

The UN Decade of Nutrition: WPHNA's position at mid-term

Background

In the decade prior to 2020, nearly one in ten persons globally was food insecure, one in three suffered from at least one form of malnutrition--under-nutrition, micronutrient deficiency, overweight or obesity--and diet-related non-communicable diseases were endemic and escalating. [1] A landmark call for global action on malnutrition was made in the Rome Declaration, adopted at the Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2), November 2014. [2] This committed to end hunger and to eliminate malnutrition in all its forms by 2030, with guidance for achievement outlined in a voluntary Framework for Action. [3]

In April 2016, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) proclaimed 2016 to 2025 The UN Decade of Action on Nutrition (Nutrition Decade or Decade) to accelerate country actions towards ICN2 targets, as well as addressing the 2025 global targets for nutrition and diet-related non-communicable diseases and the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. [4] The Nutrition Decade was officially launched July 2016 in New York.

FAO and WHO were nominated to jointly lead the Nutrition Decade's implementation and, in collaboration with other UN bodies including the World Food Program, the International Fund for Agricultural Development and the United Nations Children's Fund, they were 'to support Member States, on request, in developing, strengthening and implementing their policies, programmes and plans to address the multiple challenges of malnutrition'.

In May 2017, the joint FAO/WHO Secretariat presented a detailed Work Program, that included aims, guiding principles, action areas, roles, means of implementation, and an accountability framework that identified 'mechanisms through which Member States and other committed stakeholders should collaborate to achieve the aims of the Nutrition Decade'. [5] A 'country owned and country driven' approach 'working within existing structures and available resources' was encouraged. National governments were called on to 'raise the level of ambition' and to make commitments that are SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound). [6]

Far from pledging funding for a global scale-up of capacities and actions, the added value of the Decade was presented as a time-bound opportunity to focus on addressing malnutrition in all its forms, mobilize coordinated action from a diverse range of actors, provide global connectivity for mutual learning, and provide a framework for tracking progress and mutual accountability. [5,6] Table 1 presents an overview of the Decade's original workplan.

Table 1. Original Decade Workplan: An overview adapted from [5]

Decade aims, added value and guiding principles: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pinpoint key areas of priority action • Decide on key modalities of engagement of UN member states (MS) and other stakeholders • Propose most important tools for driving action • Align ongoing efforts making them coherent to foster a global movement • Support all countries' efforts in coming up with relevant policies and financing to assure impact --not forgetting NCDs • Establish a global accountability framework that prioritizes sustainable food systems and healthy dietary practices
On added value, the Decade is to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlight the urgency to act • Better track impacts and outcomes from country-specific commitments • Foster society-wide movements • Provide global connectivity fostering synergies • Biannually track progress of commitments for action made
Guiding principles: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accelerate commitments and foster new ones • Become an accelerator of action • Maximize participation by all actors so the needs of all people are addressed • Address nutrition emergencies • Engage with a wide range of stakeholders including multinational companies • Provide an enabling environment for the respect, protection and fulfillment of human rights (HR) and supporting the progressive realization of the right to food (RTF) • Rely on the best scientific evidence
Six Action Areas: (and cross-cutting priorities) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These six areas are not to be seen as silos • MS have to have ownership of them • Priority is to be given to carrying out a full and thorough mapping of what is already being done so as to identify gaps
Means of implementation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Translate the commitments made by ICN2 into SMART commitments particularly for the communities most affected • MS to commit to achieve one or more nutrition targets and implement one or more of the recommendations of the ICN2 Framework of Action by mobilizing the needed financial resources • MS to develop food and nutrition policies and a roadmap with time-bound operational targets • WHO and FAO to develop a resource guide (by 2017) for the formulation of country commitments • MS to submit their commitments to an FAO and WHO ad-hoc publicly accessible repository



- The Nutrition Decade Secretariat to record and analyze the voluntary commitments made by governments
- ‘Nutrition champion’ governments will be nominated when they stick by their commitments
- Action networks will be established with the above governments providing the stage for multistakeholder platforms
- Fora and conferences will be convened by FAO/WHO to follow up on the Decade

Concrete initial steps:

- A joint FAO/WHO Secretariat was set up supported by the UNSCN
- Country representatives were convened
- Biennial reports prepared
- A mid-term report due in 2020

Mid-term review

2020 was the midpoint of the Nutrition Decade. A mid-term review of progress and a look at the way forward is a standard requirement of UN Decades, along with biannual implementation reports (provided to the UNGA in April 2018 [7] and April 2020. [8] The FAO/WHO joint Secretariat outlined the format of the Nutrition Decade mid-term review in a Concept Note published in mid-2019. [9] This was followed by a Mid-term Review Foresight paper that summarized progress made in the six Action Areas of the Decade, as well as outlining promising opportunities for the second half of the Decade. [10] The Concept note documented plans for a series of consultations on the Foresight paper and dialogues with various stakeholders at different levels, with the aim of evaluating progress and seeking guidance on future priority action; the result was to be a revised version of the ‘living part’ of the Decade Work Program. An online consultation on proposed priority actions in the six action areas was subsequently conducted in June 2021, [11] with results still pending as this paper was being finalized.

The World Public Health Nutrition Association (WPHNA, or the Association) also chose to focus on reviewing the Nutrition Decade at its 2020 World Public Health Nutrition Congress entitled: *Knowledge, Policy, Action in the Decade of Nutrition 2016-2025. What is working or not? Where are the gaps? What needs more effort or change?* [12] Prior to the Congress, the Association conducted a survey of members to obtain their views on the gains, gaps and needs in public nutrition at the mid-point of the Decade and also formed working groups related to the six Decade action areas to prepare background papers intended to inform discussion and lead to recommendations from the Congress. The full Congress was never realized due to the COVID19 pandemic, reverting to an abbreviated online format. Nevertheless, abstract and online symposia analyses, member survey results and the working group papers will be published in full elsewhere; they all contributed to the WPHNA position presented here.

WPHNA mission and guiding principles for action

WPHNA shares a similar goal to the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition, as it aims to promote and improve public health nutrition and works to ensure that sufficient and adequate nourishing food is available to and affordable by all, in all circumstances, everywhere. The Association supported the concept of the Nutrition Decade to provide a focus on the urgency to act and the potential to build partnerships and a framework for action, and particularly advocated for the accountability needed to attain sustained impact. In doing so, it endorsed the four central pillars jointly defined by public interest civil society organizations (CSOs) for the ICN2. Most importantly, later, the Association participated in and endorsed the joint Civil Society Manifesto for the Nutrition Decade. [13]

Briefly, the four pillars were:

1) Human rights as a framework for the Nutrition Decade

Nutrition action under the Decade must be firmly grounded in the universal realization of human rights (HR), including the HR to food and nutrition (RTF), to health, to water, to self-determination, to decent work, to control over natural resources, and to education. [14-18] The focus must be on advancing the rights of disadvantaged and marginalized groups, and consumers' rights must be strengthened. Macro-economic policies (e.g., fiscal and trade) must be aligned with nutritional goals and human rights more broadly.

2) Coherent and coordinated management of all forms and determinants of malnutrition throughout the lifecycle

To address and prevent all forms of malnutrition, governments must adopt systemic and multi-sectoral approaches to address the underlying and basic causes of all forms of malnutrition and the profound social, environmental, economic and political determinants of this situation. [19] Policies and initiatives must ensure affordable healthy diets throughout the life course, accounting for and addressing the nutritional needs in different stages of life and those of particular groups--all of this embedded in sustainable systems and not just primarily technical responses to acute and chronic malnutrition.

3) Sovereign local food and agriculture systems based on agro-biodiversity

States and UN agencies are to protect and promote local food and agro-ecological systems based on food sovereignty; small-scale food producers; biodiversity; deep ecological foundations; sustainable use of natural resources; native seeds and traditional knowledge and practices; as well as local markets and value chains that are capable of guaranteeing the availability of and accessibility to diversified, healthy and culturally adequate diets for all.

4) Democratic governance of food and nutrition and of the global regulatory framework

Governance of food and nutrition must be firmly located within government-led normative and regulatory frameworks. The effective participation of rights-holders, in particular, groups most affected by hunger and malnutrition, in the elaboration,



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implementation, and monitoring of policies that concern them is key. At the same time, adequate safeguards must be in place to protect public policy space from undue influence by powerful economic actors and strong inclusive monitoring and accountability mechanisms must be implemented to measure progress and hold States and other actors accountable to their obligations and commitments in nutrition.

WPHNA highlights the following needs as two additional pillars:

5) Partnerships for public good, free of conflict of interest (CoI)

Much of the work to eliminate hunger and improve health and well-being will need to be done to address the social determinants also affecting other sectors. We recognize the need to collaborate and work collectively with many different groups and organizations equally committed to the four pillars above. This joint work will follow ethical principles, including those of transparency, equity, equality, mutual respect and absence of conflicts of interest, as outlined in the WPHNA CoI policy. [20] It must also acknowledge that food security and good health are inalienable human rights. Engagement with communities and individuals affected is also critical. Shared actions must support communities to have them engage in their self-selected actions, thus achieving ownership and greater self-reliance, empowerment, and sustainability.

6) Sustained capacity for nutrition action

Capacity needs are not just for a well-trained workforce, although this is not only inadequate in countries that need it the most, [21-22] but also lacks the political commitment to have the needed capable workforce to plan and enact relevant nutrition policies and programs and investments, as well as nutrition information systems and other supports needed for PHN to be effective. [21]

Have WPHNA principles been addressed?

Table 2 provides a summary and commentary on how WPHNA guiding principles have been addressed in the first half of the Decade and in priorities expressed by the UN Decade on Nutrition Secretariat moving forward from the mid-point. This analysis is based on the 2017 Decade workplan/program, [5] progress reports to the UNGA in 2018 [7] and 2020, [8] plus the Mid-term Review Foresight paper [10] and the priority actions proposed at mid-term. [11]. Note that this last paper does not include most WPHNA priority actions discussed here. Further analysis of our priorities for each action area will be published in subsequent issues of World Nutrition.

Table 2. Assessment of how WPHNA guiding principles have been addressed in the Decade Workplan

WPHNA Principles	Assessment
<i>Human rights approach</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="453 1915 1345 2016">• The right to food (RTF) was initially only summarily mentioned. (Is it enough to say the Decade will foster: ‘an enabling environment for human rights and the RTF?’).



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The need to dialogue with rights holders is only vaguely addressed. (In fact, rights holders and duty bearers are never mentioned!). • Quite a bit is said about stakeholders ‘advocating for’; nothing is said about ‘rights holders demanding’--as required by international human rights law. • Finally, also missed (or not sufficiently emphasized) in Decade documents are further HR issues important to nutrition such as private control of natural resources and of social services, children’s rights, girls’ rights, the rights of small food producers, agricultural workers and fisherfolk, rights to fair wages above subsistence level and the impunity of corporate HR abuses, consumer rights and the unregulated marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages (importantly, breastmilk substitutes). The list could go on.
<p><i>Coherent, coordinated management of all forms & determinants of malnutrition throughout the lifecycle</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The widely accepted notion of social determination of nutrition is ignored, replaced in many instances by a generic but less specific term, ‘nutrition sensitive issues’ • Whilst addressed to a small extent via the action area and cross-cutting priorities, we find little or next to nothing on the monitoring of the social, economic, political and environmental determinants of nutrition. (Progress cannot be assessed by looking at technocratic achievements only!). • More emphasis is needed on all water and sanitation (WASH) issues and on violence and discrimination against women and girls and how these influence nutrition and health outcomes
<p><i>Sovereign local food and agriculture systems based on agro-ecology and biodiversity</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The widely accepted notion of food sovereignty and its links to social determination of nutrition are ignored • Traditional knowledge and the importance of local territorial markets are not sufficiently emphasized, yet are essential in considering local solutions. • Relevant issues such as the private control of natural resources, the rights of small food producers, agricultural workers and fisherfolk, consumer rights and the unregulated marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages require greater attention.
<p><i>Democratic governance of food and nutrition and a global regulatory framework</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We see no clear distinction being made of the various actors, particularly ignoring the powerful economic interests that shape the food and nutrition sector. • When talking about CSOs, no clear distinction is made between public interest CSOs and non-state actors --the latter a hybrid between public and private sector actors, even though they have different priorities for public and private good. • Including smallholder farmers within the private sector we see as an effort to whitewash the private sector. This misclassifies these farmers and artisanal fisherfolk (and their organizations), who squarely belong in the civil society space. • At global level, the Committee on Food Security of FAO (CFS) is mentioned, but not the Civil Society Mechanism of the CFS



	<p>(CSM), which provides a critical voice for rights holders to be heard.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We feel uncomfortable with concepts like stakeholders, public private partnerships (PPPs) and multistakeholder platforms, which infer equal power in partnerships (rarely achieved) and nothing of a ‘rights’ or ‘claim holder’ focus • Will the proposed country self-assessments work if not made mandatory? (We are already mid-term and few commitments have been made). And will local public interest CSOs be required to take part in these assessments? • Decade documents speak of a global accountability framework: where is it to be found?
<p><u><i>CoI and commercial determinants</i></u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the strongest language used is ‘managing CoI’ • In the same vein, as relates to the private sector, the strongest language used is ‘leveraging private investments’, hardly a cautionary acknowledgement of the risks • No critique of the role of mega-philanthropies in nutrition governance is found, so no measures of accountability are considered for them or for the PPPs they fund. • Far too little is said about the grave ingrained problem of the private sector capture of CODEX ALIMENTARIUS. • WPHNA also has serious reservations about the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Initiative, particularly in relation to conflicts of interest and to how the engagement with businesses is carried out in relation with what gets funded according to partners’ rather than rights holders’ interests. • We note that ‘Scale up’ crept into the language of mid-term consultation surveys once SUN merged with the UN Standing Committee on Nutrition for form UN Nutrition
<p><i>Partnerships for the public good, free of CoI</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UN bodies list a range of internal agreements and joint activities to engage cross-sector [8] • The ongoing SUN Initiative has engaged with governments and ‘multi-stakeholder’ platforms in 61 countries and 3 Indian states (co-incident with but not directly due to the Decade). Concerns about CoI have been expressed. [32]
<p><i>Capacity development for PHN</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Domestic resources were to be raised and mobilized by countries to drive concrete actions at all levels. In 2018, financial commitments were made by 7 countries, US\$3.4B in total, but only, US\$6.4 m new funding. • Despite encouragement for countries to develop SMART objectives and to pledge their commitments on the Decade website, only three (Brazil, Ecuador and Italy) have done so at the time this was written. • Countries were also encouraged to form Action Networks to strengthen collaboration between countries on nutrition action aligned with the Decade’s Work Program, yet again, as of closing tome of this paper, only six networks were formed: Sustainable Food from Oceans and Inland Waters, led by



	<p>Norway; Nutrition Labelling, led by France, Australia, Chile; Sustainable School Feeding led by Germany; and other policy areas led by Brazil</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WHO 2nd Global Nutrition Policy Review was conducted as a baseline for measuring progress during the decade.
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Our main concerns are, therefore, about the Decade’s lack of attention to the needed alignment with public interest and with HR and avoiding needed language on the progressive realization of the RTF and the indivisibility of HR. In our view this has weakened the Decade so far and, perhaps for the coming years.

Added to this is the scant attention being paid to the social, economic, political and environmental determinants of nutrition. While each of these are touched-on by the Action Area priorities, fragmentation of the nutrition agenda in this way provides little or none of the coherence essential to address and cover these critical determinants of nutrition. We fear that fragmented action will only provide palliative progress. We note in the Mid-term Review Foresight paper a section on cross-cutting issues that names sectors other than health, education and agriculture; such as environment, social welfare, planning, finance, trade and industry, with a critical role to play in policy coherence and effective partnerships for nutrition. [10] But what will bring them together? Only a holistic approach based on the HR framework can engage each one and embrace all the determinants.

When covering nutrition governance issues, what is said in the Decade documents does not even remotely reflect what WPHNA and other CSOs are been asking for in Pillar 4 above. It is clear to us that Decade documents confuse *democratic governance* with *multistakeholder governance* and under-estimate the commercial inroads the private sector is making. [23-26] This is totally insensitive to the existing power asymmetries even at government level and does not offer the indispensable public policy space for claim holders that will allow them and the communities most affected by malnutrition to engage directly. Furthermore, ignoring the crucial role of public interest CSOs in the governance of the Decade as the key safeguard against CoI further weakens the potential role of claim holders¹ in the real changes expected from the Decade.

On food sovereignty and agro-ecology and biodiversity, the importance of traditional knowledge and of local territorial markets is not sufficiently emphasized, yet is essential in considering sustainable local food solutions. [27] Also missed in Decade documents are references to the impact of private control and exploitation of natural resources, as well as challenges to the rights of small food producers, agricultural workers, fisherfolk and consumers, as well as the impact on these groups of the increasing industrialization of the global food system. At the same time, including smallholder farmers within the private sector in governance structures is clearly an

¹Rights or Claim Holders are the groups whose universally recognized entitlements are or are not being catered for by the societies they live in, and whose rights are thus either being upheld or violated. Duty Bearers are those individuals or institutions that are supposed to uphold the specific right related to each entitlement of the claim holders

effort to whitewash the private sector. This misclassifies these farmers and artisanal fisherfolk (and their organizations), who squarely belong in the civil society space.

On a more positive note, we welcome in the Foresight paper its cross-cutting issues section, calling attention to building national capacity on nutrition, including a well-trained workforce, improved national data on nutrition indicators, and attention to financing and implementation. However, the devil is in the detail, namely: What training will help the workforce to address HRs and the social determinants of malnutrition? What indicators will be critical for monitoring and planning and how will implementation be financed free of CoI?

Recommendations for the second half of the Decade

Be assured that WPHNA does recognize positive points in the official Decade Workplan and Mid-term Review Foresight paper! It is just that, while they identify new areas of priority action, also referenced to the ICN2 Framework of Action at mid-term, the official 2020 mid-term review calls for “revising the living-part” of the Decade’s Workplan”, specifically looking for “a synthetic forward-looking storyline”. [8,10] What does this mean? In this endeavor, the joint WHO/FAO Secretariat are seeking guidance on new such areas of future actions, including through consultations with CSOs and representatives of the private sector. It is in this spirit that WPHNA here offers its recommendations to WHO and FAO trying to rectify and fill in what it feels is misdirected or missing:

- Better late than never, HR--as indivisible--are to progressively (but quickly) become the backbone of the Decade so as to truly address the root causes of malnutrition.
- PPPs and multistakeholder platforms (such as SUN) in the food and nutrition sector should be placed on hold until reviewed under a new optic focused on CoI.
- An up-to-date comprehensive assessment of current international trade and investment regimes and their norms and policies is needed to ensure that they do not limit states’ ability to perform their sovereign duty bearer responsibilities.
- Greater progress towards achieving the WHO NCD Action Plan must be demanded from UN member states and from the private sector (and not just by reformulating junk food!).
- Nutrition education needs to be reconsidered to encompass a wider focus more based on the basic/structural causes of malnutrition outcomes. Basically, how we train nutritionists and health workers to work with policy makers and with communities needs to be changed, with a more bottom-up approach creating empowering and enabling environments for change rather than focusing on individual-level behavior change communication.
- An independent assessment of the impact of the private sector on nutrition policies and funding needs to be commissioned, including the impact of the private sector’s role in CODEX ALIMENTARIUS and in the global and national SUN programs.
- Food safety interventions will need more emphasis, including the thorny issue of antimicrobials used in animal husbandry.



- More emphasis is needed on all water and sanitation (WASH) issues and on violence and discrimination against women and girls, all which impact nutritional outcomes.
- The protection, support, and promotion of breastfeeding and complementary feeding desperately need a much higher positioning in the nutrition action agenda.
- As accountability must be much more centered on legitimate national and multilateral institutions, the direct participation of claim holders in all issues of nutrition governance--thus protecting the public policy space from undue influence by powerful economic actors--cannot be postponed.
- Given the need to move away from unsustainable food systems based on agro-industrial food production, any further promotion of them is for us, unacceptable. So are unfair international trade and investment regimes and their responsibility in eco-destruction--all linked to climate change.
- Product-based approaches (e.g., vitamin capsules/powders, ready to use therapeutic foods--RUTF,) must be limited to a rational place in comprehensive approaches that focus mainly on food-based approaches and must be exclusively targeted to those that actually require them.
- Member states will have to pay more than lip service to sovereign local food systems and to traditional knowledge and native seeds based on biodiversity--and to accept that decision-making on these issues must be participatory.
- Consumer protection against the ever-increasing influx of ultra-processed foods will require a manifold increased mobilization of consumers as claim holders to demand the needed changes and regulations. This goes hand-in-hand with demands for subsidizing healthy foods, especially in 'food deserts' (low-income neighborhoods with little access to fresh produce) and taxing unhealthy ones.
- Finally, UN member states are to set participatory annual national benchmarks of progress commensurate with the allocation of adequate resources. It is in this spirit that what remains of the Decade will eventually become a "People's Decade of Action on Nutrition".

All the above will require WHO and FAO, as well as Northern external funders, including philanthropies and member states, to change the steering and implementation of the Decade in a more holistic and HR-based manner. The question is, can they? Will they? Adherence to Extraterritorial HR Obligations will be key here as well.

Epilogue

At the beginning of the Decade, most countries were off track to meet the World Health Assembly's global targets for improving maternal, infant and young child nutrition and reducing non-communicable disease (NCD) risk factors and will thus hardly meet the nutrition and food security targets of the Agenda for Sustainable Development by 2030. [28] The first five years of the Decade on Nutrition do not seem to have made a difference to this lagging trajectory. [29] This is not surprising, since the Decade Work Program did not come with a pledge for funding to support the coordination, infrastructure and technical assistance needed for global scaling-up activities needed to make a difference. Domestic resources were to be raised and mobilized (through taxation of unhealthy products, it was suggested, but history has



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shown this requires political will to overcome powerful commercial influences). [30]
A myriad of other factors may also influence the lack of true commitment to nutrition action. [31]

The experience from other past UN 'decades' has not been good. We need to do better to effect real change--therein lies the challenge. Significant difference will only come from public interest CSOs and social movements pushing member states to commit to action plans and then holding them accountable for the same on a year-to-year basis.

It is critical to refocus the decade on the HR framework, clearly identifying claim holders and duty bearers and doing an analysis of what their respective expected roles are. A massive HR learning process is the only thing that will lead to this. A process of empowerment of claim holders to organize, mobilize and demand needed changes is key. Without this, we can anticipate little happening or just token charity-based steps by countries to appear pro-active in front of the international community. Moreover, it is not for us to, top-down, decide priorities! It is for the claim holders suffering violations of their right to food and nutrition to lead in deciding on priority actions!

The next five years boil down to a push or pull question. Only pulling from the claim holders' side will move the Decade ahead. UN and other international agencies can do little to push member states to commit. History is clear on this. Forget about private sector actors being involved in empowering the public: it is counterintuitive to them. This is why so many of us are skeptical about the SUN Initiative with its clearly visible CoI. [32] As already stated, public interest CSOs at country and global levels, especially those acting through the Civil Society Mechanism (CSM) of the Committee on Food Security (CFS) of FAO, have the crucial role in monitoring progress made in the progressive realization of long-term plans to fulfill the right to food and nutrition. Less than five years are now left in the Decade on Nutrition. Annual benchmarks of processes-set-in-motion have to be set so that CSOs can assess progress, stagnation or retrogression on an annual basis with something like shadow reports.

If shy on this, we will be discussing the same shortcomings by the end of the Decade. What is more, little progress will be made towards achieving 2025 global targets for nutrition and diet-related non-communicable diseases and the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals for zero hunger and addressing the causes and consequences of all forms of malnutrition.

Note: Much of this paper was written before the COVID19 pandemic. Whilst the pandemic has greatly exacerbated the social, environmental, economic determinants of malnutrition, at the same time it has highlighted the importance of acting on the key principles outline in this paper. [33]

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