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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

SDG 2: Zero Hunger by 2030, a Distant Goal Amid a Reductionist View of Nutrition

ODS 2: Hambre Cero para 2030, una meta lejana en medio de una visión reduccionista de la nutrición

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Dear Editor,

Achieving the Zero Hunger target of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2 by 2030 is becoming increasingly distant. The most recent figures from the SOFI (State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World) report indicate that in 2024 approximately 673 million people were affected by hunger, representing 8.2% of the global population—slightly lower than 8.5% in 2023 and 8.7% in 2022 (1). Although this decrease reflects a statistical re-estimation, its magnitude remains limited and uneven across regions.

Even more concerning, moderate or severe food insecurity affected approximately 2.33 billion people in 2023, of whom 864 million experienced severe food insecurity (going one or more days without eating). These levels have shown no meaningful improvement since the sharp increase observed during the COVID-19 pandemic (2). By contrast, in 2019 undernourishment affected around 581 million people, indicating a marked rise (1).

These figures reveal that many public programs and international strategies have continued to emphasize ensuring minimum caloric or energy intake, a necessary but insufficient measure to improve population health and life expectancy. SOFI data also show that more than 2.8 billion people could not afford a healthy diet "defined by nutritional quality, diversity, and safety" in 2022. In low-income countries, 71.5% of the population is unable to afford such a diet, compared with 6.3% in high-income countries (2).

From a public health nutrition perspective, evidence indicates that focusing exclusively on caloric adequacy without ensuring dietary diversity, micronutrient sufficiency, environmental sustainability, and equitable access leads to persistent adverse outcomes. These include childhood stunting (22.3% among children under five), stable low birthweight prevalence (15%), and increasing anemia among women aged 15–49 years (2). Additionally, diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs) have increased worldwide, highlighting the dual burden of malnutrition and overnutrition (3).

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Several studies support that improving diet quality and diversity is more strongly associated with reductions in morbidity and mortality than energy intake alone. For example, the Global Burden of Disease (GBD) 2019 study attributed 11 million deaths and 255 million DALYs to dietary risks, particularly low fruit, whole grains, nuts, and high sodium intake (3). Diets rich in minimally processed plant foods and moderate amounts of animal-source foods have been linked to improved life expectancy, lower cardiovascular mortality, and reduced environmental impact (4).

Sustainability is another crucial dimension. The EAT-Lancet Commission proposed "planetary health diets," which integrate nutritional adequacy with environmental limits (4). However, these recommendations face implementation challenges in low- and middle-income countries, where food systems are less diversified, and inequities are structural (5). Studies in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia indicate that without targeted investments in local production, market access, and governance, these dietary patterns remain largely unattainable (5).

In Europe, including Spain, food insecurity has resurfaced in specific population groups due to economic crises and social inequalities. Evidence published in the Spanish Journal of Human Nutrition and Dietetics showed that food insecurity among vulnerable families increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the fragility of food systems even in high-income countries (6). Studies in Spain have also documented elevated prevalence of food insecurity and associated social determinants during COVID-19 lockdowns (7). Research among migrant schoolchildren in Antofagasta, Chile, one of the most economically stable countries in Latin America, also documented significant deterioration in food security during the same period (8).

Moreover, framing food security merely as energy sufficiency neglects the quality of life and healthy life expectancy gains associated with diverse and sustainable diets. For example, Mediterranean-style diets have been associated with a reduction of up to 10% in all-cause mortality and significant decreases in cardiovascular disease incidence (9). Similarly, the DASH and Nordic diets have shown protective effects on metabolic syndrome and type 2 diabetes, demonstrating that the type of calories matters as much as the amount (3).

The available data clearly demonstrate that hunger and food insecurity have not been reduced sufficiently or uniformly. Achieving SDG 2 requires more than expanding caloric access: it demands policies that strengthen local food systems, improve dietary quality, integrate environmental sustainability criteria, reduce inequalities, and increase healthy life expectancy among populations. From a research perspective, health-science investigators can contribute substantially by designing studies that minimize methodological biases, incorporate longitudinal and multi-level approaches, and capture the complex interactions between dietary patterns, food systems, and health outcomes. Strengthening epidemiological research on the impact of national public food policies, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, is crucial to evaluate their effectiveness, equity, and unintended consequences. It is also essential to investigate how improved economic stability in vulnerable communities influences diet transitions and health trajectories, including potential shifts toward overweight and obesity if sustainable, health-promoting environments are not simultaneously fostered. Generating robust, context-specific evidence through cohort studies, natural experiments, and policy evaluations can inform adaptive strategies that prevent new forms of malnutrition while advancing sustainable food systems. These scientific contributions are key to moving from a reductionist approach toward a comprehensive nutrition paradigm that truly aligns with the vision of SDG 2 (10).

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