A REPORTER’S GUIDE TO FOOD SECURITY
INTRODUCTION

The UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) has defined food security as a state “when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life.” Food insecurity has become considered one of the largest risks to global society in the next decade – due to a combination of volatile food prices, a growing world population, and the changing global climate.

Most journalists confront this challenge by finding and documenting signs of extreme food insecurity. And surely, there is no shortage of grim news. One in eight people, or 870 million, remain undernourished (i.e., they consume fewer than 1800 Calories a day). Approximately 98% of these people live in developing countries. Undernourishment persists despite the fact that grain production has doubled over the last fifty years, and that 2.5 billion people derive their livelihoods from agriculture.

This book describes responses to food insecurity. We use data from the authoritative Global Burden of Disease report to uncover “bright spots,” or places where undernourishment has decreased tremendously and could offer insights for others. We outline several ways communities and innovators are responding to food security – like agricultural storage, insurance schemes, and biotech innovations – and for each, noted pros and cons. And we’ve compiled a few resources that can get you started. (Note: Due to the breadth of the topic, we do not intend this book to be exhaustive. Rather, we’ve chosen a few topics that we believe could lend themselves to a solutions focus.)

The Solutions Journalism Network was created to help journalists examine the stories behind changes like these. We are working to support and legitimize the practice of solutions journalism: rigorous and compelling reporting about responses to social problems. We help reporters examine not just what’s wrong, but also examples of innovators working toward solutions – focusing not just on what may be working (based on available evidence), but how and why it appears to be working and, alternatively, in what ways it may be falling short.

We’ve developed this reporter’s guide to help journalists like you add a solutions lens to your work, when needed to capture the whole story. We hope you find this useful! You can learn more about us at solutionsjournalism.org

This guidebook was produced with support from the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting in September 2013.
Traditional journalism focuses on uncovering problems. But this gives a misleading picture of the world. A steady diet of problems has made the public cynical, apathetic and disengaged. Just as important, it inhibits progress. For society to improve, people need models. They need to know that solutions exist, and to learn from what’s already been done. Journalists should uncover hidden problems. But it should also uncover hidden solutions.

Journalists are sometimes reluctant to write about responses to problems because they are afraid these stories will look like – or be – advocacy, fluff or public relations. They are sometimes afraid that a program they declare a success this week might fail next week. Excessive cynicism in journalism is seen as a misdemeanor – but excessive gullibility is a felony. No journalist wants to look gullible.

Done with good reporting practices, however, solutions journalism is every bit as hard-hitting, rigorous and objective as traditional journalism. Nor does writing about responses require more expertise than writing about problems. Solutions journalism is also a way to strengthen more traditional reporting; if someone has found an approach that works, it makes failure-as-usual more glaring.

Questions to ask:

- **Who’s doing better than the others?**
- **Why?**
- **What can we learn?**
- **What does this say about the underperformers?**

Data can point you to models and strategies that are working where others don’t.

Statistics are available from UN agencies, agricultural research groups, NGOs and governments covering subjects such as: hunger, deforestation, agricultural production, land titling, and school feeding.

Academic papers: Search journals for research showing what works. Examples include: Journal of Sustainable Agriculture, Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems, Environmental Earth Sciences, Journal of Nutrition, Journal of Humanitarian Assistance (Note: These are two places that are particularly well-suited to find solutions stories. You can also turn to local experts, international organizations or NGOs, government officials, social media, or your previous reporting. Check out Page 16 for a few potential resources.)

- **Ask your sources different questions:**
  - When speaking to sources with broad knowledge about a problem (e.g., representatives from international NGOs, UN agencies, government officials), ask them: **Who’s got a better approach?** **Does this work anywhere?** **Who’s doing best on this?** **How are they doing it?** **What can we learn from it?**
  - When speaking to sources with specific knowledge about a problem (e.g., local agricultural extension agents, farmers, health workers, village officials), ask: **Do you know of anyone who’s doing better on this than others?** **Are there farmers with better yields or families with better-nourished children?** **What are they doing that others are not?** **What can we learn from it?**

- **Take to social media:** Ask your tweeps and Facebook friends if they know of promising responses or positive deviants. Ask your best sources to do the same with their social media contacts.

- **In your story, focus more on what’s going on, rather than who’s doing it.** The system is the main character. The idea is the hero/villain.
- **Don’t predict or prescribe.** Write about what’s happening now – the outcomes being produced now, and how they happened. You don’t have to worry about being an advocate or picking winners if you are careful not to make claims.
- **The judgment needed to identify solutions is similar to the judgment needed to identify problems.** What happened & how do we know it happened?
This map depicts how child and maternal undernutrition has changed in every country from 1990 to 2010. We’ve highlighted a few “bright spots,” or countries that have improved their undernutrition scores dramatically, and offered hypotheses for why. (Source: Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation)

**PERU**
In 2006, Peru began its Child Malnutrition initiative. Over the next five years, stunting – low height-for-age – fell by a third. Among the poorest children, stunting prevalence declined from 56 to 44 percent. Here are some possible reasons.
- The Peruvian government adopted the Child Malnutrition initiative as one of its most important national policies, and they focused it on the poorest parts of Peru.
- The government recognized that fighting malnutrition requires more work into a national poverty-reduction.
- Peru overhauled the way it delivered anti-poverty services. It institut ed pay-for-results financing and other measures to make services more efficient and accountable.

**BRAZIL**
Between 1990 and 2006, Brazil experienced a decline in its undernourished population from 16 million to 6 million. Here are some hypotheses of how they did it:
- The Brazilian government has implemented a variety of social safety net programs, such as fortified wheat distribution, school-feeding programs, and conditional cash transfer schemes.
- In 2003, they launched the Zero Hunger Project, which is one of the world’s largest conditional cash transfer schemes. It benefits more than 30 million poor people.
- The government has invested over $50 billion into agriculture for the 2012/2013 season and increased funding for development of farmer cooperatives.

**GHANA**
Ghana has had one of the steadiest nutritional improvements in Africa since 1990. Its stable and democratic political environment has allowed it to reduce poverty from 52 percent in 1990 to 29 percent in 2006. It has also increased attention and investment into improving food security. For instance:
- The government invested in giving farmers information, agricultural inputs, and storage facilities.
- The Ghana School Feeding Program (GSFP), launched in 2005, provides all kindergarten and primary school pupils a daily hot and nutritious meal, sourced locally.
- Ghana has experienced dramatic increases in cocoa production, which has allowed a substantial increase in exports, thereby increasing farmers’ incomes and the national GDP (which has grown four to eight percent annually over the past decade).

**VIETNAM**
- Vietnam was food deficient 30 years ago, and has since grown to be the world’s second largest rice exporter after Thailand. The agriculture sector comprises 52 percent of the country’s employment.
- Increases in annual rice, wheat, maize, and soybean production are linked with accelerated agricultural growth as a combined result of land titling policies, price liberalization, and improved use of land, irrigation, and advanced technology.
- The proportion of the health budget spent on nutrition programs is high, accounting for 25 percent of national target programs.
Farmers are producing below full capacity. A hectare of land in North America produces more than five times as much corn as a hectare in Africa, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization. Unsustainable land practices such as deforestation, cultivation on steep slopes, and soil nutrient mining (i.e., the un-replenished removal by crops of soil nutrients) continue to decrease the amount of arable land available for food production.

Low yields are often the result of technical constraints (e.g., lack of access to fertilizers or yield-maximizing crop varieties), unfavorable market conditions (e.g., trade sanctions), and failure to embrace sustainable land practices. Many farmers also do not have access to weather and crop insurance, which increase long-term productivity.

Water constraints also pose a great challenge to food productivity. Crop yields are the lowest in the Horn of Africa, where less than one percent of the land is irrigated (FAO).

The food system is leaking

One-third of food produced for human consumption is lost or wasted globally, which amounts to about 1.3 billion tons per year (UNEP).

In the developing world, food is often lost between harvest and table due to inefficient record keeping strategies, government corruption, and inadequate storage facilities or modes of transportation to minimize spoilage and exposure to rats and insects.

In the developed world, food wastage also occurs at the consumption stage. The Food and Agricultural Organization estimates the per capita food waste by consumers in Europe and North America is 95-115 kilos per person per year, while the corresponding figure in Sub-Saharan Africa and South/ Southeast Asia is 670 kilos.

A changing climate is impacting food security

Warmer temperatures, more concentrated rainfall, and extreme weather events increase the likelihood of crop failure, limiting supply and raising prices. Certain seeds and crop varieties are no longer suitable for changing weather patterns. As a result of climate change, some studies predict an average of 17% drop in wheat yields in Africa by 2050 and a 16% drop in maize yields in South Asia (Phys.org).

Poorer countries – particularly those in tropical and sub-tropical regions – are the most vulnerable to extreme weather events. Future farmers may face new and more aggressive agricultural pests and diseases.

Did you know?

For developing countries as a whole, the prevalence of undernourishment has fallen from 23 to 15 percent over the period 1990–2010 (FAO).

The global food supply is vulnerable to market conditions

In the last six years, there has been a recurrent rise and high volatility in international food prices. The prices of maize and wheat almost doubled in the last ten years and the prices of rice tripled in 2008 over the course of a few months. Rising food costs are linked with rising energy costs, increased transportation costs, seasonal factors, depreciation or appreciation of currency, political conflict, and climate change.

Food subsidies have become a controversial topic in food security. In recent years, there have been several instances where subsidies have negatively affected farmers in developing countries. For instance, rice subsidies in the US have had an adverse affect on Haiti’s rice farmers, who have been priced out of the global market ("Subsidizing Starvation" in Foreign Policy).

Did you know?

Global food production occurs on 25% of all habitable land and is responsible for 70% of fresh water consumption, 80% of deforestation, and 30% of greenhouse gas emissions.

Many scientists believe recent price volatility is linked to extreme weather events.
Cooperatives

In many countries, farmers are increasing productivity by pooling their resources to form cooperatives. Cooperatives are owned and managed by the members. Members pay dues to gain access to services like marketing, small loans, agricultural inputs, and storage facilities. Cooperatives build social capital and allow smallholder farmers greater bargaining power in the market.

For example, Amul is a dairy cooperative in India that uses an automated, computerized collection system that reduces weighing time and payment processing for small-scale farmers. Amul buys exclusively from women, which has helped to improve their social status (India Institute of Technology).

Some farmers are hesitant to join cooperatives because they might not receive returns proportional to their inputs. Effective cooperatives are also vulnerable to corruption, in the absence of good leadership (Forbes India).

Subsidizing inputs

A classic government intervention is providing subsidies to domestic farmers.

For example, in 2005, Mali joined the Farm Input Subsidy Program (FISP) to improve national food security. The country has been registering maize surplus. In 2010, 1.6 million farmers received vouchers to purchase subsidized fertilizer and maize seed, allowing them to maintain steady food production. The agreement allows some African nations to sell food without paying tariffs at inflated European prices. The program has mixed results as far as it helps farmers. Critics contend that the program is not sustainable.

Subsidies are one of the most effective government interventions in improving food security and price stability, though they can also result in unfair favoritism.

Risk management

Most farmers in the developed world have crop insurance to protect against unseen weather incidents. It is gradually becoming an integral means of improving food security in the developing world as well, especially in the face of climate change. Insurance can help align production incentives, raise awareness of the importance of risk mitigation, and encourage investment in agricultural efficiency. Many countries are moving towards more comprehensive farmsurplus management and safety net programs with risk management to achieve greater food security and price stability.

Most agriculture insurance seen in the developing countries is dependent on agriculture, has the world’s largest crop insurance market, and is a key component of a country’s development strategy. The majority of these people live in developing countries. Here are some efforts at improving these statistics.

2.5 billion people make their living from agriculture. Here are some efforts at improving agricultural production and the lives of the people along the way.

Food banks and humanitarian aid

There is a tension between long-term development and immediate need in emergency settings. On one hand, food donations are useful when there is insufficient food in conflict settings. During some natural disasters, however, agricultural markets are still functional and people affected by the natural disaster only need assistance in purchasing it (NYTimes Fixes).

In these cases, many experts argue that food and seed donations could potentially hurt local economies and limit the decision-making of local populations. Food donations also require high transportation costs and could take time to reach local populations.

For these reasons, some assistance organizations have begun experimenting with giving vouchers or cash. The World Food Program administered a program for Iraqi refugees in Syria, where refugees received food vouchers through text messages (IRIN News). Many aid organizations have also begun seed voucher programs for farmers.

In settings where food is present, cash transfers and vouchers might be a more cost-efficient solution than food. However, studies suggest that vouchers might favor a gender imbalance with distributions to male heads of households. In some cases, it may also be more difficult to guarantee that beneficiaries are using the money for food.

Safety net programs

Ethiopia, Brazil, and Mexico are examples of countries that offer safety net programs to a considerable percentage of their vulnerable populations. The programs can include food vouchers, cash transfers, school feeding programs, food distributions, and more.

In 2005, the Ethiopian government launched the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP). The program supports 7-8 million rural Ethiopians either with food or cash. The majority of recipients work on public works projects for six months in the year, while recipients unable to work receive cash grants.

In response to the 1.2 billion tons of food wasted every year, some governments and organizations are introducing better storage techniques. For example, Mylar bags use heat technology to kill pests and keep out oxygen to prevent early spoilage. In West and Central Africa, the Purdue Improved Cowpea Storage (PICS) project has introduced a triple-bagging hermetic method to reduce cowpea waste (Purdue).

Community food banks are another method of improving storage systems. Food (usually grain) is deposited in a warehouse and is entered into a record system. Community members can borrow during times of need and repay, in kind, with interest. Food banks have been found in many countries to effectively address hunger and reduce waste. To be effective, bank operators should be trained in management techniques and methods of setting fair interest rates (World Food Programme).

“Last-mile” storage techniques are not without difficulties. Some techniques may alter the nutritional content or quality of food. Availability of storage warehouses is often politically motivated. Storage is also vulnerable to corruption, mislabeling, and thievery.

One in eight people, or 870 million, remain undernourished. Approximately 98% of these people live in developing countries. Here are some efforts at improving these statistics.

WHAT ARE SOME RESPONSES?

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Separately, the European Union signed in 2001 an “Everything But Arms” treaty to encourage trade from poor countries. The program allows some African nations to sell food without paying tariffs at inflated European prices. The program has mixed results as far as it helps farmers. Critics contend that the program is not sustainable.

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There have been many noteworthy scientific and technological innovations to improve food security. If you choose to research any of these innovations, be sure to ask about how cost-effective, scalable, culturally appropriate, easily transportable, and user-friendly they are.

**Micronutrient intervention**

Food fortification: Many countries are responding to malnutrition by adding micronutrients such as vitamin A, iron, and iodine to food staples. Globally, 78 countries have mandated fortification of wheat flour, maize flour, and/or rice (FPI Network). For instance, the Mozambique government distributes a fortified wheat called “multisemina” to low-income populations. In Mozambique and Uganda, a campaign is biotfortifying sweet potatoes, or breeding orange sweet potato varieties that naturally have more vitamin A than their white or yellow counterparts. Studies have found that children who eat these orange sweet potatoes have more vitamin A in their blood (NPR).

Fortifying food does, however, carry with it increased production costs, such as initial equipment purchases, production staff, and quality control. In many countries, there has been massive districts of fortified food due to perceptions of its being altered (NYTimes).

Supplementation: Some governments and aid agencies are trying vitamin supplements to target nutritional deficiencies. In Madagascar and the Philippines, UNICEF has distributed a supplement called Plumpy Dust to meet the nutritional needs of infants and young children during their critical periods of development (UNICEF). Spinkies, a powdered iron supplement, can be added to a child's food and does not have the same side effects as iron pills or syrups (e.g., bad taste, faecal discolouration, or stomach pain) (NYTimes). However, some malnourished people have difficulty absorbing and digesting nutrients in supplement form that they are already acquiring through their natural diet. There is also some controversy around the price, availability, and patent protection of food supplements.

**Crop biotechnology and innovation**

Crop breeding: Some agricultural specialists select desirable traits from different crops to create more durable, pest-resistant, and higher-yielding varieties. This can be done by randomly mixing genes by cross-breeding different plant species, or through more selective genetic engineering. In Timor-Leste, a genetically modified variety of rice, called Nakroma, is more pest-resistant and can give up to a 40% increase in crop yield compared with the local variety (CARE).

Some genetically modified plant varieties can be harmful to local ecosystems and the environment. Critics argue they require more pesticides and could pose a variety of unexamined health risks. However, they can also be modified to adapt to changing climate and environmental conditions. Hybrid seeds are also often more expensive and cannot be reused as effectively as traditional seeds.

Conservation agriculture: Farmers are using drip irrigation and water pumps to better utilize farming inputs. Drop irrigation, which relies on tubes to bring water and fertilizer directly to the roots of plants, can be as much as a third more water efficient. However, it can be more expensive to install than surface irrigation, which relies on gravity (IMEGE).

Irrigation, fertilizer, and water harvesting are helping to reduce erosion in drylands and increase productivity. Zero tillage farming, the process of arid sowing seeds into the soil with little to no land preparation, is helping to maintain soil cover year round and increasing organic matter in soils. However, zero tillage might increase dependency on herbicides and result in soil compaction (WUS).

**What are some responses?**

We asked Roger Thow (The Last Hunger Season), Kenneth Weiss (Pulitzer Center grantee), Tina Rosenberg (New York Times), and Sharon Schmickle (Pulitzer Center grantee) how they report these stories. Here’s what they had to say:

**On deciding what’s newsworthy:**

Roger: The one story I became very passionate about was hunger in the 21st century. At the dawn of the new millennium, there were a billion poor people in the world who were chronically hungry. I had been to the Ethiopian famine of 2003, and the market collapse—I saw that to be an ongoing story of our time. It’s a problem we shouldn’t have in the 21st century.

Ken: Some of the data is a little elusive—make sure where it comes from, and be careful. A lot of the data that people keep referencing is pretty old. Also, you have a lot of people who want to come up with technological fixes, some of which may not lead to real change, because there are so many other factors.

Sharon: In some countries, one big challenge is actually getting to the neediest farmers. Their land typically lies beyond the end of the road where communication can be difficult.

Roger: One of the biggest challenges is getting people interested in the topic to begin with.

Tina: The topic is so broad. Many, many different things affect food security. Even making clear the impact of one factor may not lead to real change, because there are so many other factors.

Sharon: There is urgency in hunger. If you convey that urgency, readers will be engaged. Further, food forms a common bond worldwide. Everyone eats and almost everyone is into food in some way or another. Exploit that bond as you tell your story. I think about the point at which a reader will be convinced between a reader and a story based in a far-away place.

Roger: You want to bring the readers into the “eyes of the hungry” to understand this issue. Try to make the reader care about how we are in this situation and what needs to be done.

Tina: I write for an American audience, so solutions journalism is very important when I report on food security. Americans have a very bleak view of hunger and poverty in the world, and it makes them cynical and disengaged. But it’s not black and white. There’s a lot of gray.

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**On engaging readers:**

Roger: These stories are hard to sell! You need to tell stories about people, hang out with farmers, use all five senses in your reporting.

Sharon: There is urgency in hunger. If you convey that urgency, readers will be engaged. Further, food forms a common bond worldwide. Everyone eats and almost everyone is into food in some way or another. Exploit that bond as you tell your story. I think about the point at which a reader will be convinced between a reader and a story based in a far-away place.

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**Advice for other journalists:**

Ken: Use satellite images when you can. And the advancements in food genetics are really amazing. Don’t just fall in the camp that GMOs are bad, since the topic is much more complex than that.

Tina: Use data. You can find all kinds of data about agriculture, nutrition, hunger, climate, and water. Look at a database and see if there’s one country at place that’s doing a lot better than other countries that you’d think were similar. If there is, then that country is doing something different that’s worth telling people about.

Roger: There’s a traditional means of newspapers, magazines but think about new media and social media. Tell the story through humanitarian agencies. That’s a great way.

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Doing More than Praying for Rain
By TINA ROSENBERG

In the United States, insurance against extreme weather is seen as so important that Washington subsidizes it highly and requires it for farmers who want other government benefits. If American farmers need weather insurance, African peasant farmers need it even more. But the vast majority of African peasant farmers have no opportunity to insure their crops.

The insecurity of farming sabotages yields even when the weather is good. Because of the risk, many farmers are unwilling to bet all their money on a crop, so they sow only a portion of their land. Or they use poor quality seeds because they do not want to increase their risks by spending more. Risk makes it very difficult for farmers to get credit to buy needed seeds, fertilizer, herbicides or insecticides, so their yields are stunted. These are people who can ill afford to get less than the maximum from their plots.

Weather insurance for small farmers has always faced numerous barriers. But throughout east Africa today there are projects finding creative and innovative ways to overcome them. One of them is a project in Kenya’s southwest that so far insures 22,000 farmers. There are so few farmers with insurance in Africa that this project is the continent’s largest. It is called Kilimo WaSwahili, which means “safe farming” in Swahili. What makes it work is technology.

Note that Tina quantifies only what has been done to date. Throughout the piece, which discusses the promises and difficulties of a “micro-insurance” program for farmers, Tina is careful not to make claims about the future. This keeps her from sounding like she’s picking a winner.

Saving Lives in Africa with the Humble Sweet Potato
By DAN CHARLES

A regular old orange-colored sweet potato might not seem too exciting to many of us. But in parts of Africa, that sweet potato is very exciting to public health experts who see it as a living vitamin A supplement. A campaign to promote orange varieties of sweet potatoes in Mozambique and Uganda (instead of the white or yellow ones that are more commonly grown there) now seems to be succeeding. It’s a sign that a new approach to improving nutrition among the world’s poor might actually work.

Dan signals here the broader importance of this program, as well as its novelty.

This sentence gives readers a good early glimpse of what’s ahead.

The problem is, getting those capsules to the people who need them. Children who are eating those creams have more vitamin A in their blood. But those children, they’re more profitable.

About a third of all the sweet potatoes in Mozambique, Andrade says, now are orange.

Recently, scientists gathered evidence from Mozambique and Uganda that these vegetables are, in fact, improving people’s lives. Children who are eating them do have more vitamin A in their blood. Based on other studies of the effects of vitamin A, nutritionists are confident that the boost is big enough to improve the health of those children.

This para offers some evidence (albeit not quantified) of the idea’s merits.
Academic Articles and Resources

• Godfrey, Charles H. “Food Security: The Challenge of Feeding 9 Billion People.” Science Magazine. 28 January 2010. This article explores the changing world of food security in light on climate and environmental change.

• The Global Hunger Index. 6 June 2013. The Global Hunger Index’s series on child and adult nutrition, in collaboration with IFPRI, address the root causes of malnutrition and appropriate interventions.

• Shepherd, Benjamin. “Thinking Critically About Food Security.” Security Dialogue. 8 June 2012. This article offers a critical perspective of the meaning and language of food security while assessing state-centered complications.

• World Food Programme. ‘Revolution: From Food Aid to Food Assistance.’ 2010. This comprehensive report and index tracks country-by-country progress and strategies toward achieving food security under conditions of land, water, and energy stress.

Datasets and Reports

• FAO Statistical Yearbook 2013. FAO provides the greatest wealth of data, graphs, research, and reports on global hunger and strategies toward feeding people to food security.


• United Nations. Millennium Development Goals Report. 2012. This report highlights the major progress toward achieving millennium development goal 1, eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.


Journalism

• Charles, Dan. “Saving Lives in Africa with the Humble Sweet Potato.” NPR. 15 August 2013. How crop breeding is adding more nutritional value to foods in Mozambique and Uganda.


• Varvark, Casper. “Wild foods: a food security strategy that’s hard to swallow?” The Guardian. 3 July 2013. How wild foods are contributing to nutrition and dietary diversity in rural communities across the world.

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