

SDSN USA Zero Hunger Pathways Project Submission for the White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health

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With support from Caroline Fox and Sonja Neve, and input from an expert advisory group, these recommendations reflect six partner-led convenings with 259 total attendees.

This submission is sent with gratitude and thanks to the guidance of those in the SDSN USA Network, the Zero Hunger Pathways Project Advisory Board, and partners who contributed to these conventions and recommendations, including: the Center for Integrated Global Biomedical Sciences; Accountable Impact; the Central Florida Foundation; Howard University College of Medicine; Hunger Free America; Hunger Solutions Institute at Auburn University; Texas A&M University; NYS Government OTDA; the SDFR Policy Center at Alcorn State University; State University of New York; and University at Buffalo, among many others. Additional thanks for the leadership of Dr. Helen Bond and Dr. Jeffrey Sachs.



In the 1970's, after the U.S. significantly reduced poverty, increased economic opportunity, and dramatically expanded federal nutrition safety net programs, the nation almost entirely ended domestic hunger. In the succeeding decades, as poverty increased, real wages decreased, and safety net programs were scaled back, hunger and food insecurity in America soared. Therefore, in 2022 hunger in America is persistent and pervasive. More than 10 percent of people across the United States lived in food-insecure households in 2020. Nearly 35 percent of households with incomes below the Federal poverty line are food insecure (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2020). Almost 30 percent of female-headed households are food insecure (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2020). Additionally, female, single-parent homes experience food insecurity at almost double the rate of male single-parent households (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2021). While the largest number of food insecure people were White, almost 20 percent of individuals who are Black were food insecure compared to 10 percent of individuals who are White (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2020). In addition, one in six children (15 percent) are food insecure, equating to 10.7 million children (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic compounded food insecurity in the United States. A study by the Urban Institute (Waxman et al., 2020) found that more than one in six adults (17.7 percent) and more than one in five parents living with children (21.8 percent) reported their households experienced food insecurity during the pandemic. In counties across the United States, the top 15 counties experiencing food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic were all in the South or counties that have Indian Reservations (Gundersen et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic devastated low-income households, taking a disproportionate health and economic toll. Swift action by the Biden Administration and Congress to scale up social safety net measures—pandemic EBT and the child tax credit to name only two—provided cash and food assistance to low-income households and prevented the worst. As a result, food insecurity rates did not remain at the elevated level.

Despite an economic rebound, low unemployment, and rising wages, low-income households are now being hit by higher food and fuel prices and rising prices of other basic goods because of supply chain challenges due to the pandemic, domestic and global conflicts, climate change, and recent reductions in federal nutrition assistance. These compounding crises illustrate that while there are policies that can effectively meet critical immediate needs, there are limitations to these successes. To end hunger in America, interventions must address root causes and vulnerabilities, with increased focus on the quality of accessible nutrients. Current approaches to hunger place a premium on access to sufficient calories and too little attention to the quality of nutrients that are available, accessible, and utilized by low-income households. Existing measures emphasize food assistance but do not address underlying issues such as poverty, access to jobs providing living wages, the racial wealth gap, and other inequities. To end hunger in America, new approaches must align outcomes, measures, and systems, especially food, health, education, employment, and social protection systems, to address intersectional issues and historic inequities that leave marginalized communities at greater risk.

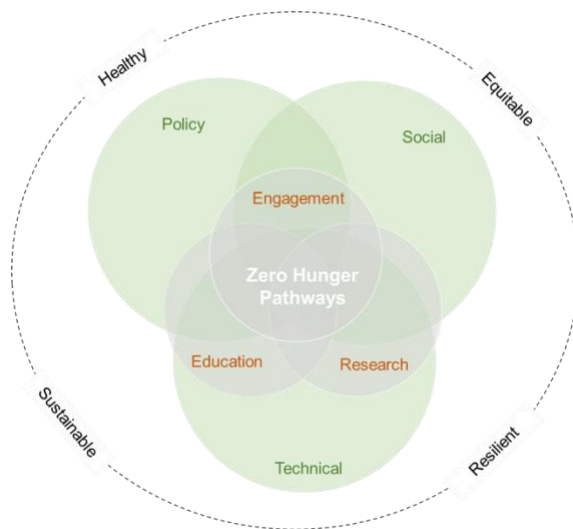
Hunger, food insecurity, and malnutrition affect every aspect of life and every sector of our economy. They are solvable problems that require actionable, scalable, and innovative political and societal solutions. We are grateful to the Biden Administration and leaders in Congress for holding a White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health that will propose a national strategy to end hunger and increase healthy eating and physical activity by 2030.

This report provides recommendations from the United States Sustainable Development Solutions Network's (SDSN USA) Zero Hunger Pathways Project (ZHPP).

Approach

The Zero Hunger Pathways Project (ZHPP) originated in January 2020 out of a desire amongst [SDSN USA](#) network members and partners to connect science and policy through collaboration of stakeholders impacted by and working to end hunger in America. As noted in Figure 1, the ZHPP applies a systems approach to end hunger. The collaborative charted equitable, resilient, and sustainable pathways to profoundly improve availability, accessibility, utilization, and stability of healthy food for all. ZHPP also considered social (behavior change, communications, media), technical (new solutions, innovations, improved efficiencies), and policy (incentives, subsidies, at national, state, and local scales) opportunities and levers to facilitate the interdisciplinary approaches and identified research, engagement, education and advocacy tools required to end hunger in the United States. The pathways must be rooted in quantitative analysis and ensure trade-offs among the four values are considered and addressed.

Figure 1. Overall approach of Zero Hunger Pathways Project (ZHPP)



To chart these pathways, ZHPP conducted a series of consultations and a dialogue series. These multi-disciplinary discussions with experts and the wider SDSN USA network required participants to stretch beyond existing food systems models and frameworks to consider what an approach rooted in the cross-cutting Sustainable Development Goals should encompass. The next phase of ZHPP included a dialogue series, which aimed to bring together a wide range of academics and stakeholders to discuss short and long-term recommendations to end hunger in the United States. These dialogue sessions covered a

variety of topics which are aligned with the pillars serving as cornerstones of the White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health. Table 1 provides a summary of the alignment of the dialogue session topics and White House Conference pillars.

This report is based on participant and expert input from the dialogue series. A total of 259 unique individuals participated across six dialogues. Attendees joined from across the country, representing academic institutions, universities, and colleges (including Tribal Colleges and HBCUs); non-profits; foundations; the United Nations; and national and local governments and government agencies (including USDA as well as local governments in California, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, Utah, and Washington). These recommendations represent a collective and collaborative process and are not the explicit views of any organization or individual who participated.

Table 1. Alignment of Zero Hunger Pathways Project Dialogue Series Topics and White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health Pillars

Zero Hunger Pathways Project Dialogue Series Topics	White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition and Health Pillars				
	Improve food access and affordability	Integrate nutrition and health	Empower all consumers to make and have access to healthy choices	Support physical activity for all	Enhance nutrition and food security research
1. Improving Health and Nutrition Outcomes through SNAP	X	X	X		
2. Situational Analysis of Hunger in America	X	X	X		X
3. Trade-Offs Evaluation and Science-Policy Communication		X			X
4. Interdisciplinary Approaches: Lessons Learned and Scaling Innovations	X	X	X		
5. Exploring Equitable Approaches to Ending Hunger in America: Food, Families, Farming, and Justice	X		X		
6. Rooted in Relationship: Power and Privilege in Food Systems	X		X		

Recommendations

Pillar 1 - Improve Food Access and Affordability

End hunger by making it easier for everyone — including urban, suburban, rural, and Tribal communities — to access and afford food. For example, expand eligibility for and increase participation in food assistance programs and improve transportation to places where food is available.

Recommendation 1.1: Update Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Eligibility, Enrollment, Participation, and Recertification

The current SNAP application and associated process discourages participants from enrolling and maintaining benefits due to eligibility, participation, enrollment, and recertification barriers. To remove these barriers, SNAP should alter the application process in a way that is designed with participants in mind.

- Include essential expenditures in calculation of gross income thereby adjusting net income and eligibility
- Modify eligibility criteria to increase flexibility across short-term income fluctuations
- Increase marketing and utilize participant focused language to support eligible individuals in enrolling
- Lift eligibility from 130% to 200% of the poverty line, and update poverty numbers
- Develop a one-stop-shop portal to streamline enrollment and recertification across safety net programs, especially federal nutrition programs, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Medicaid, Medicare, and WIC
- Increase enrollment among those who are eligible for SNAP
- Understand social barriers, stigma, or fears preventing eligible participants from enrolling in SNAP, and provide additional training to case workers
- Establish metrics for determining and monitoring systemic racism in federal nutrition programs
- Increase accessibility to transportation to provide better support to SNAP participants; widen the variety of eligible items
- Increase data sharing across programs to diminish administrative burden
- Reduce burden of recertification, particularly with respect to frequency and documentation
- Boost retention through waivers for interviews and telephonic signatures
- Implement universal access to summer electronic benefit transfer (Summer EBT) for families with children. This benefit allots \$30 per summer month per child, and reduces food insecurity by approximately 30% (Gaines-Turner, Simmons, & Chilton, 2019).
- Make undocumented immigrants in working families who have resided in the U.S. for more than a year eligible for SNAP.
- Make the Disaster SNAP program mandatory after disasters and include pandemics among the situations that qualify as disasters.

Recommendation 1.2: Expand Unemployment Insurance

In a study of adults in the United States who lost work during the COVID-19 pandemic, Raifman and colleagues (2021) reported receiving unemployment insurance (UI) was associated with large reductions in food insecurity. Specifically, UI was associated with a 35 percent relative decline in food insecurity and a 48 percent relative decline in eating less due to financial constraints (Raifman et al., 2021). Raifman's findings also are consistent with other studies (Borjas, 2004; Berkowitz, 2020) showing unemployment insurance is associated with reductions in food insecurity.

- Expand unemployment insurance supplement, eligibility, and duration of benefits to similar levels as authorized in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act

Recommendation 1.3: Add Innovation Funds to the Farm Bill, Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act, and Older Americans Act

Currently, approaches to address food insecurity often emphasize food assistance and access to sufficient calories rather than listening to those with lived experiences, acknowledging the underlying causes of food insecurity, and ensuring nutrition and food security are accessible to all. To achieve zero hunger in the US by 2030, actionable, scalable, and innovative solutions founded in research, practice, and policy must be implemented.

Recommendation 1.4: Renew Investment of Federal and State Legislators in Rural Spaces and Workforce

- Provide equitable funding and credit assistance to Black Farmers
- Implement the Justice for Black Farmers Act
- Reenergize the Emergency Relief for Farmers of Color Act (S.278)
- Provide structural support to reduce post-harvest losses

Recommendation 1.5: Focus on the root causes of hunger and food insecurity, such as promoting a Universal Basic Income and Child Tax Credit to help alleviate poverty.

Pillar 2 - Integrate Nutrition and Health

Prioritize the role of nutrition and food security in overall health, including disease prevention and management, and ensure that our healthcare system addresses the nutrition needs of all people.

Recommendation 2.1: Align Healthcare and Federal Nutrition Programs to Offer an Opportunity to Address Both Food and Nutrition Insecurity

- Adopt the Hunger Vital Signs in all health care settings, especially with Medicaid patients and in Federally Qualified Health Centers
- Provide Federally Qualified Health Centers with in-clinic resources to assist low-income patients who screen food insecure with online registration for SNAP and information on local food banks/food pantries

- Encourage states to use Medicaid waivers to offer fruit and vegetable prescription programs that support local, fresh produce
- Encourage billing codes for local, fresh produce shares or produce prescriptions
- Increase funding for the USDA National Hunger Clearinghouse

Recommendation 2.2: Establish a Center for Health and Nutrition Innovation, headed by a Chief Public Health and Nutrition Officer, to Promote Novel Strategies that Enhance Food and Nutrition Security for All (Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress, 2012)

- Pilot/test/establish a Community Health Workers program
- Create a federal program to fund nonprofit organizations to conduct joint SNAP, WIC, and child nutrition outreach and access work.

Recommendation 2.3: Establish strong partnerships between United States Department of Agriculture, Health and Human Services, and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention like the National Collaborative for Childhood Obesity Research (NCCOR) to Foster Research and Evidence-based, Actionable Policies and Programs to Promote Health and Nutrition in Federal Nutrition Programs (Christensen & Bronchetti, 2020)

- Improve data availability and accuracy

Pillar 3 - Empower All Consumers to Make and Have Access to Healthy Choices

Foster environments that enable all people to easily make informed healthy choices, increase access to healthy food, encourage healthy workplace and school policies, and invest in public messaging and education campaigns that are culturally appropriate and resonate with specific communities.

Recommendation 3.1: Add Innovation Funds to the Farm Bill, Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act, and Older Americans Act

Currently, approaches to address food insecurity often emphasize food assistance and access to sufficient calories rather than listening to those with lived experiences, acknowledging the underlying causes of food insecurity, and ensuring nutrition and food security are accessible to all. To achieve zero hunger in the US by 2030, actionable, scalable, and innovative solutions founded in research, practice, and policy must be implemented.

Recommendation 3.2: Improve equity and cultural sensitivity of hunger and nutrition programs

- Use culturally appropriate and relevant terminology to describe “racial and ethnic minority farmers”, and eliminate use of the term “Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers”

Pillar 5 - Enhance Nutrition and Food Security Research

Improve nutrition metrics, data collection, and research to inform nutrition and food security policy, particularly on issues of equity, access, and disparities.

Recommendation 5.1: Implement a Systems-thinking Approach to Food Policy through the Establishment of a Multi-stakeholder Taskforce to Determine Metrics and Set Targets for Progress

It is necessary to approach hunger while also acknowledging the other connected issues that Americans are facing. Food insecurity cannot be addressed without addressing parallel issues that are tightly interconnected with hunger. Feedback loops connecting nutrition, health, and productivity can create poverty traps. As we develop models that help us assess impacts on different interventions, it is critical to identify a set of metrics that are representative of the diverse stakeholders and their priorities as they relate to sustainability, equity, health, and resilience.

Recommendation 5.2: Support the Development of Systems Models and Scenario Analysis Tools to Assess Impacts and Trade-offs associated with Policies

Tools and models can be useful in evaluating policies and supporting evidence-based decision making that address hunger-related challenges. However, available tools do not offer a holistic assessment of the impact that might be expected by adopting different scenarios. An objective platform for trade-off evaluation should be developed and instituted to support policy development.

About SDSN USA

The SDSN USA is a network of nearly 180 research institutions, knowledge creators, and thought leaders mobilizing expertise on the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Paris Climate Agreement in the United States. Its host, the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), spans six continents and draws upon the knowledge and educational capacity of over 1,600-member institutions.

The SDSN USA endeavors to build pathways to achieve the SDGs in the United States by mobilizing research, outreach, and collective action. We believe in the power of universities to lead deep, transformative change, practical systems for measuring progress, the importance of localization, and the need to connect across disciplines and sectors. More information on the network, members, and activities can be found at www.sdsnusa.org

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