

Worldwide food security and nutrition and the role that Dutch policies on trade and development can play in addressing these challenges

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The world faces multiple food security and nutrition challenges leading to diverse manifestation of adverse outcomes across the world, for high-income and low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Visible outcomes of food insecurity challenges manifest in different forms of malnutrition according to context. Food insecurity drives hunger and undernutrition including micronutrient deficiencies in LMICs that struggle to sustain stable economic growth equitably for economies based predominantly on agriculture; there are challenges of overweight/obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases across diverse contexts; there are significant rates of environmental degradation; there is an ongoing and accelerating climate crisis; and we depend on a limited number of food crops and animal species yet long-term food security requires attention to underutilized crops and animals to diversify diets and enhance resilience.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, ***“Food security is a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”*** The definition speaks to availability, accessibility whether through economic means to purchase or own grown food, affordability and desirability of safe and nutritious food contributing to healthy diets. But incomes, accessibility or affordability of food alone is not enough to bring about healthy diets, that translate to improved nutrition and health outcomes, even in seemingly food secure contexts. For example, a recent report of the United Kingdom (UK)'s Food, Countryside and Farming Commission in 2024 shocked the world with the finding that unhealthy eating habits in the UK cost the country an average of [£268 billion per year](#), mostly in human, productivity and health costs associated with overweight/obesity and diet related non-communicable diseases. If people are getting sick from the food they eat, can we say they are food secure when the definition of food security includes health as an important outcome?

The manifestations of different forms of malnutrition vary according to poverty levels, development needs, market dynamics, culture, and the nature of food systems and consumption patterns that prevail.

Poor countries like those in Africa face multiple burdens of malnutrition due to food insecurity that is now being exacerbated by the climate crisis. The cost of undernutrition alone has over time been estimated to range from 2% to 16.5% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for different African countries according to [Cost of Hunger and Malnutrition studies](#) conducted by the African Union with several African Union member states and the World Food Program. These costs include losses in productivity, limited education outcomes, and health costs. Further, many African countries and other LMIC settings are facing unprecedented increases in overweight/obesity and diet related non-communicable diseases like type-2-diabetes, high blood pressure, and cardiovascular diseases due to changing consumption patterns. If the cost of diet related non-communicable diseases were added, the cost due to the different forms of malnutrition together would be much higher. According to the [State of the Food Insecurity Report in the World 2024](#), Africa remains the region with the largest proportion of people facing hunger – estimated at 20.4 percent (approximately 300 million). Africa is also the region where hunger has been on the increase in recent years due to conflicts, climate change and economic crises.

Against this background African countries as a collective under the African Union have agreed on a predominantly agriculture led development path taking food systems approaches for the next 10-year

Comprehensive African Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP - [2026-2035](#)) that is endorsed and implemented by most African countries. The vision is “**Sustainable and Resilient Agri-food Systems for a Healthy and Prosperous Africa**” broadening from an agriculture-led production-oriented growth to an agri-food systems approach to address complex interlinkages across agriculture, diets, nutrition, health, climate and environment while fostering equitable economic development and trade across the continent. Crops, mixed-crop livestock systems and pastoral systems are all important. In mixed crop-livestock systems, crops and livestock are intricately related supporting food security and nutrition in intertwined relationships. In pastoralists settings, crop agriculture is not a viable option due to limited water resources. All these systems need sustainable solutions to increase productivity, and production diversity while mitigating and adapting to climate change and promoting environmental and soil health.

The Netherlands’ development efforts must therefore address availability, accessibility, affordability and desirability of healthy diets for all through agriculture and food systems that must be resilient to climate change and supportive of environmental, and soil health upon which sustained food security depends. Because of the complexity of contextual food systems approaches, effective coordination and convergence to foster synergies is critical. Here I commend the Netherlands Government’s effort in supporting the [United Nations Food Systems Coordination Hub](#) to foster coordination and convergence across food systems, nutrition, and climate action. Such support to the hub and country efforts are important

The predominance of agriculture as an engine of development for Africa and other LMICs makes agriculture a critical entry point for those who seek to promote development and trade. With good development outcomes the prospects for not just trade but quality trade relations and prosperity across the continent would be greater. On this scenario, Africa is a sleeping giant but one that is awakening!

What then can be the role of the Netherlands on trade and development for Africa, in particular?

Overall, it is important to take systems approaches to both development and trade. Agriculture and food systems are strong entry points for the Netherlands because the Netherlands has relevant experiences on diverse fronts. Here are examples of potential areas to support development and trade.

1. Leverage the food biodiversity Africa offers to promote equitable development of seed systems for diverse country contexts towards diversification of nature-positive and climate-smart agricultural production for better food and nutrition security.
2. Promote development of sustainable livestock and fishery systems that include both climate adaptation and mitigation to support meaningful and decent livelihoods, better diets and nutrition for all while being protective of environmental, water and soil health.
3. Water management is a key area of strength for the Netherlands. There is need to promote irrigation for a continent primarily dependent on rain-fed agriculture while being prone to both droughts and floods as climate variability increases.
4. The Netherlands is beginning to experience improvements in dietary consumption patterns in a healthier direction while African countries are in dietary transitions in the opposite direction. When promoting trade and investment in agrifood systems, healthier, diversified diets for better nutrition, sustainability and trade relations conducive to development must be key objectives.
5. It is important to support and align with ongoing regional-led initiatives and their articulated priorities such as for CAADP in Africa to achieve synergies in trade opportunities that foster real mutual benefits.
6. All the above areas of focus must be informed by adequate research and Netherlands Government can support essential capacity development and research to generate the necessary evidence to inform direction for food systems transformation towards better diets and nutrition, development and equitable trade for different contexts.