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# Food Insecurity in Developed Countries Around the World – Characteristics, Responses, and Challenges An International Review

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# Abstract

## Background

Food insecurity is the absence of regular access to safe and nutritious food sufficient for growth, development, and healthy, active lives. It is a global problem, impacting the physical, mental, and social development of children and the health and well-being of adults. Global research indicates an increase in food insecurity worldwide, both in developing and developed countries, even when there is sufficient food to meet the needs of all the citizens of the country.

With the aim of assisting the development of a national plan to reduce and prevent food insecurity in Israel, the National Council for Food Security, in collaboration with the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs, approached the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute to conduct an international review of the policies and practices of developed countries worldwide in dealing with food insecurity.

## Objective

The objective of the review is to assist the development of an evidence-based national plan to address food insecurity in Israel by learning from practices in developed countries regarding legislation, policy, assistance programs, and through mapping challenges, barriers, and best practices.

## Method

Review of recent articles, research reports, and websites of governmental and international organizations operating in the field of food insecurity in developed countries.

## Findings

According to UN estimates in 2021, nearly one in every three people suffered from moderate or severe food insecurity, and one in every ten people worldwide suffered from hunger. In OECD countries, between 2019 and 2021, food insecurity averaged 7.5%. Worldwide, food insecurity is more prevalent among children and families with children, especially single-parent families; women; individuals with low income or no income at all; individuals relying on allowances and social assistance; individuals residing in rural and remote areas; the homeless; migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers; individuals from minority cultural and ethnic groups; individuals suffering from

physical or mental illnesses or disabilities; individuals experiencing difficult and traumatic life events; and college students without family financial support.

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the UN has defined four pillars of food security essential for survival: food availability, access to food, utilization of food, and stability of all three over time. The central issue in developed countries is not food availability but access to food (manifested in economic difficulty for low-income earners to purchase food and physical difficulty for people with disabilities and the elderly to access food), and utilization of food (manifested in difficulty in purchasing or lack of knowledge or skills to prepare healthy food).

Regarding legislative and policy actions to reduce food insecurity, the "right to food" is established in international conventions but is not anchored in the constitutions of most developed countries. In recent years, some developed countries including Switzerland, Australia, Canada, and Scotland have recognized the need to develop a nationally legislated plan to address food insecurity by allocating resources and developing comprehensive, multidimensional, and long-term plans.

Many countries, particularly in Europe, rely on the activity of NGOs to provide food assistance based on soliciting donations of food from the public or surplus food from the food industry. These programs rely mostly on volunteer work and are not directly managed by the government. Research indicates that these organizations are not successful in preventing severe and persistent food insecurity, largely because their supply of food does not meet the demand.

In addition to these programs, many developed countries provide financial government assistance to low-income households or households with no income to increase their access to food and other basic needs. Assistance is provided in various ways: targeted financial support for food (such as food vouchers or subsidized food for people experiencing food-insecurity); support through allowances (such as universal income guarantee, child allowances, and elderly allowances) and social support (such as rent assistance, education subsidies, health expenditure assistance, and financial support programs through local welfare departments). Research indicates that targeted allowances for vulnerable population groups such as the elderly and children help reduce food insecurity in these groups, especially in low-income households. While food voucher assistance programs were found to help reduce the prevalence and severity of food insecurity, rates of food insecurity among participants in these programs remained high.

Additional interventions focus on food assistance programs for vulnerable population groups, including specific food programs for children (mainly operated through school lunch programs), programs for mothers and infants,

and programs for students. Findings show that a combination of social assistance, financial support, and expanded national insurance programs led to a significant decrease in food insecurity among eligible households. In addition to governmental interventions, initiatives at the urban and community levels, such as urban agriculture initiatives, social equality promotion, economic development, and promotion of healthy and sustainable food consumption, are implemented to reduce food insecurity among urban residents.

Challenges and barriers in the field are attributed, among other things, to the narrow focus of legislation and government policy on food insecurity as a singular factor of individual food scarcity, without addressing the broader societal influences of poverty and without aspiring to systemic changes; governments' reliance on emergency measures of NGOs and charitable organizations as long-term solutions; the lack of systematic, consistent, and comprehensive measurement of the prevalence of food insecurity and the lack of research to evaluate the effectiveness of programs in reducing it; and the failure to consider the voices of service recipients, making it difficult for them to influence solutions tailored to their needs.

## **Recommendations:**

- Include the “right to food” in new legislation and develop monitoring mechanisms to guarantee its implementation.
- Invest in uniform, systematic, and consistent methods of identification, monitoring, and measurement of food insecurity and its characteristics. These methods should accompany existing programs aimed at reducing food insecurity by evaluating their effectiveness.
- Countries are advised to develop long-term macro-strategies and formulate comprehensive national social policies that extend to areas related to food insecurity. These areas include education, employment, mental health, housing, welfare, transportation, food prices, and more.
- Increase investment in targeted interventions for vulnerable groups such as women and children, youth, the elderly, and students.
- Countries should promote a collaborative approach that strengthens local leadership and community initiatives, enhances partnership and the autonomy of service recipients, and promotes the building of coalitions and collaborations among stakeholders, programs, and different sectors.
- Establish and support a national council for food security with representatives from the private and public sectors. This council should engage in coordination, evaluation, data collection, development of responses, and oversight of their implementation, providing professional recommendations to policymakers on a regular basis and during emergency times, and promoting national policy in the field.