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A Vision for a World Food Stewardship Council: Addressing the World's Major Food Crises

**Kelly D. Brownell, Ph.D.
Yale University**

Three major food crises threaten the world's ability to cope. Hunger and undernutrition, obesity/overnutrition, and unsustainable food production practices raise pressing questions about human rights, catastrophic health care costs, national security, global political stability, and the health of the planet.

The world's population will reach 9.1 billion by 2050, an increase of 34%, most of which will occur in developing countries where undernutrition, overweight, and environmental issues form a triple burden[1]. Global demand for food is expected to increase by 70% at a time when crops are used increasingly for bioenergy and industrial purposes and stresses on arable land are extreme[1]. Proceeding with the status quo will lead to highly undesirable outcomes, including regional and global instability

There is the need for an immediate, far-reaching, non-partisan effort to address both short-term and long-term issues with food on a global basis. This paper presents a vision for the creation of a World Food Stewardship Council. The Council, if adequately funded and both backed and managed by highly trusted individuals and organizations, could assemble relevant stakeholders, coordinate efforts across business, private, and government sectors, undertake strategic research, and provide guidance to a world in need of solutions.

Food Crises in a World Context

The world has long recognized hunger and food insecurity as major global issues [2-4]. More than 1 billion people worldwide are undernourished, with numbers much larger if deficiencies in nutrients such as iron and Vitamin A are considered. Further, rates of deficiencies have risen in recent years due to instability in world food prices and economic conditions generally[2]. The combination of macronutrient, micronutrient, and calorie insufficiency leads to negative effects on every organ system in the body, poverty, educational disadvantage, and far-reaching political consequences. Children, adolescents, and pregnant women being especially vulnerable.

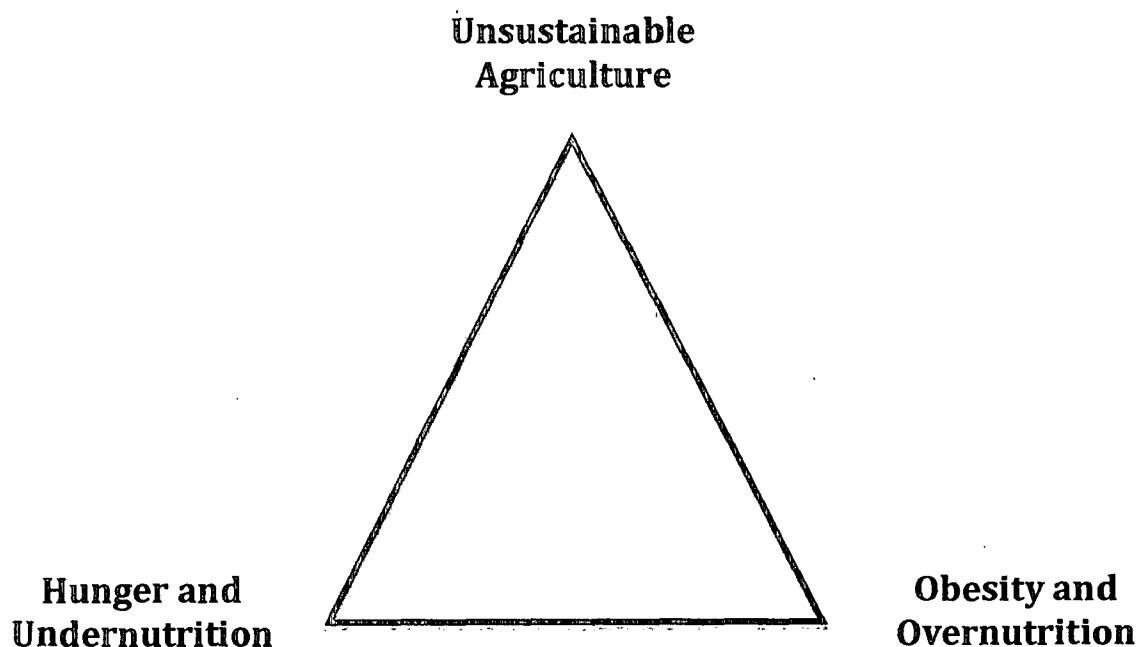
Newer on the scene is obesity. Considerable human suffering, extreme health care costs, and high prevalence (1.5 billion people are overweight) make overnutrition a pressing global issue. The World Health Organization estimates that 65% of the world's

population live in countries where overweight kills more people than does underweight [5].

Modern food production and consumption patterns are of concern not only to human health but to the ability of the planet to survive. The loss of arable land, shrinking biodiversity, depletion of water supplies, the heavy use of petroleum resources for industrial farming, and climate change are but a few relevant issues. By 2025 for instance, 2/3 of the world's population will be affected by serious stress on water supplies; 70% of water is used for agriculture[6]. Animal agriculture, which draws heavily on finite resources such as water and oil, and leads to emissions of carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide, now surpasses transport as a contributor to global warming[7].

These three areas can be seen as corners of a triangle, where each of the areas intersects with the others, and where there is potential for seeking common ground but also for conflict and working at cross-purposes (Figure 1).

Figure 1



The health of individuals is at stake, but also the health of the environment, whether economies can thrive, and the political fates of countries. As example, one could readily imagine countries coming to serious conflict over the water in a shared lake or river, countries making heavy use of natural resources in food production being

sanctioned by world bodies, and even more vast numbers of people dying from food-related problems. These daunting outcomes may seem distant, but could arise in a few decades.

Who Tends to These Issues?

Each of the three world food concerns is addressed by government agencies, NGOs, scientific experts, bodies of research and reports, and global organizations such as the Food and Agriculture Organization, World Health Organization, and World Bank. Coordination or integration of efforts across parties is inadequate given the magnitude of the problems, resources are inadequate and splintered, few opportunities exist to examine how policies and practices affect all three problems, and in some cases the players square off on controversial issues.

There are numerous examples of how progress in one area can be considered a problem in others. The use of genetically modified foods and petroleum based fertilizers that have led to food production increases in poor countries as part of the Green Revolution raises questions about impacts on biodiversity and the environment. Experts in the obesity field have proposed that SNAP benefits (food stamps) in the US not be used to buy sugar-sweetened beverages, a policy opposed by many in the anti-hunger community[8]. Because parts of the food system are affected by changes in others, there is need for cooperation, coordination, and ingenuity that creates wins across all areas.

In 1974, the United Nations General Assembly voted to create a World Food Council, a separate UN organization designed primarily to deal with hunger and malnutrition. Lack of funding, questions about authority, and difficulties with other UN organizations such as the FAO led to the demise of the World Food Council in 1993. The duties were absorbed into the FAO.

In 1974, the UN created the Administrative Committee on Coordination Subcommittee on Nutrition whose task it was to address hunger and malnutrition by coordinating activities across UN agencies. This evolved to the present day UN Standing Committee on Nutrition (UNSCN) whose primary task still involves malnutrition. It is a committee that reports to a committee, issues reports, and does outreach to nutrition practitioners globally.

Existing organizations play an important role, but food crises remain and more must be done. Creating a new organization outside existing structures, but connected to them, may offer the best hope for progress.

A World Food Stewardship Council

The Vision

A call is hereby issued for the creation of a World Food Stewardship Council whose mandate is to: a) Convene world leaders, experts and other stakeholders with the

aim of solving world food problems; b) Develop solutions that simultaneously address these problems; c) Act as an integrative body to keep relevant parties informed of developments; d) Commission and support strategic research projects that fill key gaps in knowledge; e) Develop model policies; f) Work with world leaders to have policies implemented and evaluated.

The creation of a World Food Stewardship Council could provide an opportunity for much needed dialogue between areas, but only if key stakeholders (the very top leaders in different sectors) agree to convene. Dialogue is just the one step toward the goal of healthy, vital people living on a healthy planet. The Council would work with global leaders to identify the most pressing issues, collect the necessary background information, assemble experts, carry out or support any needed research, issue reports, and follow through with all stakeholders in the service of insuring maximal reach and impact.

Structure, Governance, and Issues

Governance of the Council would have representation from six key communities (Figure 2): 1) Public health & science; 2) Funding organizations (e.g., foundations) and groups with global reach; 3) Relevant global agencies such as FAO, WHO, World Bank, WTO, etc.; 4) Industry; 5) Finance and Economics; and 6) NGOs that represent the three areas. The overriding spirit would be to nurture a non-partisan effort where real efforts would be made to solve real problems.

A Governing Board comprised of the six groups depicted in Figure 2 would help establish priorities, coordinate fundraising, and work closely with Council staff to insure projects are carried out capably and expeditiously. This board, because of its visibility and prestige, would also be instrumental in coordinating with world leaders to get input and to insure impact.

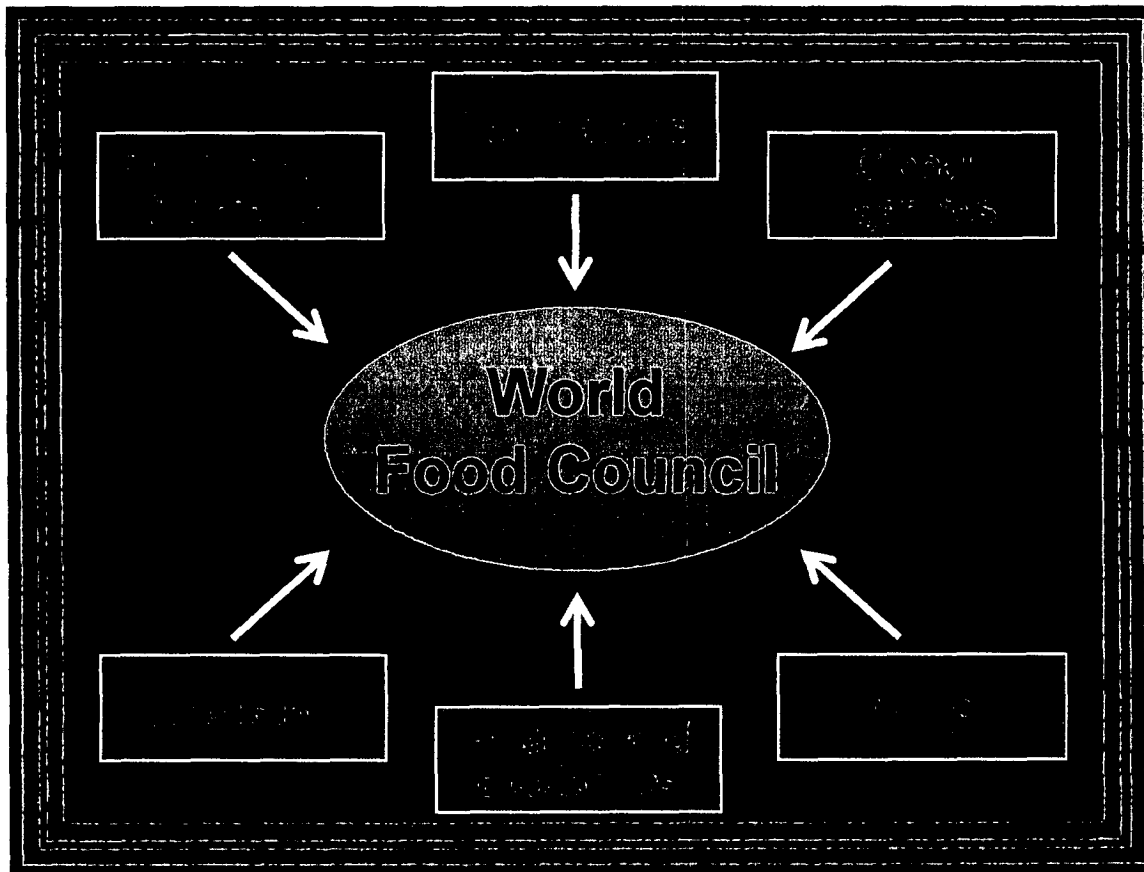
The principles underlying governance are involvement of relevant stakeholders, equity across stakeholders, low likelihood that any one stakeholder could hijack the process, a non-partisan process, avoidance of conflicts of interest, and solutions created by input from creative and visionary individuals.

Housing such an organization within the United Nations would seem reasonable at first glance, as the UN has a global governance structure in place and has existing organizations in place that deal with food and health issues (FAO, WHO, UNSCN). UN agencies, however, can get buffeted by political winds, have funding limitations, and can be hampered by internal disputes over authority.

There are dozens of examples of issues that might be tackled. The Council could address how world trade policy affects food and nutrition issues, how agriculture subsidies affect the world food supply and prices, how climate change will shift where specific crops are grown, how to protect the environment while feeding the world, how forest protection is affected by heavy cultivation of crops such as oil palm, barriers to food distribution, food marketing, to name just a few issues.

Not all problems will be solved. There will be areas where stakeholders cannot agree. There will be cases where solutions will be proposed but not implemented. Yet, it is essential to try.

Figure 2



Funding and Leadership

Funding and help with development of a leadership team would best come from institutions and foundations known for global scope, vision, and bipartisanship. Examples would be the Gates Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, Bloomberg Foundation, Wellcome Trust. Other stakeholders would not be in a position to fund such efforts (e.g., scientists) or might be seen as having vested interests (e.g., industry).

Threats

Several threats could make a World Food Stewardship Council impossible to launch or might create a weak organization without reach or impact. Perceived or actual partisanship would undermine credibility and discourage key players from taking part. Lack of funding would minimize reach. Unless high profile leaders from different sectors

took part, the stature, visibility, and significance of the Council would be reduced. Above all, the spirit of urgency, cooperation, and working toward meaningful solutions must be present or the effort would be strangled by competing interests.

Summary

There is a pressing need to address global food issues in ways that lead to more than reports and conferences – there must be solutions. The creation of a World Food Stewardship Council is proposed as a step in this direction. With the right governance, staffing, funding, visibility, and stature, the Council could play an important role in addressing major world food issues.

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