

# Facilitating progress towards SDG2: Zero Hunger

Proposed reforms to leadership,  
governance and coordination  
in the UN Rome-based agencies

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**Summary of research findings**

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# Introduction

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According to the latest annual *State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World* report, efforts to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 2: Zero Hunger (SDG2) floundered before the COVID-19 pandemic, with food insecurity stagnant from 2015 to 2019 due to climate change impacts, conflicts and economic slowdowns. The first year of the pandemic brought an increase of an estimated 118 million in the number of people undernourished, from 650 million in 2019 to 768 million in 2020. This last figure amounts to nearly one in 10 people on the planet (9.9 per cent). A lack of coordinated political engagement and prioritization has contributed to these trends.

Among the plethora of actors working towards SDG2, the three UN Rome-based agencies (RBAs) – the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Food Programme (WFP) – play critical and complementary roles. There is clearly the potential for the RBAs to facilitate progress towards SDG2, yet leadership, governance and coordination limitations are inhibiting their ability to do so.

This is a summary of a research paper that analyses these key aspects of the three RBAs and recommends specific actions that can enhance their capacity to contribute to SDG2. The paper proposes important reforms, which are derived from an extensive review of the literature as well as approximately 50 semi-structured interviews with key individuals.

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# SDG2 global architecture and the RBAs

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Among the plethora of actors that can support efforts to achieve SDG2, the RBAs have the potential to lead this undertaking by recognizing their complementarity and boosting cooperation. However, they have been reluctant to embrace this role.

There are seven global multilateral actors linked to agriculture and food that are critical to achieving SDG2. The three RBAs form the core of the multilateral actors in food and agriculture. The addition of the World Bank – more specifically the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) and the International Development Association (IDA) – and the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) make up the ‘big five’. Meanwhile, the ‘big seven’ also includes the African Development Bank (AfDB) and the Global Agricultural Food Security Program (GAFSP) – their inclusion emphasizes where progress towards SDG2 is most needed.

Within this global architecture, the RBAs are generally seen as the logical leaders due to their sole focus on the agricultural and food sector and the complementary nature of their mandates.

- FAO provides data and analysis as well as evidence-based policy and technical advice, it supports dialogue and partnership-building based on country needs, and develops treaties, standards and normative instruments in the food and agricultural space.
- IFAD is a specialized UN agency and an international financial institution (IFI) that provides investments in the form of loans and grants to governments dedicated to small-scale producers for inclusive rural transformation.
- WFP is a humanitarian organization dedicated to saving and changing lives, delivering food assistance in emergencies and working with communities to improve nutrition and build resilience.

There have been regular efforts to integrate RBA activities, with much of this focused on greater coordination and integration. However, no wholesale reforms have occurred to enhance leadership, governance and coordination.

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# RBA leadership, coordination and governance

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While progress has been made in RBA leadership, coordination and governance, there are significant limitations in terms of leadership selection, member state management and collaboration among the agencies.

## **Leadership selection**

The process for selecting leaders in the three RBAs is influenced by the nature and mandate of each organization, including their individual voting systems. Over time, leadership selection has become a more involved and expensive process, creating an advantage for candidates from member states able to finance a campaign, and those with economic and political leverage over others. This suggests that finance and politics, rather than leadership, management skills and technical ability, drive much of the RBA leadership selection processes.

Overall, however, these processes have become more transparent following efforts by member states. As part of this shift, there are now sessions in which candidates answer questions from member states, but there are numerous issues regarding how this has been implemented. The main advantage of an event is that it is an opportunity for candidates to provide their vision for an organization and to be questioned about it, and for the public and member states to raise key issues.

## **Member state management, annual meetings and calendar**

Within the three RBAs there are numerous meetings and events, including those linked to governing bodies, boards and committees. There is at least one important governing body meeting almost every month, requiring significant coordination to allow for participation and a substantial amount of preparation time. Among the events, the Committee for World Food Security (CFS) plays a critical role in

dialogue between a range of stakeholders on key strategic issues linked to the RBA agenda as well as RBA collaboration. Overall, the intensity and fragmentation of events limit the ability for broader, high-level strategic discussion.

## Collaboration among the RBAs

In line with the call from the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development for closer coordination of the UN system, RBA collaboration has gained traction and is increasingly being institutionalized and promoted by member states. However, a recent external evaluation points to the need for improved leadership, coordination and governance, and offers some specific recommendations. Member states, in particular, viewed leadership at the highest levels – between the principals as well as senior management – as critical for RBA collaboration and coordination. There are some in RBA senior management who welcome this development and would like a stronger push from member states.

As part of coordination efforts, since 2017, the FAO council, IFAD executive board and WFP executive board have informally met on an annual basis in September or October for a discussion on broad and long-term RBA collaboration. This has generally been seen as a positive development, although there is recognition from all stakeholders that the RBAs have different mandates and governance structures, and these need to be considered in any effort to enhance coordination and collaboration.

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# Lessons from comparable institutions

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This section of the paper presents the lessons drawn from comparable institutions in global finance and development – the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank Group (WBG) – and from across the global health architecture – the World Health Organization (WHO) and selected partner institutions – to facilitate improved leadership, governance and coordination of the RBAs.

**1. Coordination across the IMF and WBG is not guaranteed and is dependent on leadership.**

The overall leadership and guidance provided by the IMF executive director, the WBG president and the executive vice-presidents of each institution – as well as the leadership provided by regional and thematic vice-presidents and country directors – determines the level of coordination between the IMF and the WBG, and also among the institutions within the WBG. At certain points in history, when the leadership was not there, collaboration was limited.

**2. The IMF–WBG annual and spring meetings are considered highly valuable for discussing issues and coordinating efforts, but the perception of their specific value differs.**

Interview respondents noted three types of activities at the annual and spring meetings: (i) formal meetings of the Development Committee, the International Monetary and Financial Committee, the G10 and the G24; (ii) bilateral meetings held by attendees; and (iii) various seminars and events surrounding the meetings. The bilateral meetings were the most important for cooperation, particularly for government delegations to meet with World Bank and IMF staff as well as each other. Civil society representatives interviewed also mentioned the value of bilateral meetings with delegations. While some noted that the various seminars and events were excessive, they also acknowledged that these provided a good opportunity for discussion on larger development issues and a chance for transparent discussions between IMF and WBG officials, governments and civil society.

**3. The Development Committee is necessary for political purposes, but the perception of its value for providing a strong and coordinated strategic vision varies and its value from year to year depends on the global context at the time of the meeting.**

Most respondents highlighted that the Development Committee itself – the ministerial-level forum of the IMF and WBG – was political theatre and it was rare that anything interesting happened at the meeting, but that the preparation and discussions leading up to the meetings were useful and that the communication resulting from the meeting could be important. The value of the meeting depended on whether there were emerging global issues (e.g. debt crisis, COVID-19) that needed to be addressed. At those times, the Development Committee, or the discussions around it, could help resolve issues.

**4. Putting the IBRD, IDA, International Finance Corporation (IFC), Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency (MIGA) and International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID) collectively under the WBG results in efficiency gains and enhances the potential for collaboration.**

The institutions within the WBG are separate legal entities and have slightly different shareholders and governance structures, but they are connected through the WBG and many of the representatives on governing bodies are the same. All research interview respondents agreed that the efforts to merge back-office functions made sense and led to efficiency gains. There was also general agreement that this created opportunities to collaborate at the country level, in thematic areas (energy, infrastructure, climate) and in setting the broad development agenda.

**5. The lessons learned from the Washington-based institutions have implications for the RBAs.**

When asked, all respondents thought that a single meeting of the RBAs would be highly valuable and improve attendance, raise visibility, address important issues and allow for key bilateral discussions. Even with the limitations of the Development Committee, there was a general view that it might be useful to have a Global Food and Agricultural Development Committee, jointly managed by the three RBA principals and member states, to highlight key issues and to create focus for a meeting. A number of interviewees saw the value of creating an entity similar to the WBG in the food and agricultural space, but cautioned that it was no panacea for coordination.

**6. Election procedural changes take time and long-term planning.**

WHO director-general election procedures have been reformed multiple times. Such reforms require long-term planning, especially where they are stewarded through formal member state processes. This aspect is important not only for robust election processes but also for the full engagement and buy-in of member states in their development.

**7. Codes of conduct, although not legally binding, are important for creating greater transparency and accountability for election campaigns.**

The WHO incorporated a code of conduct in its 2017 director-general election. It is a political understanding reached by member states that recommends desirable behaviour standards for member states and candidates during elections. It focuses on increasing fairness, credibility, and openness and transparency, including around campaign funding, establishing greater legitimacy and acceptance of election outcomes. The introduction of the code of conduct was viewed favourably by candidates and representatives of member states interviewed for the research paper – although some interviewees raised concerns about adherence to the code, given it is not legally binding.

**8. Election processes establish the crucial technical and political skills of candidates, but could also focus on more strategic skills and experience such as coordination and partnership.**

The director-general of WHO needs to coordinate across a vast, competitive and evolving global health environment. This requires a technical background and organizational management skills, but also diplomatic, coordination and partnership skills and experience.

**9. Overall strategy, clarity of purpose and cooperation among agencies is important to ongoing cohesion of the global agenda, but it is also important to each agency's ongoing viability in a contested environment.**

It is no longer clear that WHO is the leading health agency, with many UN actors now taking on greater global health roles and other international agencies created or expanding to address particular gaps. As some experts identified, this was because WHO has failed in parts of its mandate, despite being created as the premier representative agency for member states on international health issues. The global health domain could therefore usefully be evaluated at this juncture for strategy and coordination, as well as for operation.



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# Proposals for action

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The research paper proposes a series of specific actions to enhance key aspects of leadership, governance and coordination among the three RBAs with the ultimate objective of improving their capacity to contribute to SDG2.

**1. Member states should continue to support an evolution towards greater transparency in leadership selection and greater formalization of that process.**

Significant progress has been made to improve the transparency of RBA leadership selection processes over the last decade. Yet more needs to be done in overall transparency, which should include internal questioning of candidates by member states to allow more flexible and less programmed discourse. In addition, there should be a code of conduct for elections to clarify acceptable behaviour and expectations in selection processes.

**2. RBAs should hold public events for leadership candidates to discuss issues and answer questions to allow key stakeholders (civil society, private sector, research institutes, etc.) to convey their concerns and for the candidates to respond and provide their vision for the future.**

The value of such events is less about identifying the best candidate, although it can play this role, and more about the opportunity for candidates to articulate a vision and for member states, civil society, the private sector and other interested parties to highlight issues of importance. It also provides a means for all stakeholders to hold prospective candidates to account, by having a set of stated promises and priorities at the outset of a new leader's tenure that can be used to gauge their success or failure. Any such process should be done with the active engagement of member states, and organized carefully to ensure a fair process for candidates from all parts of the world.

**3. A Food and Agriculture Group (FA Group), similar to the WBG, should be created to increase institutional efficiency and facilitate coordination and collaboration.**

Creating an FA Group would systematize these efforts and clearly define the areas where back-office functions could be merged. The recent experience at WBG shows gains in efficiency and was viewed by all entities as positive. There is also an argument that the creation of an FA Group could enhance transparency and

lead to greater professionalization of the functions. A move to create an FA Group would need to be very carefully considered, and the objective would be to enhance efficiency and foster collaboration and coordination.

**4. The RBAs should consider holding an annual meeting similar to that held by the IMF and WBG, which combines the key RBA governance meetings as well as the CFS into a single event.**

An annual event that combines governing body meetings and CFS into a single meeting could bring a higher-level delegation than those that currently attend separate FAO and IFAD governing body meetings and, if managed well, could expand visibility in the space. It might also help move discussions to a higher political and strategic level. The objective of an annual meeting is then to raise the profile of the RBAs through greater engagement and to enhance strategic dialogue among member states as well as civil society and the private sector.

**5. Create a Global Food and Agricultural Development Committee similar to the Development Committee of the IMF and World Bank, which meets during an annual meeting.**

A Global Food and Agricultural Development Committee could potentially provide an opportunity for high-level political engagement and discussion on strategic issues at times of crisis and replace the current joint meeting of RBA member states. The objective would be to limit replication of discussions across the three RBA executive board meetings and facilitate high-level coordination in a manner that helps the RBAs achieve their objectives. Alongside an annual meeting with the engagement of civil society and the private sector, such an event could facilitate the work of participants.



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