

Analysis of Governance for Food and Nutrition Security in Three Caribbean Countries

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Abstract Objective. To conduct an assessment of governance for food and nutrition security (FNS), in three Caribbean countries, and distill the key lessons learned and the critical role of governance for FNS from this three-country experience. **Methods.** The authors developed an analytical framework that contextualizes FNS within an inter-related multi-sectoral setting in which governance, global, hemispheric and regional mandates, and other key variables combine to determine a country's FNS status. Interviews were conducted with upper-level policy makers in the three countries, to solicit their perspectives on governance for FNS. Finally, various policy documents were reviewed to assess the extent to which they included principles of good governance for FNS. **Results.** Macro-level indicators of good governance in the three countries are comparable with other Caribbean peers, but some of the indicators have been declining in recent years. FNS-oriented structures and institutions do exist in the countries, but they focus mainly on their respective core mandates, and rarely appreciate the multisectoral dimensions of FNS. There is a plethora of FNS-oriented policies, strategies and action plans, but they do not specify activities to address governance of FNS. Moreover, many policies have expired, and the coordinating bodies for supporting their implementation have not been established and/or are not functioning. FNS policies are implemented in an *ad hoc* manner, and monitoring and evaluation are rarely conducted. **Conclusions.** Good governance enhances the efficient delivery of FNS, an essential public good that a country's citizenry expects from a democratic state. The political leadership and policy makers in all three countries must work harder to ensure that FNS policies and action plans are current, diligently implemented, monitored and evaluated. They must also integrate the human rights-based PANTHER and good governance principles into policies and action plans to achieve more robust FNS outcomes.

Keywords: *governance, food and nutrition security, PANTHER principles, right to food, Caribbean*

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, despite much progress in policy conceptualization and formulation, food and nutrition security (FNS) policies and action plans, and related public policies in many Caribbean countries have not produced expected outcomes. In this context, the relevant question is less about what are the right policies, but instead, what makes policies produce the desired life-improving outcomes? The World Bank's answer to this question is "better governance—that is, the ways in which governments, citizens, and communities engage to design and apply policies." [1], p xiii]. This answer concurs with considerable consensus in the literature that governance is a key underlying determinant of FNS. There is an increasing awareness that understanding the way structures, institutions, actors and power relations interact in an evolving context is an important dimension for effectively advancing the FNS agenda in countries [2,3,4,5]. However, this idea has not

motivated policy makers in Caribbean countries to integrate key governance objectives into their FNS policies.

This study is on the governance for FNS in three Caribbean countries, viz., St. Kitts and Nevis (SKN), St. Vincent and the Grenadines (SVG), and Jamaica (JAM). It is being conducted at a time when, although there is enough macronutrients (carbohydrates, protein, and fats), available in the country to meet recommended population food goals, food and nutrition security is compromised on several fronts [6,7]. This paper provides an assessment of, and the lessons learned from, the governance of FNS in these three countries, and distills the critical role of governance for advancing the FNS agenda.

2. Methods

2.1. Analytical Framework

Figure 1 depicts the analytical framework that is used in this paper to assess governance for FNS. FNS exists when

all persons have physical and economic access to safe, healthy and nutritious food for active and healthy living, and that they are not at risk of losing this access [8]. This definition is operationalized in terms of four pillars of FNS, namely food availability, food access, food consumption/nutritional adequacy and the stability of these three components. Figure 1 contextualizes these four pillars of FNS within an inter-related multi-sectoral setting in which governance, key national structures, institutions, policies, and external mandates and commitments, combine to determine a country’s FNS status.

Governance for FNS refers to the set of political relationships from which the various levels and sectors of society and government interact to adopt agreements that define and regulate the food system for achieving nutritional well-being and eradicating hunger and malnutrition [2]. From this perspective, governance is a political process that exists at three distinct levels, namely, the political, institutional, and policy levels.

At the political level, good governance for FNS is the efficient delivery of food and nutrition security as a basic public good that the citizenry can reasonably expect from a democratic state. At this level, good governance embraces several principles: (i) The regulatory and implementation framework that drives the food system represents the agreements achieved by different sectors of society acting on representation of public interest; (ii) The human rights-based PANTHER principles [9], which guarantee the Right to Food that underpin the governance for FNS, namely, **P**articipation, **A**ccountability, **N**on-discrimination,

Transparency, **H**uman dignity, **E**mpowerment, **R**ule-of-law; (iii) An integrated, inclusive and holistic approach that coordinates the actions of different sectors, stakeholders, institutions and policies, thus creating a framework of trust, coherence and multi-sectoral and institutional collaboration dedicated to achieving FNS goals; (iv) Neutral forums and platforms in which all sectors and stakeholders of society are included in building a shared vision that drives the process of good governance; and (v) A whole-of-society perspective, involving strengthening and empowering non-state as well as state actors [2,4].

At the institutional level, good governance requires institutions that have the responsibility to organise, structure, and coordinate the actors among different organizations, communities, individuals, sectors and stakeholders to promote more effective political process and ensure implementation of public policies. Figure 1 demonstrates the imperative of an inter-related multi-sectoral framework in which several government ministries, with relevant policies and direct access to national resources, have critical collaborative roles in contributing to the final food and nutrition security status of a country.

At the policy level, good governance requires effective and appropriate regulatory frameworks that are expressed as legislation, strategy, action plans or public policies. However, policies must be accompanied by their respective implementation strategies or action plans, and also contain monitoring and evaluation plans which serve as a management tool to maximize impact, prioritize resource use and improve decision-making processes.

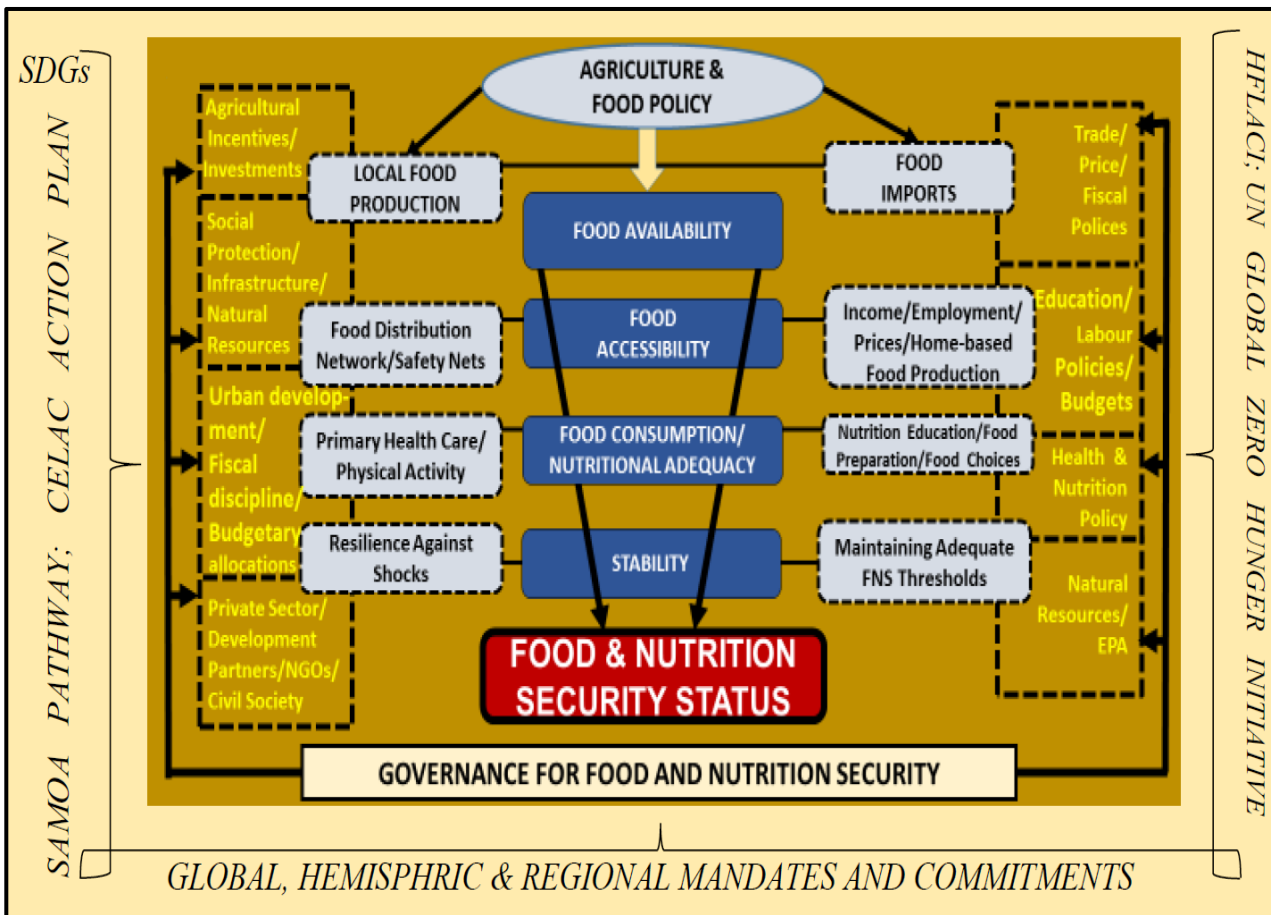


Figure 1. Key Influences on Food and Nutrition Security Status (Source: Authors’ construct)

The final set of influences on the FNS outcomes of a country is its commitments to global, hemispheric and regional mandates. All three countries under study have made commitments to several of these mandates. The global mandates are exogenous factors that add significant value to FNS at the national level, but it is when policy makers exercise good governance by strategically channeling and managing the resources from these sources, that optimal results are achieved.

2.2. Data Sources

An extensive review of national strategic plans and various policy documents was undertaken to gather information on governance for FNS in the three countries. National official statistics and data from the FAOSTATS database were used extensively. Finally, key-informant interviews were conducted in all three countries among upper-level policy makers, including government Ministers and opposition shadow Ministers, Permanent Secretaries, Heads of Departments and Chief Technical officers.

3. Results

3.1. State of Food and Nutrition Security in the Countries

Food balance sheets [10], indicate that all three countries have enough macronutrients (carbohydrates, protein, and fats), available to meet recommended population food goals. But several challenges compromise food and nutrition security in the countries [6,7]:

- i) Poverty, high youth unemployment, low economic growth, and skewed distribution of income constrain households' access to healthy and nutritious foods on a daily basis;
- ii) There is a significant excess of fats/oils, sugars and sweeteners in the food supply;
- iii) Chronic non-communicable diseases are the main public health problems, linked to increasing prevalence of overweight and obesity, sedentary lifestyles, and preferences for refined carbohydrates, and foods that are processed, high in fats, sweeteners and sodium;
- iv) While the countries produce some amounts of food, the domestic production indexes for food, crops, livestock, roots and tubers have fluctuated fairly stably around the 2004-06 base-year level. In SKN over the past five years, of the top 18 food crops produced, ten declined at an average of 33% per year, five increased at an average of 11% annually, and roots, tubers and pulses production were stable at just about 1 percent annually. In SVG, while overall crop production is about 3% above the 2004-07 base-year level, carrots and tubers have been declining over the years. Jamaica is self-sufficient in roots, tubers, plantains and bananas, and fresh vegetable production has been increasing over the past decade. But the overall food production index for the country has not improved

significantly over the 2004-07 base-year level. To meet domestic food needs, all three countries are net food importers, with relatively high food import dependence ratios of 63% (Jamaica), 65% (SVG), and 95% (SKN).

- v) Frequent natural disasters (storms, hurricanes, droughts, and floods), and other exogenous factors (crises on the world economy, COVID-19, etc.), reverse years of the macro-economic development and the economic progress of many households, and push vulnerable groups of the population below an acceptable food and nutrition security threshold.

3.2. Governance at the Macro-political Level in the Countries

Food and nutrition security is inextricably linked to the macro-political level, and to the character of governance exercised at that level. The World Bank Indicators (WBI) of the state of governance show a country's percentile ranking of six macro-political level governance indicators relative to those of over 200 other countries [11]. These indicators are: (i) Voice and Accountability, (ii) Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism; (iii) Government Effectiveness; (iv) Regulatory Quality; (v) Rule of Law; and (vi) Control of Corruption.

For SKN, the indicators of good governance at the macro-political level range between the 65th and 78th percentile ranking. However, the only indicator that has improved over the past five years is Regulatory Quality. In contrast, all of the other indicators of good governance have deteriorated over the past decade [11]. For SVG, the current indicators of good governance at the macro-political level range between the 62th and 79th percentile ranking. Political Stability is the only macro-level governance indicator that has improved over the past decade. Voice and Accountability has deteriorated progressively since 2007. Although Rule of Law and to a lesser extent Government Effectiveness and Control of Corruption, improved in 2012 relative to 2007, they all declined since 2017. Finally, for Jamaica, the current indicators of good governance at the macro-political level range between the 49th and 69th percentile ranking. Voice and Accountability, Political Stability, Government Effectiveness, and Rule of Law, have improved since 2007. With respect to the other two governance indicators, Jamaica's rank has declined (Regulatory Quality), or remained fairly constant (Control of Corruption), since 2007, and these indicators are at or below the 50th percentile.

The information that emerges from reviewing the countries' macro-level indicators of good governance, highlights the need for the political leadership of both the government and the opposition parties in the respective countries to work harder to achieve higher levels for all the indicators of good governance. Low levels of these indicators of governance all militate against a human rights-based approach to FNS, and specifically against the PANTHER principles and the practice of participatory consultative democracy. In turn, this can impact negatively on economic development, and by extension, food and nutrition security in the countries.

3.3. Governance at the Institutional Level

All three countries have a core set of government ministries, with staff complements, that can support their FNS agendas. Some of these ministries, such as Ministries of Agriculture, Health, Education, Sustainable Development, and Social Protection, have food and nutrition security explicitly stated as an integral part of their core mandates; others, such as Ministries of Finance, Local Government, Foreign Affairs, Trade and Commerce, perform critical functions, without which, food and nutrition security would be severely compromised. In addition, most ministries have a development plan or strategy and associated action plans. Several ministries, such as the Ministries of Agriculture, Community Development, Gender Affairs and Social Services, and others, are well-positioned as direct inter-faces between centralized government and beneficiaries of food and nutrition security and related policy interventions. In effect, these ministries can play a critical role in the effective delivery of supportive services, and thereby enhance the governance of an essential public good, viz., food and nutrition security.

The resources available for these institutions to implement their programs come mainly from the annual national budgets, sector-specific grants, and technical cooperation activities of regional, hemispheric, and international agencies. The annual budgetary allocations to the agriculture sector (for current expenditures), as a proportion of total annual national budget over the 2015-2018 period, averaged less than 2% for SKN, 3% for SVG, and 4.5% for Jamaica. These are relatively low compared to other Caribbean countries, and may reflect a lower priority to a sector that has functioning food systems and relatively large rural populations. However, this should be viewed within the context that in SKN there are 12 government ministries, 11 in SVG and 14 in Jamaica, all competing for budgetary resources. Additionally, there are several central government administrative/statutory agencies, and significant national debts for which budgetary allocations are made annually. Information from staff interviewed for this study indicated that there are several resource challenges and gaps encountered by the various agencies with regards to the implementation of food and nutrition security-related activities. These include lack of funding for programs and to finalize the FNS Policy and Action Plans, inadequate resources for training and for promoting healthy diets, and lack of market intelligence and other resources to facilitate the movement of agricultural products from the farm to markets (both domestic and export).

The ministries generally develop annual business plans which are implemented. However, there is very little

evidence that these ministries undertake diligent monitoring and evaluation of activities that have been implemented. This is a particularly weak area in the governance for food and nutrition security in all three countries. Additionally, with the possible exception of the Ministries of Agriculture and Health, many personnel in other government ministries and agencies (including very senior policy makers), are not fully sensitive to, or are even aware of the multi-sectoral dimensions of FNS. While they appreciate the concept when it is explained to them, these personnel invariably opined that the notion seems at variance with the ministries' and agencies' specific mandates, the boundaries of which would appear to be blurred by a multi-sectoral approach to FNS.

3.4. Governance at the Policy Level

There is no shortage of development strategies/plan/policies to advance food and nutrition security in the three countries [12,13,14,15,16]. The main public policies that support FNS in the countries can be separated into: (i) An over-arching, economy-wide national development plan, and (ii) Sector-specific policies and strategies that are linked to the national plan. SKN's national development strategy is contained in four inter-dependent and mutually reinforcing policy documents [17,18,19]. These policy documents are cross-cutting in intent and provide the buttress for the country's sustainable development thrust, and serve as the compass bearing for all sectors, public and private, in advancing the national agenda. SVG's National Economic and Social Development Plan (NESDP) [20], advances a vision which aims to improve the quality of life for all Vincentians. The Plan contains five over-arching strategic goals that inform the strategic objectives of all other sub-sectors in the economy, and is organized into four main sectors for convenience, viz., the economic, social, governance, and infrastructural/environmental sectors. Vision 2030 is Jamaica's first long-term strategic development plan [21]. The plan covers the 21-year period, 2009-2030, and integrates 31 sector-specific plans.

3.5. National Food and Nutrition Security Policy and Action Plan and Its Implementation

The overall goal of the countries' policy/action plan is to improve the health and well-being of all persons living in in the respective countries through enhanced food and nutrition security.

Table 1. Summary Information from FNS Policy and Action Plan (SKN, SVG, Jamaica)

Country	# of Goals	# of Strategic objectives	# of Outcomes	# of Priority Areas	# of Strategic Activities
SKN	4	Not stated	18	Not Stated	70
SVG	4	14	46	198	86
Jamaica	4	16	45	83	129

Source: Country's FNS Policy and Action Plan [15,22,23].

Table 1 provides summary information from the respective countries' FNNSP/AP planning logframe [15,22,23]. Each country's policy has four main goals which, respectively, addresses each of the four pillars of food and nutrition security, viz., food availability, access, utilization and stability. In turn, these goals are aligned to the strategic objectives, outcomes, priority areas and strategic activities covered in the countries' FNNSP/APs.

SKN's FNNSP/AP has been in draft form since 2012, and is yet to be finalized for presentation to Cabinet. However, the activities of the policy are been implemented, mainly by the Nutrition Unit in the Ministry of Health. The SVG's FNNSP/AP covered the period 2013-2018, and has expired. There is no initiative to develop a new policy/plan at this time, but activities of the expired policy/plan are selectively being implemented by the Ministry of Health. The Jamaica FNNSP/AP (2013-22), was officially launched in 2013, and is being implemented by the country's Ministry of Agriculture. These four policies and action plans share several commonalities:

- i) The strategic activities in the FNNSP/APs cover a comprehensive range of key FNS issues to be addressed under each goal, and the strategic activities are framed for implementation specifically through multi-sectoral partnerships and collaborations;
- ii) Although the policies and action plans are in implementation stage, none of the countries conduct monitoring and evaluation of the activities implemented;
- iii) The FNS policies do not have a dedicated set of goals or objectives and associated strategic activities to advance the governance of FNS in the countries. Instead, in each country a Food and Nutrition Co-ordinating and Advisory Committee was proposed with governance responsibilities to facilitate the implementation of the country's FNNSP/AP. However, these Coordinating and Advisory Committees and the Technical Working Groups to advise them, have not yet been established, and the FNS action plans are being implemented in an *ad hoc* basis.

4. Discussions

The findings from the analysis emphasize the need to integrate governance for FNS into FNS policy and Action Plans. The functions of the Coordinating and Advisory Committee for the FNNSP/AP border on key elements of governance for food and nutrition security. However, these functions would be more effective as an integral part of the action plan and framed under an additional goal with associated strategic objectives and activities to address the issue of governance for FNS. This study suggests the following construct for an additional goal.

Additional Goal: Promote governance of FNS through increased institutional coordination and functioning for improved food and nutrition security.

Strategic Objective 1: Establish effective mechanisms to facilitate inter-sectoral dialogue on critical issues impacting food and nutrition security.

Activity 1: Provide oversight, coordination and monitoring of the implementation of the FNNSP/AP as approved by Cabinet.

Activity 2: Assist in identifying sources of funding for action areas identified in the FNNSP/AP;

Activity 3: Identify gaps in existing programmes to support food and nutrition security and make recommendations to Cabinet to address gaps identified.

Activity 4: Consult and communicate with the national stakeholders on issues relating to food and nutrition security.

Activity 5: Prepare white paper to Cabinet on Right to Food to be incorporated into the Constitution and solicit support for a Parliamentary Front on Food and Nutrition Security.

Strategic Objective 2: Conduct training in food security concepts and processes at all public, private sector and community levels, emphasizing the issues relevant to their interests.

Activity 1: Preparation of training and communication materials on food security concepts and goals so that all stakeholders are aware of the commitments and programs

Activity 2: Development of local capacity to participate in the food and nutrition security planning and implementation process.

Activity 3: Implementation of food security planning training at the national and decentralized levels linked to resources and technical support.

Strategic Objective 3: Establish effective coordination of programs and monitoring mechanisms.

Activity 1: Foster co-operation among government, donor agencies, private sector, and NGOs.

Activity 2: Provide guidance to Ministries, Agencies and civil society on the alignment of programmes to achieve national food and nutrition security goals.

Activity 3: Hold all stakeholders accountable in implementing actions identified in the plan.

Activity 4: Prepare a list of food and nutrition security (FNS) process and outcome indicators to be utilized.

Activity 5: Provide annual reports to Cabinet on the progress made with the implementation of the FNNSP/AP

Activity 6: Establish a system of collecting, analyzing, and reporting on FNS indicators.

Activity 7: Establish linkages with an institution of higher learning to implement food and nutrition security evaluations to inform the work of the FNS Coordinating Agency.

The information presented above strongly indicates that the three countries have two solid planks that can serve as strong foundations for good governance for food and nutrition security, namely, (i) a plethora of FNS policies and related national plans of action, sector-specific policies/plans, strategies and programs; and (ii) A core set of structures and institutions that can implement these policies and strategies and advance the FNS agendas of the countries. There were also other examples of good governance, such as: (i) fairly high rankings in macro-political level governance indicators relative to the other 200 countries in the sample; (ii) dedicated FNS policies and action plans that cover a good range of key FNS issues to be addressed; (iv) proposals for fairly well-designed multi-sectoral FNS Coordinating Agencies and Technical Working groups to facilitate the implementation of the FNS policies and Action plans. However, several examples of bad governance practices were observed that must be addressed:

- i) While the policymaking environment that exists in all three countries appears to be supportive of developing policies, a dedicated policy and action plan for advancing food and nutrition security has been in draft stage in SKN, and expired in SVG, in a context where food-related diseases are the main public health problems, and increasing proportions of the country's food supply is outsourced to imports. Moreover, FNS requires a multi-sectoral coordinating agency to facilitate the implementation of the FNS policies, which are still to be established in the countries. This resulted in responsibilities for food and nutrition security being very poorly coordinated, with public sector entities pursuing food and nutrition security-related activities through the lens of their own technical and sectoral mandates;
- ii) Many expected policy outcomes have not been realized. This is best demonstrated in the poor performances of policies to, *inter alia*: (a) reduce poverty and activate economic growth; (b) increase domestic food production; (c) effectively address the increasing prevalence of non-communicable diseases and their risk factors; etc.
- iii) Several macro-level indicators of good governance—fairly good proxies for the human rights-based PANTHER principles—have been trending downwards in recent years;
- iv) Politics in the countries are centralized, and polarized along party lines. Within this context, and with a Westminster-type “winner-takes-all” political system, this has militated against genuine bipartisanship in policy making, consequently impacted negatively on economic development, and by extension, food and nutrition security in the country;
- v) From the perspective of governance for FNS, what is absent in the three countries, including SVG despite explicitly including a governance goal in its national development plan, is a genuine human rights-based framework that elevates the Right to Food as a priority, to advance their FNS agendas. Food security governance and the Right to Food are *sine qua non*, i.e., one cannot exist without the other. It is when good governance prevails that the right to food is most likely to be realized [4].

5. Conclusions

The three countries under study have been advancing their food and nutrition security agendas. There is sufficient food energy available to meet the recommended population food goals (RPFG) of the population. However, significant challenges remain, including: (a) unacceptable rates of poverty and a highly unequal distribution of income; (b) unhealthy eating habits and other lifestyle behaviours that drive the increasing prevalence of overweight and obesity; and (c) frequent droughts and tropical storms/hurricanes that reverse gains in economic development. While all three countries have FNS policies and institutions to implement them, there are several areas where bad governance of FNS were observed. By way of conclusion this paper makes several recommendations for

strengthening FNS governance in the three countries: (i) As a matter of urgency, SKN and SVG need to finalize their national food and nutrition security policies and action plans, and present them to Cabinet for approval; (ii) As a governance issue, the Right to Food has to be addressed more boldly and explicitly in the countries. This should be a goal in their FNS policy and Action Plans, with the appropriate strategic activities as suggested earlier in this paper; (iii) The countries should establish the Coordinating Agencies recommended in their NFNSP/APs as a matter of urgency; (iv) Finally, every effort should be made by the government in power to engage the opposition in supporting and partnering in national development. Additionally, international organizations should initiate discussions with the government to establish Parliamentary Fronts on Hunger, Poverty Reduction and FNS, as countries in Central and Latin America have already done [24,25].

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