

Draft Remarks for Rodger Voorhies
Committee on World Food Security (CFS)
February 10, 2020

Good afternoon, and thank you all for being here. It's a privilege to address stakeholders of the Committee on World Food Security. It's a pleasure to join so many leaders and friends today. And it is an honor to represent the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation as we discuss our obligation and our opportunity to ensure food security and nutrition for all.

For two decades, we made extraordinary progress in improving the quality of life for millions of people around the globe, reducing extreme poverty from 28.6 percent in 1999 to 10 percent by 2015. And yet, in the last few years, we have faced headwinds. For the last four years, global hunger has been on the rise, reaching nearly 822 million people in 2018—levels not seen in nearly a decade. Climate change is driving poverty in places like sub-Saharan Africa, where the rate of hunger is at almost 20 percent. Inequality, both across and within countries, has complicated our assignment as instances of overall progress mask yawning gaps between the lucky and the left out.

As we speak, billions of people are projected to miss the targets that we set in the Sustainable Development Goals—targets that we all agreed represent a decent life.

In order to reverse that trend and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals in just 10 short years, we will not only need to continue our current efforts—we will need to accelerate them. Unfortunately, we face a real and significant obstacle in that work: in too many cases, we simply do not have the data we need to measure the scope of the challenge or the viability of our solutions.

This data gap—the lack of reliable, contemporary data on farmers and food production in the developing world—is both harmful and widespread. It affects at least 800 million people, those who live in rural areas and are most at risk of being left behind. Last year, a survey of member states on the status of SDG indicators—conducted by our colleagues at the Food and Agriculture Organization found that less than 20% of countries had any data on the income of small-scale food producers. An even smaller number of countries are able to report data on the productivity of small-scale food producers,

while no country yet is able to assess the sustainability of its agriculture according to international standards. This means that right now most countries cannot track progress towards SDG targets 2.3 or 2.4. Three quarters of respondents to the FAO's survey noted that they required technical or financial assistance to produce data on the indicators under the custodianship of the FAO. Those of us in this room and our partners around the world are doing innovative, groundbreaking work, but the reality is that without better data, even our most exciting programs and initiatives cannot achieve their full potential.

We are developing more resilient and nutritious plant varieties—but without information about the planting practices and yields of farmers, we cannot adjust our strategies for success. We are improving digital access to financial services for smallholder farmers and individuals in remote locations—but without reports on their ability to access adequate financing, we cannot ensure that our resources are used effectively. We are supplying agricultural extension agents, and making sure women have access to the support they need and deserve—but without reliable data from the field, we cannot direct resources to the places and programs where they are needed most.

A few months ago, our foundation's most recent Goalkeepers Data Report showed how a lack of data has, for too long, obscured and abetted growing inequality within and across nations. Over the past two decades, global poverty trendlines have been overwhelmingly positive. Mean years of schooling has increased in every nation in the world. Nearly every country has reduced child mortality. Even in the worst-off parts of low and low-middle income countries, more than 99 percent of communities have seen improvement in these two critical measures. And yet, using new sub-national data, our report uncovered vast inequalities within countries that have traditionally been masked by averages. Almost half a billion people – nearly one in every 15 people worldwide – still live in places without basic health and education. Huge gaps remain between the best-off and worst-off districts, and between boys and girls. Those at the bottom are simply not progressing fast enough to reach a decent standard of living. That means that while the picture is brighter overall, communities at the margins are being left behind.

Our foundation used that data to call for a new approach to development, targeting the poorest people in the countries and districts that need to make up the most ground. We asked governments to prioritize primary health care to deliver a health system that works for the poorest; digital governance to ensure that governments are responsive to their least-empowered citizens; and more support for

farmers to help them adapt to climate change's worst effects. Without our investment in data, we never would have gained a clear picture of the effects of inequality, or understood how to fight back.

The data gap is a key reason why so many poor and hungry people stay poor and hungry; why malnutrition persists, and why progress is slow. It affects all entities and organizations with an interest in this space. Government agencies need data to make sound program and policy choices. The private sector needs data to inform investment strategies and mitigate risks. Development partners need data to optimize their investments and understand the consequences of their interventions. Farmers need accurate and timely information about climate patterns, prices, and the availability of agricultural inputs in order to adapt and maximize productivity.

At the Gates Foundation, we are quantitative actors by nature, but it is hard to develop solutions for problems that are not well-understood, and we can't track progress toward achieving our mission if the situation on the ground remains unclear. CFS' own vision statement notes that the body "will focus on activities that identify and address the root causes of food insecurity and malnutrition," but it is simply not possible for this body to identify and address that which it does not know. If we are going to make real advancements, we must be able to measure our steps forward and gain reliable information about the road ahead. That will require strengthening public-sector work—in particular, on national statistical systems—to help ensure that well-functioning public institutions can generate useful public information.

Of course, CFS not only understands this challenge—you are also taking important steps to overcome it. You have said that more needs to be done at the global level to lay the groundwork for informed decision-making. You have called for improved data-driven policies around food security and nutrition, and for stronger monitoring, review, and follow-up to deliver SDG 2. And your workstream on data collection and analysis tools—supported by the foundation and all CFS Members—is a central part of the effort to strengthen the capacity of countries to collect, analyze, and use quality data around food security and nutrition policies.

You are uniquely suited to bring attention this work, and exceptionally well-positioned to ensure that this conversation continues. With your dedication to learning and exploration, you can help us better understand this data gap and what can be done to address it. With your inclusive structure and convening authority, you can bring partners together around this issue. CFS offers a comprehensive

forum for each constituency to consider what action they can take. How can member states leverage their role and experiences to support FAO's drive for a modern, coherent approach to filling the data gap? How can civil society bring diverse voices and on-the-ground experience to this challenge? How can the private sector help articulate the win-win of increased action on data?

As an inclusive and stakeholder-led body, CFS can play a key role in expanding awareness and spotlighting solutions. Working with institutions that host, the Rome-based agencies, and partners that work with it, such as the World Bank, CFS delivers on a critical need that member states have identified. That's why we at the Gates Foundation have been proud to invest about \$1.5 million in direct support of the CFS since its reform in 2009. We'll be considering how best to support the Data Work Stream at the CFS and urge other member countries and partner organizations to support it as well.

The good news is that organizations like the FAO have stepped up to the challenge, and are developing the tools we need to make a difference. Just over a year ago, we joined partners including the FAO, IFAD and the Governments of Sierra Leone, Kenya and Ghana to launch the 50 x 2030 initiative—an unprecedented, groundbreaking data-gathering effort to improve our understanding of the productivity and livelihoods of the world's 500 million small-holder farmers. This is the largest-ever publicly-led effort on data for agricultural development. The initiative will help 50 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America with the technical and financial assistance they need by 2030, shrinking the data gap and offering vital insights into agriculture. National governments and the broader community will be able to track progress on SDG2, CAADP and improve decision-making to benefit farmers, reducing poverty and hunger.

Already, this action has helped us strengthen our processes and improve outcomes. One of the programs the initiative is scaling up is the Living Standards Measurement Study – Integrated Surveys on Agriculture, or LSMS-ISA. So far, the results have informed specific policy decisions like poverty mapping and diagnostics in Ethiopia and Nigeria. This data has improved targeting and evaluation of social assistance programs and public spending in countries like Malawi. It has raised the profile of rural poverty eradication and increased demand for further data at the country level, providing tangible tools, producing respected statistics, and building local analytical knowledge. And it has changed the way we think about agricultural development, from the importance of non-farm income among rural

households, to the relationship between farm size and productivity, to the role of gender relations in agriculture.

Our investment in the LSMS-ISA—just one part of the 50 x 2030 initiative—has already transformed our understanding, and the results we have achieved should serve as a critical reminder that this kind of data generation doesn't just help us *talk* about progress; it helps us *make* progress.

Initiatives like this one are central to the FAO's mandate. Article I, Function 1 of FAO's Basic Texts says that "The Organization shall collect, analyze, interpret and disseminate information relating to nutrition, food and agriculture." FAO has a critical role as custodian for 21 indicators under the SDGs, including SDG 2.3, which seeks to double the productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, and SDG 2.4, which calls for sustainable food production and resilient agricultural practices. None of these goals, from FAO's most fundamental mission to the responsibilities it has in supporting and achieving the SDGs, will be possible without more consistent and comprehensive data.

Shrinking the data gap may not feel like the most sensational of projects, but it is essential to our most basic functions. We are working to achieve the SDGs in a world that is becoming more complex and more challenging than ever before. As the climate crisis makes its influence felt in every aspect of human existence, from agriculture to migration to health to economics, we will need to evolve and change our practices to adapt and grow our response. If we are going to accomplish our goals, we will need to ensure that every dollar invested in agricultural development has the biggest possible impact. We will need to confirm that every action we take to support global agriculture has the greatest possible effect. We will need to ascertain that every successful initiative can be targeted, expanded, and scaled successfully. Data is the bedrock of that shared effort, and closing the data gap is the key to progress on every other issue.

That is why this effort is so urgent. We've seen this approach work in other areas of development, in fights against polio, AIDS, TB, and malaria. We have used data to gauge the scope of problem. We have used metrics to measure what works and what doesn't. We have used evidence to determine the extent of our success. For millions of people in countries across the globe, our evidence-based approach has delivered transformative results—and if we can bring that toolset to our fight against hunger, we can change and save countless more lives around the world.

There is no doubt that we have a difficult task ahead of us. We have a great deal of work to do, and the time to achieve our objectives is growing short. But if we can stand together, if we can work together, if we can learn from our efforts and programs together, then I am confident we can meet our moment and achieve our mission. I am excited about the potential of our partnership. And I am eager to build a world where agriculture can fulfill its promise to lift millions of families and rural communities out of poverty.

Thank you.