2018 was a somber and unpredictable year, not only for food and nutrition security, but also for global political stability and international development. Many regions of the world faced rising rates of hunger and stagnation in tackling malnutrition. Dramatic shifts occurred in multilateral and bilateral relations as trade protectionism and anti-globalism emerged as central political themes in many countries. Amid these challenges, rural areas continued to find themselves in a state of crisis marked by a deepening cycle of hunger and malnutrition, persistent poverty, limited economic opportunities, and environmental degradation. The world’s rural areas have been ignored by policymakers and the development community for too long.

The 2019 Global Food Policy Report reviews the major policy developments of 2018 and focuses on rural revitalization as a promising way to achieve the 2030 development agenda and improve rural lives. Policies, institutions, and investments that take advantage of new opportunities and technologies, increase access to basic services, create more and better rural jobs, foster gender equality, and restore the environment can make rural areas vibrant and healthy places to live and work for generations to come.

2018 IN REVIEW

Despite strong economic growth in 2018, undernourishment rose for the third year in a row, with 821 million people in the world now facing chronic food deprivation. The number of stunted children globally remains very high at 150 million despite a decline of 9 percent between 2012 and 2017, and other nutrition indicators point to an even more difficult road to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Progress in reducing anemia among women of reproductive age and overweight among children has stagnated, and adult obesity has continued to rise.

The urgency of these developments was rarely reflected in global policy dialogues, and bilateral and multilateral funding commitments to the development agenda remained uneven and unpredictable. The development community, for its part, focused on rallying support for SDG2—Zero Hunger through the first Global Parliamentary Summit Against Hunger and Malnutrition, a high-level report highlighting the public health threat of poor diets, and the IFPRI-FAO conference on Accelerating the End of Hunger and Malnutrition. These initiatives reflect a continued shift toward transforming the whole food system; rural revitalization could serve as the linchpin of such an approach.

Trade protectionism was on the rise in 2018. The trade war between the United States and China boded poorly for global trade and economic growth. But the year also saw major pushback against protectionism with the formation of numerous trade partnerships, including the Asia-based Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, poised to become the world’s largest trade bloc, and the African Continental Free Trade Agreement, signed by 49 countries to date.
Progress on climate change lost momentum. Commitments to meeting the Paris Agreement goals varied wildly against the backdrop of anti-science sentiment in some countries, even as climate shocks were a primary driver of food insecurity in 23 countries in 2017. A report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warned that limiting global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels will require rapid and extensive changes in many aspects of society.

Protracted crises, such as those in Yemen, Venezuela, and South Sudan, also continued to pose grave threats to food and nutrition security. Conflict and instability were the main drivers of food insecurity for 74 million people in 18 countries in 2017, and there was an 11 percent increase in the number of food-insecure people needing urgent humanitarian assistance.

In a rare bright spot in 2018, there was renewed emphasis on using entrepreneurship and technology to foster innovation, raise incomes, and slash poverty. Africa hosted several innovation and investor forums to bring the private sector, especially small and medium enterprises, on board in working toward the SDGs, and the 73rd UN General Assembly featured the launch of several tools to measure corporate progress on the SDGs.

A CALL FOR RURAL REVITALIZATION

The first two SDGs call to “end poverty in all its forms everywhere” (SDG1) and to “end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture” (SDG2) by 2030. These goals seem distant, especially as political attention has shifted away from rural areas, where most of the world’s poor live. The global rural poverty rate is currently 17 percent, in contrast to an urban poverty rate of 7 percent. Rural areas lag behind in reducing the prevalence of child stunting and underweight among children. Rural environments are also under threat: climate change, deforestation, soil degradation, and pollution increasingly challenge rural production, sustainability, and well-being. Lack of rural infrastructure, services, and economic opportunities compound these obstacles to realizing the potential of rural areas. A systemwide transformation is needed to raise rural incomes, improve rural food security and nutrition, safeguard environmental resources, and lift living conditions in rural areas.

Rural revitalization is a way of positively transforming rural areas for present and future generations. It considers all aspects of life that can make rural areas good places for people to live, work, and raise families. These considerations include creating opportunities for employment and forging links between rural and urban economies, not only with megacities but also with smaller towns and cities. Rurbanomics is an approach that frames rural economies as equal partners with urban economies, emphasizing the vitality of rural economies as drivers of food security and rural well-being; as springboards for value chains; and as providers of quality environmental services. Increased agricultural productivity and diversity and functioning rural markets linked to urban centers can provide both urban and rural populations with healthy diets as well as boost the incomes of the rural poor. Investing in agriculture (particularly post-production) and beyond—especially in the nonfarm sector, already a booming segment of the rural economy—can make rural areas hubs of innovation, spur job creation, and slow the tide of youth migration. Rural revitalization includes investing in information and communication technologies (ICTs), education, governance, rural health, and a healthy environment. These building blocks can create vibrant rural areas that can attract and retain employed, educated, and healthy rural residents.

BUILDING BLOCKS OF RURAL REVITALIZATION

RURAL EMPLOYMENT

Transformation and revitalization of the world’s rural areas will only be possible if rural employment opportunities, both on-farm and off-farm, increase in number and offer better livelihoods. Rural employment in agriculture, agribusiness, and other rural-based businesses will be especially critical in Africa south of the Sahara, where the rural population continues to increase and where poverty will continue to be concentrated. While many African countries have experienced strong growth and urbanization, much of this growth has been in the services sector, rather than industry, which does not offer a realistic pathway to creating the number and types of jobs needed to raise living standards. Investments in Africa’s agriculture sector show greater promise than investments in urban areas for reducing poverty.

In addition to increasing agricultural productivity, improving market links to urban areas will be vital to improving rural livelihoods. In Africa, the peri-rural areas that are within one to three hours of a city of 50,000 people or more produce the most agricultural output, and about 80 percent of rural residents now live within three hours of an urban center, reflecting growing connectivity through roads and communications. A territorial approach designed to further integrate rural economies with secondary cities and small towns shows promise for generating rural employment and transforming rural areas. For Asia, especially among youth populations, expansion of ICTs can provide the connectivity needed to spur rural revitalization.

WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT

Rural revitalization requires that all members of society be able to participate in and benefit from growth and transformation of rural areas, including women. Achieving gender equality is a key step toward achieving many of the SDGs, including not only SDG1 and SDG2, but also SDG3—“ensuring good health and well-being for women and children”—and can enhance women’s contribution to rural revitalization. Numerous studies have shown that when women control resources, their families, especially their children, enjoy better health and nutrition.
Women’s empowerment can improve agricultural productivity, dietary quality, and maternal and child nutrition. These connections are especially evident in rural areas, reflecting the importance of applying a gender lens to the various building blocks of rural revitalization.

ENVIRONMENT
Rural areas are critical to the provision of ecosystem services. Functioning ecosystems provide numerous benefits: safe food, clean water, and energy; disposal of waste; services such as control of climate and oxygen production; and cultural, spiritual, and recreational benefits for urban and rural dwellers. Economic incentives can help to address rural environmental degradation and contribute to the health of the planet. Key examples include payments for ecosystem services (compensation paid to resource managers in exchange for practices such as watershed protection); and removal of environmentally damaging subsidies for electricity, fuels, fertilizer, irrigation water, and other scarce inputs. Innovations such as water harvesting and precision farming can improve agricultural production while conserving scarce resources. These improvements must be supported by appropriate institutions to motivate and coordinate action, including legal recognition of the rights of rural men, women, and communities to land, water, forests, and fisheries.

RURAL ENERGY
Access to energy is essential to reducing poverty—but more than a billion people lacked access to electricity in 2014. Ninety percent of them resided in rural areas, primarily in Africa and South Asia. Unfortunately, fossil-fuel-based energy systems do not easily reach these widely dispersed and poor rural populations. The good news is that modern electrical systems, particularly solar power, are making it easier than ever to meet rural energy needs. Costs of solar systems have fallen dramatically and, given the high solar potential in many developing countries, these systems offer a host of rural livelihood, business, and development possibilities, including the potential to irrigate, store, and transport perishable, nutrient-dense foods, as well as greater sustainability. With the right policies to foment competition among energy providers, identify the best locations for solar or wind systems, and ensure that women and other vulnerable groups benefit from these technologies, real potential exists to ensure access to electricity for all by 2030.

RURAL GOVERNANCE
Pursuing the many policy goals mentioned here will require investing in good governance. Three aspects of governance are critical for rural revitalization. First, appropriate and predictable laws and regulations—especially a legal framework to protect property rights and to create incentives to support business—are fundamental to economic growth and development. These laws can have unexpected and far-reaching impacts: land tenure security, for example, has been shown to positively impact children’s height. They can also create conditions that empower women. For example, policies to reduce women’s domestic workload and to improve their access to financial and agricultural services will give women greater ability to make life choices. Rural institutions are also key: when rural government workers have adequate technical skills, financial resources, and appropriate organizational structures, they can help realize policy goals for rural areas. Finally, accountability—from frontline civil servants to elected politicians—is essential to ensuring that governments respond to the needs of the poor. Competitive elections, access to information, and transparency help citizens monitor and evaluate their governments’ policies and actions.

A SYSTEMWIDE SOLUTION TO RURAL CHALLENGES
Looking ahead, 2019 may be another difficult year. Global economic growth is projected to slow over the next two years. Setbacks or negligible growth in per capita GDP are projected for much of the developing world. Heightened risks for global trade will increase uncertainty for the livelihoods and food security of both producers and consumers. At the same time, rising demand for processed foods will aggravate booming rates of overweight and obesity.
These worrying trends will undoubtedly affect rural areas most. Rural economies, already long neglected, continue to struggle. Any slowdown in national economic growth will impact employment levels and absorption of new workers by rural labor markets. In most developing countries, the majority of the poor live in rural areas and bear the brunt of food and nutrition insecurity, lack of basic services, and limited opportunities. High levels of poverty and dependence on traditional agriculture also leave rural residents especially vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

Focusing on the needs of rural areas is one of the most practical ways to achieve the SDGs and address many of the roadblocks encountered in 2018. Rural revitalization represents a systemic approach to addressing poverty and food and nutrition insecurity through its recognition of the intrinsic links among sectors that make up the entire food system. Rural revitalization also represents an opportunity to leverage some of the successes of 2018, notably an upsurge of interest in using entrepreneurship, new technologies, and public-private partnerships to solve development challenges. In just under a decade, innovation and investment in rural areas could provide a means for many rural residents to move out of poverty, malnutrition, and a low quality of life. The potential is vast.

The challenges encountered in 2018 will continue in 2019. But policymakers, researchers, program implementers, and civil society are already crossing sectoral boundaries to learn from past experiences and scale up successes. With perseverance, 2019 can become the year when the will to eliminate hunger and malnutrition gathers momentum, forging a bright future for poor people around the world.

INSIDE THE 2019 REPORT

- **Food Policy in 2018–2019: Growing Urgency to Address the SDGs**  
  Shenggen Fan

- **Rural Revitalization: Tapping into New Opportunities**  
  Achim Steiner and Shenggen Fan

- **Poverty, Hunger, and Malnutrition: Challenges and Breakthroughs for Rural Revitalization**  
  Homi Kharas and Lorenz Noe

- **Employment and Livelihoods: Connecting Africa’s Rural and Urban Areas for Rural Revitalization**  
  Xinshen Diao, Paul Dorosh, Mekamu Kedir Jemal, Adam Kennedy, and James Thurlow

- **Gender Equality: Women’s Empowerment for Rural Revitalization**  
  Agnes Quisumbing, Ruth Meinzen-Dick, and Hazel Malapit

- **Environment: Revitalizing, Restoring, and Improving Rural Areas**  
  Claudia Ringler and Ruth Meinzen-Dick

- **Renewable Energy: Bringing Electricity to Revitalize Africa’s Rural Areas**  
  Channing Arndt

- **Governance: Making Institutions Work for Rural Revitalization**  
  Katrina Kosec and Danielle Resnick

- **Europe’s Experience: Investing in Rural Revitalization**  
  Alan Matthews

- **REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS**
  - **Africa**  
    Ousmane Badiane, Julia Collins, Tsitsi Makombe, and John Ulimwengu
  - **Middle East and North Africa**  
    Clemens Breisinger, Namid Khouri, and Fatma Mahfouz
  - **Central Asia**  
    Kamiljon Akramov, Jarrilakasin Ilyasov, Evgeny Tsvetnov, and Allen Park
  - **South Asia**  
    Anjani Kumar, Abdul Wajid Rana, Stephen Davies, Akhter Ahmed, and P. K. Joshi
  - **East and Southeast Asia**  
    Kevin Chen, Peter Timmer, David Dawe, and Zimeiyi Wang
  - **Latin America and the Caribbean**  
    Eugenio Díaz-Bonilla and Valeria Piñeiro

- **FOOD POLICY INDICATORS: TRACKING CHANGE**
  - Agricultural Science and Technology Indicators (ASTI)
  - Statistics on Public Expenditures for Economic Development (SPEED)
  - Food Policy Research Capacity Indicators (FPRCI)
  - Agricultural Total Factor Productivity (TFP)
  - Projections of Food Production, Consumption, and Hunger

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