RCMOS – Revista Científica Multidisciplinar O
Saber. ISSN: 2675-9128. São Paulo - SP.
Ano VII, v.1 2026 | submissão: 11/09/2026 | aceito: 14/09/2026 | publicação: 17/09/2026

Human right to adequate food, food security and food systems: the historical-legal construction of international guidelines for food and nutrition policies

Direito humano à alimentação adequada, segurança alimentar e sistemas alimentares: a construção histórico-jurídica das orientações internacionais para políticas públicas de alimentação e nutrição

Derecho humano a una alimentación adecuada, seguridad alimentaria y sistemas alimentarios: la construcción histórico-jurídica de las orientaciones internacionales para las políticas públicas de alimentación y nutrición

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Abstract:
This article analyzes the historical-legal construction of the connections between the Human Right to Adequate Food (HRAF), food security and the food systems approach in international guidelines for food and nutrition public policies. It adopts a qualitative, documentary and bibliographic approach, examining frameworks produced by or linked to the United Nations, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the Committee on World Food Security and the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition. The analysis reconstructs four movements: recognition of food as a human right; translation of this right into guidance for food security policies; expansion of the agenda to incorporate nutrition, sustainability and governance; and the contemporary incorporation of the food systems perspective. The results indicate that these movements are articulated rather than substitutive: the HRAF provides the normative foundation, food security organizes public action, and food systems make visible the structural processes that shape availability, access, adequacy, health and sustainability. The analysis also identifies tensions involving multisectoral governance, state responsibility, social participation, enforceability and the involvement of actors with unequal power. It concludes that the food systems approach can broaden the conditions for realizing the HRAF when it remains anchored in human rights, equity, sustainability and public accountability.

Keywords:
Human right to adequate food. Food security. Food systems. Public policies. Human rights.

Resumo:
Este artigo analisa a construção histórico-jurídica das conexões entre o Direito Humano à Alimentação Adequada (DHAA), a segurança alimentar e a abordagem de sistemas alimentares nas orientações internacionais para políticas públicas de alimentação e nutrição. Adota abordagem qualitativa, de natureza documental e bibliográfica, com análise de marcos produzidos ou vinculados às Nações Unidas, à Organização das Nações Unidas para a Alimentação e a Agricultura, ao Comitê de Segurança Alimentar Mundial e ao Painel de Especialistas de Alto Nível sobre Segurança Alimentar e Nutrição. A análise reconstrói quatro movimentos: o reconhecimento da alimentação como direito humano; a tradução desse direito em orientações para políticas de segurança alimentar; a ampliação da agenda para incorporar nutrição, sustentabilidade e governança; e a incorporação contemporânea da perspectiva dos sistemas alimentares. Os resultados indicam que esses movimentos se articulam: o DHAA fornece o fundamento normativo, a segurança alimentar organiza a ação pública e os sistemas alimentares evidenciam processos estruturais que condicionam disponibilidade, acesso, adequação, saúde e sustentabilidade. Também são identificadas tensões relacionadas à governança multissetorial, à responsabilidade estatal, à participação social, à exigibilidade e ao envolvimento de atores com diferentes capacidades de poder. Conclui-se que a abordagem de

sistemas alimentares pode ampliar as condições de realização do DHAA quando permanece ancorada nos direitos humanos, na equidade, na sustentabilidade e na responsabilização pública.

Palavras-chave:
Direito humano à alimentação adequada. Segurança alimentar. Sistemas alimentares. Políticas públicas. Direitos humanos.

Resumen:
Este artículo analiza la construcción histórico-jurídica de las conexiones entre el Derecho Humano a una Alimentación Adecuada (DHAA), la seguridad alimentaria y el enfoque de sistemas alimentarios en las orientaciones internacionales para las políticas públicas de alimentación y nutrición. Adopta un enfoque cualitativo, documental y bibliográfico, con el análisis de marcos producidos por las Naciones Unidas o vinculados con ellas, la Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la Alimentación y la Agricultura, el Comité de Seguridad Alimentaria Mundial y el Grupo de Alto Nivel de Expertos en Seguridad Alimentaria y Nutrición. El análisis reconstruye cuatro movimientos: el reconocimiento de la alimentación como derecho humano; la traducción de este derecho en orientaciones para políticas de seguridad alimentaria; la ampliación de la agenda para incorporar nutrición, sostenibilidad y gobernanza; y la incorporación contemporánea de la perspectiva de los sistemas alimentarios. Los resultados indican que estos movimientos se articulan: el DHAA proporciona el fundamento normativo, la seguridad alimentaria organiza la acción pública y los sistemas alimentarios evidencian procesos estructurales que condicionan la disponibilidad, el acceso, la adecuación, la salud y la sostenibilidad. También se identifican tensiones relacionadas con la gobernanza multisectorial, la responsabilidad estatal, la participación social, la exigibilidad y la intervención de actores con capacidades de poder desiguales. Se concluye que el enfoque de sistemas alimentarios puede ampliar las condiciones de realización del DHAA cuando permanece anclado en los derechos humanos, la equidad, la sostenibilidad y la rendición de cuentas pública.

Palabras clave:
Derecho humano a una alimentación adecuada. Seguridad alimentaria. Sistemas alimentarios. Políticas públicas. Derechos humanos.

1. Introduction

Food is a fundamental dimension of human life and occupies a central position on international agendas concerning human rights, development, food security, nutrition, and sustainability. Guaranteeing it involves more than food availability, as it depends on social, economic, cultural, political, institutional, and environmental conditions that enable all individuals and groups to have regular, permanent, and dignified access to adequate food. In this sense, food has ceased to be treated solely as a biological need or a matter of assistance and has become part of the field of human rights and public policy.

At the international level, the recognition of food as a human right is grounded in normative frameworks that affirm its connection to human dignity and the right to an adequate

standard of living. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights included food among the elements necessary to ensure dignified living conditions (UN, 1948). Subsequently, the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights legally consolidated the right to adequate food and the fundamental right to be free from hunger, establishing obligations for States to take measures toward their progressive realization (UN, 1966). These two frameworks form the initial normative basis for food as a human right within the international system.

Building on these instruments, the human right to adequate food began to be developed through international interpretations and guidelines that sought to clarify its normative content and institutional implications. General Comment No. 12, adopted by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1999, was a milestone in this process by identifying availability, accessibility, adequacy, and sustainability among the elements related to realizing the right to food. This document helped shift the debate from an understanding restricted to food provision toward a broader approach concerning the conditions that make adequate and dignified food possible (CESCR, 1999).

At the same time, the international food security agenda was becoming established as a field of public policy formulation. Initially associated with food availability and the fight against hunger, food security came to incorporate dimensions related to access, utilization, and stability and later broadened its connection with nutrition, sustainability, and social participation in international policy and governance agendas (HLPE, 2020; Jones et al., 2013; CFS, 2012; FAO, 1996). Along this path, the Voluntary Guidelines of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations in support of the progressive realization of the right to adequate food, adopted by the FAO Council in 2004, played an important role in linking the language of human rights with institutional guidance for national food security strategies (FAO, 2005). By highlighting the importance of legal frameworks, institutions, public policies, monitoring, and accountability mechanisms, these guidelines helped bring the right to food closer to organized State action.

In recent decades, the food systems approach has broadened this debate once again. By highlighting the interdependencies among production, processing, distribution, marketing, consumption, food environments, health, environmental sustainability, and social inequalities, this approach began to guide international documents aimed at transforming food and nutrition policies. Reports and guidance produced within the Committee on World Food Security, the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition, and FAO began to associate the guarantee of food security and nutrition with the need to transform food systems so that they

become healthier, more sustainable, more inclusive, and equity-oriented (FAO, 2025; HLPE, 2020; HLPE, 2017; CFS, 2012).

The incorporation of the food systems approach does not eliminate the centrality of the human right to adequate food. On the contrary, it can broaden the conditions for its realization, provided that State responsibility, substantive social participation, protection of the groups most affected by hunger and food insecurity, and mechanisms for enforceability and public accountability are preserved. This articulation, however, also creates challenges. The contemporary language of governance, multisectoral collaboration, and systemic transformation can strengthen integrated public responses, but it can also dilute State obligations when it is not clearly anchored in human rights and the centrality of rights holders.

Against this backdrop, this article addresses the following research question: how do international guidelines historically and legally articulate the human right to adequate food, food security, and the food systems approach in the formulation of public food and nutrition policies?

The hypothesis guiding the analysis is that international food and nutrition guidelines have undergone a process of historical and legal expansion in which the human right to adequate food has been progressively connected to food security and, more recently, to the food systems approach. This trajectory broadened the parameters for public policy formulation by incorporating dimensions related to access, adequacy, nutrition, sustainability, social participation, intersectoral coordination, and State accountability.

The general objective of this article is to analyze the historical and legal construction of the connections among the human right to adequate food, food security, and food systems in international guidance for public food and nutrition policies. Specifically, it seeks to identify the main international frameworks that contributed to recognizing and consolidating the human right to adequate food; examine how food security was incorporated into international guidance as a field for formulating and implementing public policies; discuss the convergence of food security, nutrition, and food systems in contemporary international agendas; analyze the institutional parameters recommended by international organizations for public food and nutrition policies; and reflect on the challenges of articulating human rights and food systems, particularly with respect to preserving State responsibility, the enforceability of the right to food, and the centrality of the groups most affected by hunger and food insecurity.

The research adopts a qualitative, documentary, and bibliographic approach. The documentary corpus consists of international frameworks selected for their normative, political, and institutional relevance, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 12 of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the FAO Voluntary Guidelines on the Right to Food, the Committee on World Food Security's Global Strategic Framework for Food Security and Nutrition, the HLPE report Nutrition and Food Systems, and FAO's Transforming food and agriculture through a systems approach.

The article is organized into four parts, in addition to this introduction and the final considerations. The first presents the methodological procedures. The second discusses food as a human right under international law, emphasizing its normative consolidation and the related State obligations. The third analyzes the construction of food security as a field of public policy. The fourth examines the incorporation of the food systems approach into international food and nutrition agendas and discusses the historical and legal connections among these fields.

2. Materials and method

The research adopts a qualitative, documentary, and bibliographic approach aimed at analyzing international guidelines that contributed to the historical and legal construction of the relationships among the human right to adequate food, food security, and food systems. This design was selected because of the nature of the object under investigation, since the article seeks to understand how international documents established normative, political, and institutional parameters to guide the formulation of public food and nutrition policies (Bowen, 2009; Cellard, 2008).

Documentary research will be used because the selected documents constitute relevant institutional records of the work of international organizations in the fields of food, nutrition, food security, and human rights. These materials express commitments, concepts, guidelines, and recommendations that have come to guide State action and the shaping of national and international public agendas. Bibliographic research, in turn, will support the conceptual discussion of the human right to adequate food, food security, food systems, governance, and public policies in dialogue with scientific literature relevant to the subject (HLPE, 2020; Jones et al., 2013; Bowen, 2009; Cellard, 2008).

The documentary corpus comprised international documents selected for their normative, political, and institutional relevance to the topic under analysis. Documents produced by or linked to the United Nations system were considered, especially those of the United Nations, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the Committee

on World Food Security, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition.

The following documents will be analyzed: Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948); International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UN, 1966); General Comment No. 12: the right to adequate food (CESCR, 1999); Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security, adopted in 2004 (FAO, 2005); Global Strategic Framework for Food Security and Nutrition (CFS, 2012); Nutrition and Food Systems (HLPE, 2017); and Transforming food and agriculture through a systems approach (FAO, 2025).

The selection of these documents makes it possible to trace a historical and legal trajectory through four main movements. The first concerns the recognition of food as a human right under international law. The second concerns the consolidation of food security as a field that guides public policies. The third involves the construction of international governance, coordination, and accountability mechanisms for food security and nutrition. The fourth corresponds to the contemporary expansion of the international agenda through the food systems approach.

Document analysis will be conducted using a standardized data-extraction protocol designed on the basis of the research question and the article's objectives. In each document, excerpts, concepts, recommendations, and guidance related to the following categories will be identified: human right to adequate food, food security, nutrition, food systems, State obligations, public policies, governance, intersectoral coordination, social participation, monitoring, accountability, enforceability, and policy coherence (Bowen, 2009; Cellard, 2008).

Data extraction will be organized into analytical tables containing the identification of the document, the responsible organization, the year of publication or approval, the location of the passage analyzed, the corresponding thematic category, a summary of the extracted content, and its contribution to answering the research question. This strategy will make it possible to compare the selected documents and identify continuities, expansions, and shifts in international guidance.

In a first stage, the documents will be characterized in terms of institutional authorship, normative or policy-guidance nature, purpose, and context of production. Next, content related to the defined analytical categories will be extracted thematically. Finally, the extracted data will be organized in an interpretive matrix aimed at reconstructing the historical and legal trajectory that connects the human right to adequate food, food security, and food systems (Bowen, 2009; Cellard, 2008).

The analysis will seek to highlight four main movements: the legal recognition of food as a human right; the translation of this right into guidance for food security policies; the expansion of food security to incorporate nutrition, sustainability, and governance; and the contemporary incorporation of the food systems approach as a parameter for public food and nutrition policies. The aim is therefore to understand how international organizations contributed to broadening the legal and institutional foundations of public policies designed to guarantee adequate food.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 The human right to adequate food under international law

The international construction of the human right to adequate food begins with the affirmation of food as part of the conditions necessary for a dignified life. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, recognizes in Article 25 everyone's right to a standard of living adequate for health and well-being, including food, clothing, housing, medical care, and necessary social services (UN, 1948). Although the Declaration does not contain a separate article on the right to food, its wording was decisive in placing food within the field of human rights and linking it to human dignity.

This first framework is historically and legally significant because it shifts food from an exclusively private, charitable, or welfare-related dimension into the sphere of public responsibility. Guaranteeing food becomes part of the minimum conditions for living with dignity. At that time, there was not yet a detailed formulation concerning food security, food systems, or public-policy instruments, but a fundamental normative basis had been affirmed: food is part of the right to an adequate standard of living.

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, adopted in 1966, deepened this recognition in legal terms. Article 11 recognizes everyone's right to an adequate standard of living, including adequate food, and affirms the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger (UN, 1966). The difference from the Universal Declaration lies in the legal density assigned to the right, since the Covenant establishes commitments for States Parties and introduces the idea of the progressive realization of economic, social, and cultural rights.

With the ICESCR, food ceases to be merely an element of well-being and is recognized as a human right with corresponding obligations. This recognition is important because it provides a legal basis for assessing State actions and omissions in addressing hunger and food insecurity. Hunger comes to be understood not only as material deprivation or a humanitarian problem, but as a situation incompatible with the obligations undertaken by States in the field of human rights (CESCR, 1999; UN, 1966).

Beginning in 1999, General Comment No. 12 of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights gave greater normative substance to the human right to adequate food. The document interprets Article 11 of the ICESCR and establishes that the right to adequate food is directly linked to the inherent dignity of the human person and to the realization of other human rights (CESCR, 1999). The Comment clarifies that adequate food cannot be reduced to the minimum supply of calories, proteins, or nutrients, since it encompasses availability, accessibility, adequacy, and sustainability.

Availability refers to the existence of food in sufficient quantity and quality, whether through direct production or through distribution, processing, and marketing systems. Accessibility involves the physical and economic conditions that allow people to obtain adequate food regularly and with dignity. Adequacy includes nutritional, sanitary, social, and cultural dimensions, recognizing that food must correspond to the needs and contexts of individuals and groups. Sustainability indicates that guaranteeing food must take both present and future generations into account (CESCR, 1999).

This formulation is particularly relevant to public food and nutrition policies. By detailing the normative content of the right, General Comment No. 12 builds a bridge between the legal language of human rights and the concrete conditions that must be ensured by the State. The right to adequate food thus requires national strategies, public institutions, legal frameworks, coordinated action, monitoring mechanisms, and forms of accountability, elements later developed in the Voluntary Guidelines on the Right to Food as well (FAO, 2005; CESCR, 1999).

Another central aspect of General Comment No. 12 is its clarification of State obligations to respect, protect, and fulfill the right to food. The obligation to respect prevents the State from adopting measures that hinder existing access to food. The obligation to protect requires the State to prevent third parties from violating this right. The obligation to fulfill requires positive measures to facilitate, promote, and, when necessary, provide access to adequate food (CESCR, 1999). These obligations lend greater precision to State responsibility and make it possible to assess public policies using legal parameters.

Thus, the international construction of the human right to adequate food reveals a movement toward progressively greater legal substance. The Universal Declaration recognizes food as part of an adequate standard of living; the ICESCR legally consolidates this right and the right to be free from hunger; and General Comment No. 12 clarifies its normative content and corresponding obligations (CESCR, 1999; UN, 1966; 1948). This path lays the foundation for food security subsequently to be understood as a field of public policy oriented toward realizing the right to food.

3.2 Food security as a field of public policy

Food security is one of the main mediating links between the human right to adequate food and the formulation of public policy. While the HRAF provides the legal and normative basis, food security organizes a field of public action aimed at guaranteeing availability, access, utilization, and stability and, progressively, at linking these to nutrition, sustainability, and agency (HLPE, 2020; Jones et al., 2013; CFS, 2012; FAO, 1996).

The Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security, adopted by the FAO Council in 2004 and published in 2005, represent a decisive milestone in this articulation. The document's title itself makes explicit the connection between the right to food and national food security. The Guidelines were conceived as an instrument of practical guidance to support States in the progressive implementation of the right to food on the basis of human-rights principles (FAO, 2005).

The Guidelines contribute by translating the human right to adequate food into institutional parameters for public policy. The document addresses the need for national strategies, legal frameworks, responsible institutions, economic and social policies, protection programs, attention to groups in vulnerable situations, monitoring, transparency, and social participation (FAO, 2005). In this way, the right to food ceases to be treated only as a rule of international law and begins to guide the design of concrete public policies.

This political and institutional translation is relevant because it demonstrates that realizing the HRAF depends on an articulated set of State actions. Hunger and food insecurity cannot be addressed solely through emergency measures or by expanding food production. They require policies directed toward economic access, social protection, food supply, sustainable production, food and nutrition education, health, market regulation, and the guarantee of social participation.

The Voluntary Guidelines also indicate that national food security must be anchored in human-rights principles. This means that public food and nutrition policies must observe dignity, non-discrimination, participation, transparency, accountability, and the rule of law. Realizing the right to food therefore depends not only on the existence of programs but also on how those programs are formulated, implemented, monitored, and overseen (FAO, 2005).

This point is central to understanding the difference between a welfare-oriented food policy and a rights-based food policy. In the first case, food may be treated as a benefit granted by the State or private actors. In the second, food is recognized as a right, and public action must be structured to guarantee permanent conditions of adequate access to food. In this sense, food security becomes the institutional field through which the right to food can be realized.

The Global Strategic Framework for Food Security and Nutrition, developed within the Committee on World Food Security, consolidates this agenda from an international-governance perspective. The purpose of the GSF is to provide a reference framework for food security and nutrition strategies, policies, and actions (CFS, 2012). The document incorporates the human right to adequate food as a normative foundation and organizes principles and recommendations aimed at coordinating action at different levels.

The GSF is relevant because it clarifies that food security is not limited to food availability. It adopts the definition according to which all people, at all times, must have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and preferences for an active and healthy life, a definition consolidated at the 1996 World Food Summit and incorporated by the CFS (CFS, 2012; FAO, 1996). It also affirms that the nutritional dimension is an integral part of food security.

The incorporation of nutrition represents an important expansion. Food security comes to be related not only to access to any food, but to access to safe, nutritious, and adequate food. The international agenda thereby brings food security closer to health, nutrition, and food quality. This movement is later deepened with the incorporation of sustainability and agency into the dimensions of food security and nutrition and prepares the transition to more integrated approaches, in which food systems are analyzed as determinants of dietary patterns and nutritional outcomes (HLPE, 2020; CFS, 2012).

Another relevant aspect of the GSF is its emphasis on policy coordination and coherence. Food security and nutrition depend on actions spanning agriculture, health, social protection, trade, the environment, education, labor, income, and development. When these sectors operate in a fragmented or contradictory manner, realizing the right to food is compromised. The documents therefore reinforce the need for coordinated strategies and

governance bodies capable of coordinating actors, sectors, and levels of action (CFS, 2012; FAO, 2005).

Social participation also appears as a structural element of the agenda. In the field of food security, participation should not be understood merely as formal consultation, but as a democratic component of the formulation, implementation, and monitoring of public policies. Groups affected by hunger and food insecurity must be recognized as rights holders with the capacity to influence public decisions that affect their living conditions (CFS, 2012; FAO, 2005).

Thus, the FAO Voluntary Guidelines and the CFS Global Strategic Framework mark an important transition in the international trajectory analyzed. The human right to adequate food is translated into guidance for public food security and nutrition policies. This transition broadens the agenda by incorporating national strategies, legal frameworks, institutions, participation, monitoring, accountability, coordination, and policy coherence (CFS, 2012; FAO, 2005).

3.3 Food systems and the contemporary expansion of the international agenda

The food systems approach represents a contemporary expansion of international guidance for public food and nutrition policies. Its contribution lies in demonstrating that guaranteeing adequate food depends on the processes that organize food production, processing, distribution, supply, marketing, consumption, and disposal, as well as the social, economic, cultural, environmental, and institutional conditions that cut across these processes.

The report Nutrition and Food Systems, published by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition in 2017, is an important milestone in this expansion. Produced within the Committee on World Food Security, the report analyzes the relationship among food systems, diets, nutrition, and health, emphasizing that nutritional outcomes are shaped by supply chains, food environments, consumer behavior, and political and institutional factors (HLPE, 2017).

This formulation shifts the debate away from food as an individual choice toward an analysis of the structural conditions that shape eating practices. Diet quality depends not only on the information available to consumers or on individual decisions, but also on the organization of food systems, prices, the availability of healthy foods, advertising, regulation, income conditions, consumption environments, and existing public policies (HLPE, 2017).

Incorporating nutrition into the food systems approach is especially relevant to public food and nutrition policies. Malnutrition in its multiple forms, including hunger, micronutrient deficiencies, overweight, obesity, and diet-related diseases, cannot be addressed solely through educational measures or isolated sectoral interventions. It requires policies that act on the systems shaping food production, supply, quality, price, and consumption (HLPE, 2017).

In this respect, the HLPE report broadens the understanding of the relationships among food security, nutrition, and food systems. Food security is not limited to access to sufficient quantities of food; it involves conditions of access to safe and nutritious foods and, within a broader agenda, to healthy and sustainable diets. This perspective brings food security and nutrition closer to the agendas of public health, environmental sustainability, social equity, and economic regulation (HLPE, 2020; HLPE, 2017).

This approach also makes it possible to understand that realizing the human right to adequate food depends on food systems capable of promoting healthy and sustainable diets. While General Comment No. 12 had already defined availability, accessibility, adequacy, and sustainability as elements related to the HRAF, the food systems approach makes it possible to identify the concrete processes that shape these dimensions. Agricultural production, supply, processing, transport, marketing, advertising, prices, and food environments become relevant elements in realizing the right (HLPE, 2020; HLPE, 2017; CESCR, 1999).

FAO's document Transforming food and agriculture through a systems approach, published in 2025, deepens this perspective by proposing the incorporation of a systems approach into policies, programs, projects, and interventions. The document seeks to clarify what adopting a systems approach means in practice, especially in the context of agrifood systems, emphasizing the need to overcome fragmented action and connect existing initiatives to produce more effective impacts (FAO, 2025).

The systems approach starts from the understanding that problems such as hunger, food insecurity, malnutrition, climate change, environmental degradation, and inequalities are interconnected. Public food and nutrition policies must therefore consider connections among sectors, actors, levels, and objectives. Food production cannot be analyzed separately from economic access, environmental sustainability, working conditions, consumption patterns, health, and social protection (FAO, 2025; HLPE, 2020).

This understanding strengthens the need for integrated public policies. Guaranteeing adequate food requires coordination among different areas of government, such as health, agriculture, social assistance, education, the environment, economic development, urban planning, and market regulation. It also requires coordination among different levels of

government and the participation of social actors, particularly the groups most affected by hunger and food insecurity (FAO, 2025; HLPE, 2020; CFS, 2012).

However, systemic expansion also presents challenges. The language of food systems can make the agenda more comprehensive, but also more diffuse. In the interpretation proposed here, when everything is connected to everything else, political responsibility risks becoming less clear. The food systems approach must therefore be anchored in the human right to adequate food. The HRAF functions as a normative axis capable of guiding priorities, identifying rights holders, defining State obligations, and assessing whether proposed transformations effectively contribute to reducing hunger, food insecurity, and inequalities (HLPE, 2020; FAO, 2005; CESCR, 1999).

Thus, the food systems approach should be understood as an expansion of the conditions for realizing the right to food, not as a replacement for the language of human rights. Its contribution lies in showing that adequate food depends on structural transformations in the systems that produce, distribute, regulate, and shape food consumption. Its limitation emerges when the approach is treated merely as a technical management strategy without placing State responsibility, social justice, and the enforceability of rights at its center (HLPE, 2020; FAO, 2005; CESCR, 1999).

3.4 Historical and legal connections among the HRAF, food security, and food systems

The documentary analysis supports the conclusion that international guidance has built a trajectory of conceptual, legal, and institutional expansion in the field of food and nutrition. This trajectory articulates three main dimensions: the legal and normative dimension of the human right to adequate food; the political and institutional dimension of food and nutrition security; and the systemic dimension of food systems.

The first, legal and normative dimension establishes food as a human right. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights link food to human dignity, an adequate standard of living, and the right to be free from hunger (UN, 1966; 1948). General Comment No. 12 deepens this foundation by defining the normative content of the HRAF and State obligations (CESCR, 1999).

The second, political and institutional dimension translates this right into guidance for public policy. The FAO Voluntary Guidelines show that the progressive realization of the right to food depends on national strategies, institutions, legal frameworks, programs, monitoring, social participation, and accountability (FAO, 2005). The CFS GSF consolidates food security

and nutrition as a field of international governance, with attention to coordination, policy coherence, and articulation among actors and levels (CFS, 2012).

The third, systemic dimension broadens the agenda by demonstrating that food security and nutrition depend on the organization of food systems. The HLPE report shows that food systems shape diets, nutrition, and health by connecting supply chains, food environments, consumer behavior, and sustainability (HLPE, 2020; HLPE, 2017). The FAO document on the systems approach reinforces the need for policies and interventions capable of integrating actions, connecting sectors, and addressing interdependent problems in agrifood systems (FAO, 2025).

These three dimensions do not replace one another. The food systems approach neither supersedes nor eliminates the human right to adequate food. Nor does food security replace the HRAF. What can be observed is an expansion of the field of understanding and intervention: the right provides the normative foundation; food security organizes public action; and food systems reveal the structural processes that need to be transformed.

This connection has direct implications for public food and nutrition policies. First, it indicates that such policies cannot be reduced to emergency action against hunger, even though such action is indispensable in contexts of food deprivation. Realizing the HRAF requires permanent, structural, and coordinated policies capable of addressing income inequalities, supply conditions, physical and economic access, nutritional quality, environmental sustainability, and the protection of vulnerable groups (HLPE, 2020; FAO, 2005; CESCR, 1999).

Second, it reinforces that food and nutrition policies must be intersectoral. Adequate food depends on policies concerning health, agriculture, social protection, education, income, labor, the environment, trade, regulation, and planning. Institutional fragmentation hinders realization of the right, especially when different sectors produce contradictory effects on food access and quality (FAO, 2025; CFS, 2012; FAO, 2005).

Third, it demonstrates the centrality of social participation. International guidance indicates that realizing the right to food requires the participation of civil society, communities, farmers, consumers, and groups affected by hunger and food insecurity. Such participation must be understood as an expression of citizenship and the status of rights holders, not merely as formal consultation or a mechanism for legitimizing previously made decisions (CFS, 2012; FAO, 2005).

Fourth, it highlights the importance of monitoring, accountability, and enforceability. The right to adequate food requires States to be assessed and held accountable for their actions

and omissions. Indicators, reports, transparency, social oversight bodies, and administrative and judicial mechanisms are fundamental components for turning international commitments into effective public policies (FAO, 2005; CESCR, 1999).

Finally, the food systems approach introduces sustainability as an unavoidable dimension of the contemporary agenda. Realizing the right to adequate food must take into account the environmental, social, and economic conditions that make it possible to guarantee adequate food now and in the future. This requires public policies guided by equity, environmental protection, appreciation of food cultures, the promotion of healthy diets, and the reduction of inequalities (FAO, 2025; HLPE, 2020; CESCR, 1999).

The trajectory analyzed also reveals tensions. The first concerns the relationship between State responsibility and multisectoral governance. The participation of multiple actors can expand the capacity to formulate and implement policies, but it must not dilute the State's obligation. In the field of human rights, States remain the primary duty bearers, even though realizing the right involves other social, economic, and institutional actors (FAO, 2005; CESCR, 1999).

The second tension involves the transition from food security to food systems. The systems approach broadens the diagnosis and makes it possible to address structural factors, but it may lose normative substance if treated solely as a technical management strategy. To contribute to realizing the HRAF, it must be guided by rights, social justice, and public accountability (HLPE, 2020; FAO, 2005; CESCR, 1999).

The third tension lies in the difference between social participation and stakeholder involvement. Recent international guidance values collaboration among different actors, but the analysis demonstrates the need to distinguish rights holders, duty bearers, and interested parties. This distinction is essential to prevent the participation of groups in vulnerable situations from being equated with that of actors possessing greater political and economic power (HLPE, 2020; FAO, 2005; CESCR, 1999).

The fourth tension concerns enforceability. Many international documents are advisory, strategic, or voluntary in nature. Although they establish relevant parameters, their effectiveness depends on incorporation into national frameworks, public policies, institutions, and oversight mechanisms. Without institutionalization, monitoring, and accountability, international guidance may remain merely programmatic (CFS, 2012; FAO, 2005; CESCR, 1999).

These tensions do not diminish the importance of the documents analyzed. On the contrary, they demonstrate that the international construction of the right to food, food security,

and food systems is a field in continuous development. The challenge is to ensure that the contemporary expansion of the agenda does not weaken the legal foundations of the HRAF, but strengthens its realization through integrated, participatory, sustainable, and equity-oriented public policies.

Final considerations

This article analyzed the historical and legal construction of the connections among the human right to adequate food, food security, and food systems in international guidance for public food and nutrition policies. Based on documentary analysis of selected international frameworks, it was possible to identify a trajectory of normative, political, and institutional expansion in the international treatment of food.

Food was initially recognized as a dimension of the right to an adequate standard of living in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948). With the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, it was legally consolidated as the right to adequate food and the fundamental right to be free from hunger (UN, 1966). General Comment No. 12 gave this right greater normative substance by clarifying availability, accessibility, adequacy, and sustainability, as well as State obligations to respect, protect, and fulfill it (CESCR, 1999).

The FAO Voluntary Guidelines represented an important turning point by translating the human right to adequate food into guidance for national food security policies. This document connected the language of human rights to national strategies, legal frameworks, institutions, programs, participation, monitoring, and accountability (FAO, 2005). Subsequently, the Global Strategic Framework of the Committee on World Food Security consolidated food security and nutrition as a field of international governance, reinforcing the need for policy coordination and coherence (CFS, 2012).

More recent documents, particularly the HLPE report Nutrition and Food Systems and the FAO document on the systems approach, expanded the agenda by incorporating the food systems perspective. This approach demonstrates that realizing the right to food depends on the organization of the processes that produce, distribute, market, regulate, and shape food consumption. It also reinforces that public food and nutrition policies must connect health, agriculture, food supply, social protection, education, the environment, economic regulation, and social participation (FAO, 2025; HLPE, 2020; HLPE, 2017).

The article's hypothesis was confirmed. International guidance on food and nutrition has undergone a process of historical and legal expansion in which the human right to adequate food has been progressively linked to food security and, more recently, to the food systems approach. This trajectory broadened the parameters for public policy formulation by incorporating dimensions related to access, adequacy, nutrition, sustainability, social participation, intersectoral coordination, and State accountability.

The principal contribution of this trajectory lies in demonstrating that guaranteeing adequate food requires more than legal recognition or food supply. It calls for permanent, integrated, participatory, and sustainable public policies capable of addressing the structural conditions that produce hunger, food insecurity, malnutrition, and inequalities. The human right to adequate food provides the normative foundation; food security and nutrition organize public action; and food systems broaden the understanding of the structures that need to be transformed (FAO, 2025; HLPE, 2020; CFS, 2012; FAO, 2005; CESCR, 1999).

However, the expansion of the international agenda also poses challenges. Multisectoral governance must not dilute State responsibility. The language of food systems must not replace the enforceability of human rights. Stakeholder participation must not obscure rights holders. International documents, when advisory or voluntary in nature, must be incorporated into national frameworks, public policies, institutions, and accountability mechanisms (HLPE, 2020; CFS, 2012; FAO, 2005; CESCR, 1999).

It is concluded that the food systems approach can strengthen realization of the human right to adequate food when guided by human dignity, social justice, equity, sustainability, and public responsibility. Thus, the international guidelines analyzed provide important parameters for public food and nutrition policies, provided that their incorporation preserves the centrality of human rights and of the groups most affected by hunger and food insecurity (FAO, 2025; HLPE, 2020; FAO, 2005; CESCR, 1999).

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