

# Interview: Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) Executive Director Dr Lawrence Haddad



28-06-22 / 8 min read

AUTHOR: STEF BOTTINELLI



Dr Lawrence Haddad is the Executive Director Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), a non profit organisation founded in 2002 at the UN's 27th Special Session of the General Assembly on Children.

GAIN works closely with various United Nations agencies and organisations to improve global nutrition, promote food security and eradicate hunger and malnutrition.

*Food Matters Live* talks to Dr Lawrence Haddad about improving food security for all, the role of private companies in the fight against global malnutrition, promoting biodiversity, the need

---

cooperation – not competition – in order to tackle food security, yes this is still not happening at a large scale. Why do you think that is?

Many countries, agencies and organisations want to help, and that is fantastic. But they also want to control and be recognised. Both of these tendencies reflect human nature. But we need to sublimate them to countervailing human tendency to cooperate and put the issue ahead of the ego and logo. This is not easy to do, but with the right leadership, and time, we will get there. I am beginning to see signs of more joined up work.

Forty-three companies have pledged to invest USD 391 million in 47 countries through the Zero Hunger Private Sector pledge. What must be done to ensure the private sector is more active in tackling hunger and food security? Why aren't more private companies getting involved?

Signing up to the pledge is a non-trivial exercise. We have to check that the proposed pledge:

1. Really is in one of the action areas that the evidence tells us is high impact and in a high burden country.
2. The company abides by the CFS Principles for Responsible Investment in Agriculture and has not violated the Code of Marketing for Breastmilk Substitutes.
3. The company is willing to be publicly assessed and will cooperate. So we who coordinate this initiative need to be quite proactive in working with companies to help them navigate this to see if they qualify. We are gearing up our own capacity to do this.

This month WFP Executive Director David Beasley announced daily meals cuts for refugees in the Sahel region and elsewhere. Despite all the talk about ending hunger, the situation is getting worse, with more and more people not having access to enough food. What are your thoughts on this?

The world (real) price of foods is at the highest it has been in 50 years, but the prices of inputs for producing food (all energy and natural element based) have risen even higher and this is squeezing farmers. Combined with the undoubtedly impaired 2022 planting and growing season in Ukraine (where there is more metal and blood in the fields than seeds), the export bans imposed by some large countries, and the general low levels of economic growth (which means incomes are not keeping up with food prices), hunger in the next two years will get worse before it gets better. And hunger leads to unrest and migration. But it can get better if we make the proven investments in the medium term to 2030. So I am hoping:

1. The short term needs get addressed quickly.
2. They serve as a wake up call to politicians and businesses – that business as usual is not an option (we need much more diverse systems with double the investment).
3. That the short term response does not undermine the medium term actions needed.

The Russia-Ukraine war, COVID 19 and climate change have had a hugely negative impact on food security. The implementation of agri-foodtech is desperately needed and there are

ecosystem. But the African innovation system is greatly hampered because patents are so expensive in Africa (in Kenya it is 15 times the Kenyan GDP/capita, whereas in the US it is 1/3 of the US GDP/capita). And even if affordable, there are trust issues and bureaucracy issues. African patent systems need support if African innovation is to thrive.

Countries all over the world have pledged to cut down on greenhouse emissions, yet we see more investment in polluting industries. In the UK alone for instance, in the latest **Government Food Strategy**, there is no mention of cutting down on meat production and consumption. There's also talk of decreasing car use, yet trains are so expensive in Britain, commuters have no choice but to use a car to go to work. Excuse the pun, but are we being taken for a (very polluting) ride by our politicians?

Industrially produced red meat consumption is disastrous for many environmental dimensions in addition to climate change. But there are meats that are less destructive of the environment, and, for a given meat, not all production systems are equally destructive.

The good news is that there are plenty of degrees of freedom and choices to be made in meat production to reduce environmental degradation. The same goes for health – high meat consumption is not good for health, but there are certain meats that are much worse than others (processed meats for example). The UK 'food strategy' is not a strategy and is not a serious document. It is more than a disappointment, frankly, and I say this as a UK citizen, it is embarrassing.

Only nine plant species account for 66% of total crop production, yet there are many more that are comestible and, if we diversified what we grow and eat, not only would we solve issues such as depending solely on some crops (such as wheat and sunflower oil – both affected by the conflict in the Ukraine and in the instance of wheat, also climate change), but we would create economies in countries that desperately need it – and of course, feed more people. Why is this not being done?

It is a bit of a chicken and egg situation. Production and consumption patterns are hard to shift due to infrastructure and preferences. For example, in Tanzania, one of the countries in which GAIN works, dark green leafy vegetables are abundant—they are available, affordable and nutritious and have a low environmental footprint. But while they were consumed by grandparents of 20-year-olds, they are now considered 'goat food' by the younger population. These kinds of foods are ripe for a re-boot to make them more desirable, but that means strong demand side campaigns to make them viable business propositions, and even then it will probably be not the very poorest who experiment with them. Initiatives like the **Rockefeller Periodic Table of Food** will really help to map out all the nutrition and health possibilities for a very wide range of foods, which will help entrepreneurs see the commercial opportunities.

Many responsibilities when it comes to food choices, food waste and plastic reduction fall on the consumer, but as 'green' as an individual might be, the result is smaller than a drop in the ocean when it comes to tackling public health, food security and climate change. Do we need more legislation?

---

but we do need stronger policy and legislation for (a) the sticks: e.g. to clamp down on irresponsible behaviour such as marketing junk foods to kids, ensure production of clear labels, introduce taxes and levies on some ultrahigh processed foods which have very high levels of added salt, sugar and trans fats. And for (b) the 'carrots': e.g. reward companies that produce healthy foods via lower rates, utilities, taxes etc.

### What do you think the prospect for the future is? Are you hopeful we can truly tackle hunger, malnutrition and climate change?

I am very optimistic. We reduced hunger tremendously between 1975 and 2010. It is only in the aftermath of the 2007-8 food and finance crisis, with a growing rumble of climate change, COVID, and now the Ukraine invasion that things have been going in the wrong direction. Now is the time to turn it around: invest in more resilient food systems that protect the hungry, address malnutrition, reduce GHG emissions, promote biodiversity, and generate decent work and livelihoods for all. Shocks are the new normal and we must make sure the latest one wakes us up to this and helps us invest in food systems that makes future shocks less likely. More diverse production areas, more diverse foods, more biodiversity, more diverse energy sources for food production, more diverse income sources and more diverse diets, especially for those under the age of 2. Diversity is the best insurance policy against shocks. It has been criticised as a second best solution by those who prize economic efficiency above all. In a first best world, where information is perfect, transactions are frictionless, the rules of the game are fair and everyone plays by them, they are right. But we do not live in such a world. We need food systems that are fit for our reality, not our fantasy.

[Features](#)[Food and nutrition policy](#)[Food Technology](#)[Nutrition](#)[Sustainability](#)

SHARE:



#### RELATED CONTENT



27-05-22 / The Big Interviews

**George Monbiot: 'Protein production must move from farm to factory'**