

What is the right to food?

- The most comprehensive statement of the “right to food” is found in the **International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), article 11**. It describes the right of everyone to “an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, **including adequate food**, clothing and housing[.]” Article 11 also explicitly recognizes “the fundamental right of everyone **to be free from hunger.**”
- See also the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Article 25(1); Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Articles 24(2) and 27(3), Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), Articles 25(f) and 28(1); Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Articles 12(2) and 14(2); FAO Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security; UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP).
- The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the UN body charged with monitoring compliance with ICESCR, has provided detailed guidance on implementing the Right to Food (General Comment 12).

What does the right to food mean?

- “The right to adequate food is realized when every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, have physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement.” It is “indivisibly linked to the **inherent dignity** of the human person.”
- It is different from **food security**. Food security is a precondition for the full enjoyment of the Right to Food, but food security is not a legal concept and does not impose legal obligations.
- Intertwined with the Right to Food is **food sovereignty**. UNDROP defines food sovereignty as the right of people to “participate in decision-making processes on food and agriculture policy and the right to healthy and adequate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods that respect their cultures.” The rights to land, seeds, and biodiversity, which are very important for the full realization of the right to food, are also recognized in UNDROP.
- The Right to Food is intertwined with civil and political rights, such as people's ability to exercise their right to political participation in their food system. Violations of the right to food are intertwined with structural discrimination on the basis of race, gender, and socioeconomic status, because hunger and malnutrition disproportionately affect people of color, women and children, and the poor.

NOTE: The Right to Food is NOT the same as a right to be fed or have enough calories to survive!

What are the components of the right to food?

- 1 ACCESSIBILITY.** Adequate food must be accessible both economically and physically. This means that the costs of accessing adequate food must not be so high that “other basic needs are . . . threatened or compromised,” and adequate food must be physically accessible to all, including to the physically vulnerable, such as children, the sick, persons with disabilities or the elderly.
- 2 AVAILABILITY.** Adequate food must be available through either one’s own land and access to natural resources or a well-functioning distribution system “that can move food from the site of production to where it is needed in accordance with demand.”
- 3 ADEQUACY.** Food must satisfy dietary needs taking into account individuals’ specific nutritional needs, be culturally acceptable, and be safe and free of harmful substances.
- 4 SUSTAINABILITY.** Food must be accessible, available, and adequate for present and future generations. Sustainability means that food has “long-term availability and accessibility.”

How can it be meaningfully realized?

States are permitted to achieve the full realization of the Right to Food progressively, in line with their logistical and financial constraints. However, this does not mean that States do not need to do anything until they have sufficient resources. States should aim to advance human rights as far as they can. While some aspects of the Right to Food are subject to progressive realization, other State obligations, such as the elimination of discrimination, prohibition of retrogressive measures, protection of a minimum essential level of the right to food (“minimum core obligations”), and the obligation “to take steps,” are of immediate effect.

The Right to Food creates binding obligations of the States. States have three main obligations under ICESCR, namely the obligations to respect, protect and fulfill. Failing to meet any of these obligations constitutes a violation of the Right to Food.

- **RESPECT.** States cannot do anything that prevents access to adequate food or interferes with the right to food. States must respect existing access to food and means of obtaining food. For example, States cannot deny food assistance to some groups, suspend legislation that give people access to food, or contaminate or destroy farmland.
- **PROTECT.** States must stand guard and ensure that no third parties deprive people of access to adequate food. They must protect people from enterprises and individuals who would deny them their human rights. For example, States should prevent third parties from destroying ancestral lands or polluting water.
- **FULFILL.** This obligation is more positive than respect or protect, and it has two parts: fulfill-facilitate and fulfill-provide. This means strengthening access to food for people who already have it, or fulfill-facilitate, and providing adequate food for those who currently do not, or fulfill-provide. This could mean State-funded programs connecting rural and poor communities with the national food system, emergency food services like food pantries, or social protections for those who cannot afford adequate food.