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The moral economy of global priorities: fusing profit and public duty in malnutrition governance

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ABSTRACT

This article examines a shift in the discourses through which attention to problems is justified in global governance. Whereas appeals to the public good and private gain were once invoked as distinct and often conflicting grounds for collective action, contemporary governance discourses increasingly bring them into alignment. Grasping this shift, I argue, requires a moral economy lens that can account for the novel entanglements between profit and moral obligation in an era where hybrid arrangements and the language of stakeholder collaboration have become commonplace. Empirically, the article traces how malnutrition moved from episodic recognition to unprecedented prominence within the United Nations (UN) governance architecture after 2008. It argues that two practices were central to this shift: the communalization of market solutions and the recasting of the problem as a win–win opportunity. The paper underscores the need for an analytical reintegration of morality in international political economy (IPE) not only within the confines of financial or corporate practice, but also as part of a wider transformation of how the global 'common' is being articulated. More broadly, the analysis shows that moral discourses may function not as a remedy for capitalism but as one of the means through which it anchors its core principles at the heart of public life.

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Introduction

When it comes to understanding how problems become a political priority in global governance, it is often assumed that moral and economic dimensions—and, by extension, the 'public' and 'private'—stand in opposition to each other. These binaries have shaped how scholars in

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International Relations (IR) approach the ways International Organizations (IOs) and other public institutions *justify* their actions around given problems: either as rooted in appeals to collective responsibility and widely shared moral discourses or, often more implicitly, as driven by alignment with efficiency and economic viability. This view reflects a long-standing tradition in the discipline, and the social sciences more broadly, where the moral realm is seen as operating externally and autonomously to the economic, and at times even serving as an 'antidote' to it (Sachweh & Hilmar, 2020).

However, this neat division no longer maps cleanly onto how global priorities are articulated in the context of an increasingly hybrid and multistakeholder governance landscape (Graz, 2019; Taggart & Abraham, 2024; Uribe, 2024b). Increasingly, we encounter justifications that seem to speak to both dimensions at once: calls to fulfill a public duty, which are inseparable from promises of short-term profitability; appeals to global justice, long-term intergenerational wellbeing, or the 'common' that accompany, rather than contest, the rhetoric of private gain. Loose accountability, blurred public–private boundaries, and growing material asymmetries create a context in which these discourses presenting public obligation and private gain as naturally aligned can easily take hold.

The case of malnutrition is emblematic of this shift. While malnutrition was present in global discussions before 2008, its prominence and institutionalization took unprecedented proportions in the period thereafter. From attracting attention mainly through crisis headlines, malnutrition became progressively embedded in a robust global multistakeholder governance architecture. The justificatory discourse that underpinned this elevation was not only that malnutrition was a collective moral responsibility, nor only that it mattered primarily because it hindered economic growth when left unaddressed. Rather, it was that tackling malnutrition represented an unprecedented 'opportunity' that benefited all: Governments could fulfill one of their most essential public duties, private actors could significantly expand profit margins, and malnourished populations could see their conditions significantly improved.[1]

The malnutrition case points to a significant reconfiguration of the justificatory grounds on which collective action is upheld in global governance discourses that existing IR and International Political Economy (IPE) cannot fully grasp. On the one hand, IR has tended to rely on implicit binaries between the moral and the economic when explaining how issues become global priorities (Buzan et al., 1998; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Hanrieder & Kreuder-Sonnen, 2014). On the other hand, while existing IPE scholarship has examined the connections between morality and economic logics more broadly, it has mainly done so in the context of global finance (Calkin, 2015; De Goede, 2005; Elias, 2020;

Hozic & True, 2016; Kaushal, 2025; Tsingou, 2025), and corporate rebranding (Langley, 2015; Richey & Ponte, 2011). Yet far less attention has been given to how this link permeates the justificatory grammars of public life. Unlike the domains mostly examined in IPE—financial stability, competitiveness, or development financing—malnutrition sits in a part of public life traditionally associated with charity, social protection, and welfare provision, where profit-oriented logics are least expected.

In this paper, I propose a moral economy analysis of how market logics become embedded in the discourses that justify collective action and establish a problem as a political priority. Concretely, I identify two such justificatory repertoires. The first, *communalizing market solutions*, consists of presenting the existence of market-based responses as the very reason why collective action around a problem can no longer be deferred. The second, *recasting problems as win–win opportunities*, repositions issues not as 'problems' in the political sense, but as opportunities for gain for all—rendering them consensual and free of conflict. This shows that moral discourses that once animated critiques of market-driven global governance, such as calls to long-term intergenerational wellbeing and justice, are being repurposed to justify what is deemed to matter publicly (albeit in market-based terms). Second, it shows that what is at stake is not merely the retreat of public authority or the ascendancy of private actors, but a deeper reconfiguration in which public institutions themselves become co-participants of hybrid justificatory discourses (Uribe, 2024b).

In shedding light on this shift, the paper emphasizes the need to take morality seriously in work at the intersection of IR and IPE, not as a rhetorical add-on but as one of the extra-economic dimensions through which contemporary capitalism reinvents itself (LeBaron et al., 2021). This, I argue, makes it possible to grasp what is epistemologically and politically most significant about contemporary capitalism: Its survival rests not only on material accumulation and appeals to 'efficiency', but also on its ability to continually expand its justificatory repertoire (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005). This trend has become more acute since the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, when ecological collapse and rising inequality laid bare the limits of uncontrolled market expansion (Fourcade & Healy, 2007). As Langley (2020, p. 5, emphasis added) pointed out, rather than 're-embedding' the market in society, one of the most powerful shifts of contemporary capitalism lies *in re-anchoring public predicaments to market logics*. Yet, it does so in ways that are compatible with the reproduction of the very material forces it discursively claims to oppose (Barman, 2016).

The empirical material for the case study of malnutrition combines primary and secondary sources. First, I conducted a discourse analysis of documents produced by global development organizations, including policy

reports, strategic frameworks, press releases, and web content from key public institutions. These include the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Health Organization (WHO), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Bank (WB), the Scaling Up Nutrition Movement (SUN), the European Union (EU) and summits such as the Group of Eight (G8) and the Nutrition for Growth (N4G) Summit. Second, I examined secondary sources, including key academic publications. The analysis was iterative and inductive, focusing on instances where justifications were articulated for why malnutrition should 'matter'. Indications of this were calls for resource mobilization, political attention, high-level public commitments (i.e., within the G8 or global summits and/or discourses by heads of state or key figures of multilateralism), and calls for institutional reform. The analysis focuses primarily on the period between 2008 and 2016, when malnutrition experienced an intense surge of political salience.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the first section, I survey different accounts that help us understand how issues are articulated as global political priorities. The second section sheds light on the value of a moral economy lens to study the shifting justificatory repertoires of global governance. The third section delves into the empirical material of the paper. After providing context on the place that the issue of malnutrition occupied in earlier global discussions, the section shows how it moved from episodic visibility to being firmly embedded in the architecture of global governance. The promotion of solutions such as vitamin capsules and micronutrient powders—presented as essential to societal wellbeing—became central to giving the issue renewed 'push' on the global development agenda. This section also examines how global action around malnutrition continued to grow as the issue shifted from being described as an intractable problem to a win–win opportunity benefiting all. Yet, as the analysis shows, this seemingly consensual surge in attention ultimately normalized a commercial approach and opened lucrative new channels for market expansion.

Global priorities within global governance

Understanding how collective priorities are articulated and how they come to occupy a prominent place in global politics has been one of the most central concerns in IR scholarship. Prevailing explanations hold that issues previously absent from the global agenda gain prominence when they are successfully articulated around widely shared moral ideals such as justice, dignity, security, or the common good (Buzan et al., 1998; Carpenter, 2007; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). This was the case of human rights, which became a matter of 'broad societal importance' once framed in a way that resonated with widely shared public values such as justice,

dignity, and humanity (Keck & Sikkink, 1999; Norman, 2019; Seabrooke & Henriksen, 2017). Similarly, IR accounts have shown how reframing otherwise marginal (or 'ordinary' political) issues as collective threats to humanity has likewise conferred them the status of political priorities (Davies et al., 2015; Elbe, 2006; Kreuder-Sonnen, 2019). Some of these dynamics have also been evident in the formation of governance problems such as the ozone layer, climate change, or even piracy, issues in which decision-makers successfully assembled a body of knowledge that strongly resonated with public ideals and notions of collective identity (Allan, 2017; Bueger, 2015; Corry, 2013; Haas, 1992). Whether explained through networks, entrepreneurs, or securitization discourses, the central insight of this literature is that appeals to moral obligation, to doing 'the right thing' from a public perspective, are crucial in elevating problems. Yet these accounts often rest on an implicit binary between the moral and the economic when explaining why issues gain political traction.

Another strand of IR scholarship, grounded in IPE, by contrast, has pushed us to see that what becomes a matter of public concern is inseparable from economic dynamics and, more broadly, from the role of capitalism (Abrahamsen & Leander, 2016; Aradau, 2010; Boy et al., 2011; Konings, 2016). Feminist scholars have long noted that problems translated into market terms are more likely to gain salience (and resources) than those that resist such translation (Federici, 2004; Mezzadri et al., 2022). This broader trend has also been captured under the rubric of economization, or the idea that market expertise, tools, and infrastructures strongly mediate what is seen as governable, visible, or relevant (Aradau, 2010; Clapp, 2019; Epstein, 2005). For instance, Newell (2008) showed how the environment has been subject to increased scrutiny and mobilized attention due to a powerful combination of forces that positioned the market as a source of efficiency. These accounts tell us more broadly that what is seen as a priority in global agendas should be understood as a symptom of highly unequal socio-economic relations (Kamola, 2013). Still, much of this work relies on a narrowly economistic lens, in which the 'economic' remains tied to market instruments, economic actors, or technocratic discourses around efficiency. What is less often acknowledged is that these processes are not only narrowly economic but also tied to normative claims about values, morals, and what is considered 'rightful'.

A key dimension that remains underdeveloped in this literature is that the moral and the economic never operate as separate spheres: Appeals to prioritize a problem are infused with economic reasoning, just as economization itself rests on profoundly moral claims (see Hanrieder, 2016). We know from IPE and feminist scholarship that political-economic practices are inseparable from morality (Hozic & True, 2016; Kunz et al., 2021).

Yet, most of this literature has examined these dynamics in the context of finance, competitiveness, and development financing (Best, 2006; De Goede, 2005; Kaushal, 2025; Langley, 2015; Seabrooke, 2005). From 'brand aid' and the idea of shopping well to save the world (Richey & Ponte, 2013; Roberts, 2015), to the production of gendered neoliberal selves by global financial institutions (Calkin, 2015; Elias, 2020; Hozic & True, 2016; Krook & True, 2012; Prügl, 2015), and to how corporate actors mobilize normative discourses to rebrand their market practices as virtuous (Littoz-Monnet & Osorio Garate, 2024; McGoey & Thiel, 2018; Mediavilla & Garcia-Arias, 2019), IPE accounts have done much to illuminate the ethical, moral, and epistemological foundations of capitalism.

What is less examined, however, is how *the fusion* of moral and market vocabularies has migrated beyond the realm of global finance to where one would least expect to find them: public domains that appear, at least nominally, at odds with profit, including spaces traditionally associated with charity, social protection, or public welfare such as malnutrition. What is at stake are novel rearticulations of the public–private divide and the consolidation of a governance landscape where the public good is no longer opposed to but actively aligned with profitability. This shift reflects a broader reconfiguration where private actors are positioned on ostensibly equal footing with public ones (Uribe, 2024b), and where serving the public good and enabling private gain are presented as advancing in perfect tandem.

The making of governance priorities through a moral economy lens

That economy and morality are entangled is not a novel observation: Social science research has long documented that economic practices and discourses draw on moral claims, and rest on ideas of trust, virtue, and social order. Economic life, as economic sociologists have reminded us ever since Polanyi, is ideationally embedded within broader narratives and interpretive frameworks through which societies make sense of, normalize, and legitimate economic processes (Block & Sommers, 2014, p. 155). From Adam Smith's vision of *doux commerce* and virtuous societies to neoliberal claims that markets foster freedom and responsibility, economic activity has always been dependent on the legitimation of a given moral order.

The concept of moral economy entered social analysis as a way to explain how appeals to *fairness, collective obligation, and shared norms* could underpin collective resistance to expanding market relations. In his 1971 essay *'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd'*, E.P. Thompson demonstrated that peasant food riots were not irrational outbursts but

actions grounded in a widely recognized sense of economic justice (Thompson, 1971). Scott extended this insight to Southeast Asia during the Great Depression, showing that uprisings were similarly rooted in appeals to social justice, customary rights, obligations, and principles of reciprocity (Scott, 1977). Here moral claims were mostly seen as a strong counterweight to market incursions.

Where earlier analyses approached moral economy primarily as a language of resistance, recent sociological and anthropological work has broadened the lens and employed it to account for how market and capitalist relations are reproduced and stabilized (Fassin, 2012; Fourcade & Healy, 2007; Sachweh & Hilmar, 2020). As Sayer (2000, p. 4, emphasis added) put it, 'there is no reason why moral economy approaches should not incorporate analysis of *questions such as exploitation, inequality and domination where appropriate*'. From analyses of corruption and fraudulent actors (Whyte & Wiegratz, 2016), to high-tech modernism (Farrell & Fourcade, 2023), to 'femtech' (Tsingou, 2025), and the making of 'assets' (Birch & Muniesa, 2020), the study of the morality of economic practice has been extended to examine a broader set of practices through which contemporary capitalism anchors its core logics in everyday political practice and rebrands itself. These developments suggest that we need to take seriously the full spectrum of moral claims that justify—or contest—what kind of political-economic order is regarded as *desirable* and proper.

Therefore, whether moral economies re-entrench existing capitalist relations or subvert them remains an empirical question. One way of assessing this is to examine the discursive practices through which global governors articulate moral and economic claims. Discursive practices offer a privileged entry point because they allow us to trace how actors give meaning to their activities and connect 'sayings' to 'doings' (Adler & Pouliot, 2011). In this view, discourse is not merely descriptive but performative: It shapes which issues rise to prominence and what kinds of material responses follow, whether in the form of funding flows, institutional reforms, or new governance initiatives. As the next section shows, the elevation of malnutrition illustrates one configuration of this dynamic, one in which moral economies work to re-entrench core tenets of capitalism by coupling the language of intergenerational justice with market expansion. Yet, moral and economic claims can be articulated in very different, and even oppositional, ways. Agroecology, for instance, advances a moral economy grounded in the right to healthy and culturally appropriate food, and does so in ways that explicitly reject market paradigms as the means to achieve those ends. Both instances are moral economic articulations, but they sustain fundamentally different socio-economic and political orders. What kind of order is (re)produced or contested through these articulations is therefore what empirical analysis can help to unpack.

What remains an important conceptual issue, however, is how we understand morality. Rather than treating it as transcending social contexts, or as something inherently tied to the 'good', the approach I propose draws on existing accounts that treat morality as a shared grammar of evaluation through which groups define what counts as right or wrong, legitimate or illegitimate (Fourcade & Healy, 2007; Wiegratz, 2016). Seen in this way, moral decisions function less as universal yardsticks than as socially mediated standards that make certain practices appear proper, acceptable, or necessary. They often involve dilemmas and tensions, especially when moral claims are used to reinforce existing power relations. Yet, such dilemmas do not mean that morality is absent (Wiegratz, 2016). On the contrary, they treat morality as a 'contradictory, dynamic and agonistic aspect, fully intertwined with the pressures, politics, and relations of the day' (Kalb & Hann, 2020, p. 5).

Shifting justificatory repertoires in global governance

I shed light on two discursive practices—communalizing market solutions and recasting problems as win–win opportunities—as part of the repertoire through which attention to problems is increasingly being justified in global arenas. Their analytical value lies in showing how public obligation is being redefined through market-oriented logics in novel ways, making profitability appear not only compatible with, but necessary to the very pursuit of the public good.

Communalizing market solutions

Communalizing market solutions captures an inversion in how prioritization is justified within an increasingly hybrid governance space. Instead of a high-profile 'problem' prompting the search for 'solutions', market solutions are foregrounded first, and their 'availability' becomes the reason why the problem warrants immediate collective action. Take the example of indoor air pollution. Although indoor air pollution has long been identified as a global health risk, it gained increased political salience when investable and ready-made 'clean cooking' technologies—produced by private companies—were endorsed by public agencies (IEA, 2024). These technologies are presented simultaneously as effective fixes and profitable investments, *as well as* moral imperatives, an alignment that makes political neglect appear inconceivable (see WHO, 2024).[2] A similar dynamic can be observed in the case of malnutrition. Only when a 'package' of solutions was endorsed, promoted, and invoked as readily available by a multistakeholder coalition of public and private actors did malnutrition begin to acquire unprecedented political attention (Horton, 2008). The

imagined availability *ex ante* of such market solutions thus largely drives justifications for why the problem deserves visibility and resources in the first place. At the same time, it renders inaction difficult to defend, while creating a compelling benefit structure for powerful actors. States, increasingly acting as 'partners', can demonstrate moral commitment without regulating or engaging in redistribution; corporations can legitimize commercial expansion under the banner of serving the public good; and IOs can secure resources in an increasingly competitive donor marketplace in which they are ever more reliant on private-sector funding.

Recasting problems as win–win opportunities

The second shift, recasting problems as win–win opportunities, captures a change in how action is justified within an increasingly hybrid governance space: Instead of presenting problems as sources of crisis, failure or injustice, they are reframed as ventures that promise gains for all. This reframing transforms political contestation into a language of shared advantage, making action appear appealing, non-confrontational, and aligned with market logics (Uribe, 2024a). Whereas earlier calls for mobilization tended to invoke urgency, failure, or collective responsibility, today's appeals are markedly more optimistic, entrepreneurial, and opportunity driven. This practice is particularly visible in multistakeholder platforms, where problems are cast as investment spaces that promise simultaneous gains for governments, corporations, and affected populations. In doing so, it operates as a kind of tabula rasa that sidelines histories of neglect, political contention, and responsibility, rendering these issues non-confrontational and de-conflictualised (Uribe, 2024a). Consider the case of sanitation. In the early 1990s, UN agencies such as WHO and UNICEF framed sanitation primarily as a response to unmet basic needs to be addressed through public investment and state-led provision. Reports frequently warned of chronic neglect and the international community not 'taking the issue seriously' (WHO et al., 1992, p. 2). Today, that language has given way to more optimistic and future-oriented tropes. In a recent joint report, the same organizations describe sanitation not as a crisis, but as 'our lifetime opportunity' (WHO, 2023). Rather than stressing infrastructural failure, the same organizations emphasize 'innovation', 'experimentation', and the benefits of public–private 'collaboration'. As a joint communique between UNICEF and the WHO puts it, 'the key to unlocking universal sanitation is right there—now we just have to seize it' (WHO, 2023). We can observe a similar shift in the environmental domain, whereby the discourse is shifting from a more fatalistic 'loss of nature' frame to a forward-looking 'nature positive society' (New Forests, 2024). By presenting problems as opportunities, this practice helps attract political buy-in by making action appear non-confrontational,

consensual, and beneficial *for all.* This practice has significant effects, as it smooths over tensions that might otherwise prompt questions about historical responsibility, accountability, or that challenge the socio-economic structures from which powerful actors benefit.

Taken together, these justifications have direct implications for how an issue is governed. They carry implicit assumptions about why we should care, what the problem is fundamentally about, and how it ought to be addressed. These justifications are, of course, not univocal. Alternative ways of articulating issues, and by extension, of articulating morality and economy *differently* are present in global discourses. In the case of malnutrition, for instance, agroecology discourses and food sovereignty movements link global attention to questions of equity, ecological sustainability, and local autonomy, rather than to market expansion and profitability (Anderl & Hißen, 2024; McKeon, 2014). However, while these discourses are present, they often struggle to generate the same level of political visibility or secure global attention (Canfield et al., 2021). While this does not preclude the possibility of alternative justifications, it underscores the prevailing tendency for market-oriented ones to subtly shape public life and what comes to matter politically. The sections that follow trace how these discursive repertoires were mobilized to justify the elevation of malnutrition as a global priority.

The ascent of malnutrition in the global development agenda 2008–2016

From crisis headlines to sustained institutionalization

Malnutrition has long figured in international debates. From the mid-twentieth century onward, it appeared on the agenda of high-level forums and conferences. For example, in the mid-1970s, the World Food Conference, held in Rome in the wake of a devastating famine in Bangladesh, proclaimed that no child would go to bed hungry (UN, 1974). Around the same time, Alan Berg's influential work helped bring malnutrition to the forefront of policy discussions by framing it as integral to economic and social development (Berg, 1970). By the early 1990s, the first International Conference on Nutrition, jointly organized by the WHO and FAO, attempted to provide a more coherent framework for global nutrition policy (Shaw, 2007).

However, within the UN system, malnutrition never acquired the institutional weight of other issues such as education, food and agriculture, or health, unless a humanitarian crisis erupted. The closest it came to having a dedicated institutional home was through the UN System Standing Committee on Nutrition (UNSCN), a small and under-funded committee often described as its 'strategic nerve' (Friel et al., 2017). Persistent

complaints about the lack of sustained attention and lack of resources were widespread. For example, the UNSCN faced significant obstacles, including chronic underfunding, limited political backing, and inconsistent engagement from member agencies (Friel et al., 2017). In that context, FAO officials repeatedly warned that the fight against malnutrition was severely handicapped by donors' lack of long-term commitment, lamenting that 'only when a crisis erupts, hunger and malnutrition make headlines' (FAO, 2006). Global public controversies and crises were indeed moments when malnutrition rose to a high position on the global political agenda. Emblematic of this pattern was the Nestlé infant-formula scandal in the 1970s, which exposed the dangers of corporate marketing practices for infant nutrition and gave malnutrition a momentary surge in global attention. Such episodic spikes of visibility, however, did not always translate into sustained institutional grounding.

This peripheral status was reinforced by institutional fragmentation. No international body had an exclusive mandate for nutrition. Unlike other global agendas such as education, food and agriculture, or health, which had dedicated agencies, malnutrition had typically been addressed as part of these three broader mandates. The World Food Programme (WFP), for example, primarily intervened in humanitarian settings, offering short-term relief to emergencies; UNICEF, despite being an important player, concentrated its efforts primarily on infant and maternal malnutrition; FAO, for its part, housed only a small nutrition division that remained the 'poor sister' within an agriculture-dominated organization (McKeon, 2015). Even the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) relegated nutrition to a 'secondary technical issue' without a dedicated body (Michelé et al., 2020).

Scholars have traced the lack of sustained attention to malnutrition to three overlapping dynamics. First, as feminist scholarship has shown, nutrition has often been framed as a domestic and private concern, tied to women's reproductive and caregiving roles (Pentecost et al., 2018). Second, malnutrition has long been overshadowed by the dominant framing of food governance in terms of production, productivity, and global food security. In this paradigm, questions of agricultural output and international trade have largely taken precedence (McKeon, 2015). Third, some scholars have attributed the secondary status of malnutrition to its frequent casting as a 'technical' issue, centered on the chemistry and health effects of nutrient intake (Prato & Bullard, 2014).

However, in the aftermath of 2008, the form and intensity of attention around malnutrition shifted significantly. During this period, malnutrition became a distinct global issue with dedicated policy agendas, new institutional arrangements, and high-level events, including commitments at the 2012 and 2013 G8 summits, the 2013 N4G summit, and the launch of the first Global Nutrition Report (GNR) in 2014. These developments were

accompanied by a dramatic shift in resource allocation. While donor aid for nutrition amounted to only a few hundred million dollars per year in the late 2000s, by 2016 this budget had roughly quadrupled (Development Initiatives, 2018). Institutional restructuring also placed malnutrition more firmly within the global governance architecture. In 2015, the CFS, which had historically sidelined the issue, formally integrated it into its agenda by creating a dedicated working group (Michelé et al., 2020). The year 2011 saw the emergence of a global institution exclusively dedicated to fighting malnutrition, the SUN, operating under UN auspices. This process culminated in 2016, with it being firmly enshrined in the global development agenda through the first-ever UN Decade of Action on Nutrition. The framework provided, for the first time, a commitment to 'undertake 10 years of sustained and coherent implementation of policies' (UN, 2016).

Structural drivers

Structural elements played a crucial role in the 'push' that malnutrition experienced during the post-2000 period. The 2007–2008 commodity price spike and associated food riots called attention to the volatility of food systems and their serious political and economic consequences (Clapp & Fuchs, 2009). It became, then, virtually impossible not to pay attention to rising social unrest and rising levels of hunger. But the crisis also precipitated an increased infusion of private capital into the global food landscape, which significantly reshaped priorities and resource allocation. As Clapp (2019) argued, the financial crisis further re-entrenched financial power at the very heart of global food governance and led to an increased presence of market actors who profited from the crisis. In parallel, changes in political leadership also played a significant role in malnutrition's ascendancy in global policy debates in the aftermath of the crisis. The internationalization of domestic initiatives such as Brazil's *Zero Hunger* programme, amplified by José Graziano da Silva's election to the leadership of FAO in 2012, provided a favorable landscape to put the spotlight on malnutrition as a key developmental priority.

While these developments explain malnutrition's elevation in the global agenda, they do not tell us much about the justificatory repertoires through which this process took hold in the post-2008 period. The language of 'collaboration', the reconciliation between private and public gain, and the 'win–win' synergies that resonated across diverse actors cannot be captured by increased capital flows or political leadership change alone. This, I argue, requires a complementary moral economy analysis that is attentive to the 'effort' and the content of the discourses through which malnutrition moved from being a secondary concern to a top global development priority.

Justifying increased public action around malnutrition

To understand how malnutrition gained sustained global traction after 2008, we need to look beyond structural shifts alone and instead examine how it was reimagined as a space where public duty and private gain could be reconciled, thereby generating broad-based political buy-in.

Linking market expansion and intergenerational wellbeing

One of the most significant shifts after 2008 was not only the renewed visibility of malnutrition, but also the terms on which this surge in visibility was justified. Central to this change was a new line of argument that linked a set of commercial solutions to the promise of long-term intergenerational wellbeing. These arguments were crystallized and amplified through the work of a public–private coalition that brought together UN agencies, the WB, governments such as the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), Canada, Ireland, and the EU, as well as private actors like the Gates Foundation (see Lie, 2019). Together these actors advanced the claim that malnutrition was not simply a humanitarian concern but a threat to future intergenerational wellbeing and economic and social prosperity (Horton, 2008).

The argument proceeded in two moves. First, the coalition endorsed a ready-made 'package' of effective solutions to malnutrition, which mostly consisted of consumer goods, such as vitamin capsules, micronutrient powders, hygienic products, and behaviour-change trainings, as the 'proven' solution to malnutrition. Second, on that basis, failing to deploy this 'package' was portrayed as morally indefensible. This strategy crystallized in a high-profile intervention by *The Lancet* in 2008. Funded by the Gates Foundation, the publication endorsed the 'package', warning that failure to implement it would result in irreversible developmental damage, compromising both individual potential and the wellbeing of future generations (Black & Bloomberg, 2008). UNICEF and WHO staff were among the authors and endorsers, and the series drew heavily on UN-backed data and programmatic frameworks (WHO, 2008).

From this point onwards, public and private organizations alike started mobilizing the 'package' of solutions as evidence that malnutrition was a newly compelling 'development imperative for all'.[3] This message was also echoed and endorsed by various global nutrition initiatives and campaigns, including those led by the Copenhagen Consensus, a think tank with close links to the WB and the Gates Foundation. In one key report, the Copenhagen Consensus Center reunited various economists, including five Nobel Laureates, to rank the ten greatest global challenges. Framed as direct policy advice to governments and IOs, the report asked how best

to allocate an additional US$75 billion (bn) to advance global welfare (Copenhagen Consensus Center, 2008, p. 1). The stated aim was to determine 'how to do more good in the poorer half of the world' (Copenhagen Consensus Center, 2025).

The challenge areas under consideration were broad, spanning air pollution, armed conflict, communicable diseases, education, global warming, malnutrition and hunger, sanitation and water, subsidies and trade barriers, terrorism, and women and development. Yet, malnutrition emerged as the top-ranked priority. Beyond appealing to cost-effectiveness, the Copenhagen Consensus Center's rationale hinged on weaving commercial interventions into a normative vision of public duty, framing their alignment as both obvious and necessary. In fact, the report presented commercial interventions produced by food industry giants and pharmaceutical companies such as vitamin capsules and micronutrient sachets as indispensable tools for securing intergenerational wellbeing and social justice. The founder of the initiative put it bluntly: 'feeding people is smart' and 'the best investment to *do good* in the world':

> If all the issues that call for our attention, *nutrition is exactly the right issue to focus on.* Not only is under-nutrition the largest single contributor to child mortality worldwide, but it is *also morally wrong* that in a world with sufficient food, more than 800 million remain hungry. But the most important reason we ought to focus on nutrition is the one you haven't heard. *It simply turns out that nutrition is the best way to spend a dollar to do good in the world*. We know this from the Copenhagen Consensus economics project. It asked more than sixty of the world's top economists and four Nobel Laureates to look at a large number of world challenges and find *where we could do the most good.* Of all the solutions, they found nutrition to be the very best. (Copenhagen Consensus Center, 2014, emphasis added)

Rather than questioning the compatibility of commercial incentives with long-term public goals, the report framed them as both the most reliable means of achieving these goals and as the very reason why the international community should act. The findings—cosigned by economists with public-sector affiliations such as WB economist Harold Alderman—fed directly into UN deliberations. In fact, the WB further reinforced these arguments by drawing on the Copenhagen Consensus Center to stress that investing in the 'package' of solutions could save millions of lives (Horton et al., 2010). Jim Yong Kim, President of the WB Group at the time, went further, declaring that scaling up the 'package' of solutions was 'one of the highest-return investments the planet can make to end poverty and promote shared prosperity' (World Bank, 2013).

Crucially, the communalization of market solutions paved the way for the launch of the SUN Movement, a multistakeholder platform exclusively dedicated to malnutrition launched by the WB, UNICEF, WFP, and WHO.

Although discussions about creating a single global institution dedicated to nutrition issues began in 2008, it was only by 2011(after malnutrition had been firmly anchored in commercially viable solutions) that SUN was formally established. The existence of the 'package' was invoked as a central justification for launching SUN and creating a sense of necessary action. SUN's foundational documents and advocacy materials explicitly present the 'momentum' around malnutrition against the backdrop of the 'package' and its importance for accomplishing an 'intergenerational duty' (SUN, 2012, p. 6). Over time, SUN became the political locus of global food and nutrition governance, benefiting from significant political and financial backing from countries and key multilateral institutions (Morris et al., 2008).

After 2008, major public institutions also began ramping up their financial commitments to malnutrition. For example, the EU made nutrition a higher priority in its development programmes (from only US$3 million (m) in 2008 to US$118m in 2016). Within the UN system, this shift was also particularly visible. UNICEF, for example, roughly doubled its core nutrition expenditures from about US$23m in 2007 to US$44m in 2016 for nutrition-specific programmes (Action Against Hunger and Results for Development, 2018). This momentum culminated in the issue reaching the G8 Summit in 2012, where leaders were urged to make unprecedented commitments to combat malnutrition, now framed as 'solvable' and supported by a 'formidable arsenal' of interventions (Gillespie, 2013):

> The G8 countries are being asked to make firm financial and strategic commitments to fight malnutrition on a scale never before imagined. Can they do it? If not, we can point to a lack of political will but not lack of information and viable solutions. Nutrition researchers, economists, and other champions in the fight against undernutrition have worked hard over the past five years to come up with tools and strategies that, when used together, can improve the lives of millions around the world. At the heart of this intensive research and strategising is the recognition that solutions must go beyond economic growth.

One of the authors of the influential Global Food Policy Report in 2013, summarized the prevailing rationale succinctly: 'In addition to meeting a moral obligation, eliminating hunger could offer high economic returns for humanity' (Mintz, 2014).

The justification for making malnutrition a top priority hinged on the endorsement and communalization of a 'package' of interventions centered largely on manufactured products and behavioural-hygienic measures (many of which themselves involved commodified items such as soaps). By merging profitability with intergenerational justice, public duty, and shared prosperity, the coalition of actors behind this agenda constructed a compelling case: ensuring nutrition was not only the 'right' thing to do

from a moral perspective but also the most profitable. The effect was to make action appear both self-evident and unavoidable. If endorsing these 'solutions' delivers high financial returns while simultaneously fulfilling universal obligations of social justice, who could refuse to act?

Malnutrition as a 'win–win' venture

Alongside a discourse that emphasized the availability of commercially viable solutions, there was also a noticeable shift in how malnutrition was described and narrated after the 2000s. During this period, malnutrition ceased to be portrayed as a negative condition to be remedied and was instead reframed as a positive 'opportunity'. This does not mean that the language of risk and urgency disappeared, but that it was often overshadowed by a more positive, motivational, and future-oriented narrative. Entrepreneurial vocabulary as well as optimistic metaphors were mobilized through a series of key multistakeholder summits and global gatherings bringing together public and private actors. These were crucial in reinforcing the idea that malnutrition is a 'win–win' space from which everyone benefits.

Before 2008, international discourse tended to describe malnutrition in negative and often fatalistic terms. Malnutrition was typically portrayed as a stubborn, intractable challenge resistant to long-term solutions, as well as a 'chronic tragedy' relegated to the background, unless a famine struck (Morris, 2005). Former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan captured this sentiment when he warned that the lack of sustained commitment to addressing malnutrition stemmed from the perception that long-term solutions were 'slow, costly, and politically difficult' (Stringer, 2008). Similarly, WFP Executive Director at the time described malnutrition as a 'silent tsunami sweeping the world's most desperate nations' (J. Morris, 2004). In testimony before the US Senate, she pointed to the so-called 'CNN effect', observing that 'money follows the media'—meaning that attention and funding was only temporary and surged only when dramatic images made headlines: 'If there are no horrible images of skeletal babies, no food riots, no mass movements of starving people, the cameras are soon gone. And often, so is the money' (J. Morris, 2004).

This discourse began to shift in significant ways in the early 2000s, with malnutrition increasingly described as a great opportunity. A clear expression of this shift came with the 2013 N4G, a high-level global event which both symbolized and amplified this new political grammar. The summit was co-hosted by UK Prime Minister David Cameron, Brazilian Vice President Michel Temer, and Jamie Cooper-Hohn of the Children's Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF). Other participants included the UK,

the US, and Canada, UN agencies such as UNICEF and the WHO, research institutions, corporations, philanthropies, and civil society. Framed as a landmark in 'public–private collaboration', it raised US$23.15bn in resources both from public and private sources.

The summit was paradigmatic of the emerging win–win discourse as it deliberately avoided the language of crisis or negativity. Instead, it explicitly positioned itself as a 'rupture' with previous approaches to addressing malnutrition. It was hailed as a 'historic moment' when the world finally 'turned the tide' through collective resolve and optimism (Global Health Policy, 2013). Also, the summit explicitly called for moving beyond 'past rhetoric' and adopted an optimistic, investment-oriented discourse which depicted malnutrition as a space for innovation. During the summit, the 'package' of interventions was continually mobilized to justify action, helping to sustain the broader narrative of opportunity and optimism characteristic of this new justificatory repertoire.

This entrepreneurial ethos was captured most clearly in the speech of then-UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, who stressed that the summit marked a turning point in 'doing things differently' and 'harnessing' the power to make a commercial return while also transforming lives (Cabinet Office UK, 2013). The justificatory repertoire of the summit leaned heavily on metaphors of 'unlocking', 'catalysing', and 'tapping' the new 'opportunity' (World Bank, 2015). Similarly, vocabulary around 'collaboration' and 'cross-sectoral partnership', where governments, civil society, and businesses would jointly 'forge' solutions became commonplace. Together, these metaphors suggested that the reason why malnutrition previously had long remained peripheral was due to a lack of information. This was a subtle but powerful move: It positioned the past not as a time of political neglect, but as a period of unknowing, where the problem remained unaddressed simply because its 'true' (financial) value had not yet been recognized.

This high-profile event served as an incubator for public initiatives and frameworks of action that, in the years to come, would give malnutrition a firm foothold within the global development agenda. For example, the summit paved the way for the development of the first-ever GNR in 2014 to track the commitments set in London. It also set the ground for the prioritization of malnutrition through the launch of the first-ever UN Decade of Action on Nutrition by the UN Secretary-General, which set the most ambitious global time-bound targets in history. The entrepreneurial and optimistic tone of the summit echoed strongly across both initiatives. The GNR, for example, insisted on the fact that ending malnutrition was 'well within our reach' and that 'by investing in nutrition for all, we all win' (International Food Policy Research Institute, 2015, p. 2). The Decade of Action, for its part, described malnutrition as an 'unprecedented

opportunity' for prosperity and growth, and called for 'SMART' commitments to be made through 'stakeholder' collaboration (UN, 2016). Both initiatives exemplify how market-compatible optimism and investment-oriented language became institutionalized as the dominant grammar through which malnutrition moved from being a secondary concern to becoming a top global development priority.

From 2013 onward, this motivational reframing became increasingly institutionalized within broader global agenda and policy-setting frameworks. The Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2) in 2014, convened by FAO and WHO, strongly echoed the win–win rhetoric that had taken hold the previous year, adopting the slogan 'Better Nutrition, Better Lives' and explicitly framing the meeting around 'scaling up nutrition interventions'. FAO Director-General José Graziano da Silva captured the mood by proclaiming that 'ICN2 presents us with a great opportunity to shine the spotlight on nutrition. Let's not lose this opportunity' (FAO, 2014). The broader discourse around ICN2 built directly on the wave of optimism generated by previous initiatives.

Between 2008 and 2016, the justification for action around malnutrition thus pivoted from one of crisis and burden to one of strategic opportunity. What had once been described in terms of failure, injustice, and systemic neglect was now re-scripted as a domain of potential, a venture where coordinated investment could yield benefits for all. This reframing de-conflictualised malnutrition in the ethical-political sense: Rather than a collective ethical–political challenge, it came to be treated as a global venture with ready-made solutions.

By presenting malnutrition as a site of convergence between profit and the public good, the public–private coalition was able to give malnutrition global visibility, though in a way that preserved economic concentration and dependency. Within this script, governments are pressed to channel resources toward commercial products—fortificants, powders, and vitamins—produced largely by corporations in the Global North (see Prato & Bullard, 2014). These products are often costly, and their purchase deepens dependency on external donors and corporations, who view in the expansion of nutrition markets a lucrative opportunity. In effect, public resources that might otherwise fund programmes relying on food sovereignty and agroecology are redirected toward commercial solutions. This, most importantly, conceals the fact that market-driven logics, such as financial power and corporate concentration, are among the factors that help sustain malnutrition in the first place (Clapp & Fuchs, 2009; Patay et al., 2023; Prato & Bullard, 2014).

Recent scholarship has drawn attention to the role of profit-driven logics in sustaining the very conditions that undermine the collective good, highlighting the growing concentration of financial power and the

entrenchment of the agropharmaceutical nexus as central drivers of hunger and malnutrition (Clapp, 2014). Also, food sovereignty and agroecology movements have fundamentally challenged the conflation of financial returns with collective wellbeing, advocating for alternative justifications beyond the 'package'. They insist that malnutrition deserves attention because it reflects deep-seated injustices and structural inequalities that demand redress, regardless of market incentives (Anderl & Hißen, 2024; McKeon, 2014). However, when what counts as responsible collective obligation becomes tethered to profit logics, it becomes increasingly difficult to justify action on grounds that cannot be translated into profitability. In other words, when political visibility is secured through the alignment of long-term moral imperatives with commercial returns, the resulting 'hype' may be significant, but it is also one that leaves intact the very power asymmetries and social relations of production that underpin the problem in the first place.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have adopted a moral economy lens to identify a shift in the justificatory repertoires through which global governors justify which problems deserve prioritization. In this emerging public grammar, moral imperatives to act (grounded in ideas of public wellbeing, justice, and duty) and market-compatible rationales (such as profitability, scalability, and innovation) are no longer treated as being in tension. Instead, they are fused into a *single justificatory logic* in which public duty is made contingent on private gain. As the analysis shows, however, this fusion serves to embed market logics at the very heart of governance processes, while foreclosing alternative visions of collective responsibility.

Empirically, the article focused on the justificatory grounds through which malnutrition rose on the political agenda in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. Even though action around malnutrition has receded since 2016, not least with the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, understanding how it gained heightened attention between 2008 and 2016 remains an essential task. This period matters because the multistakeholder governance structures and repertoires of action established at the time have left enduring imprints. Above all, they entrenched a market-based approach that is now normalized as the prevailing political grammar through which the problem is understood and addressed.

The increasing visibility of morality in governance political-economic discourse is itself a phenomenon that warrants closer examination. For this task, a moral economy lens is particularly useful, as it helps move beyond the binaries that structure much IR scholarship while also drawing attention in IPE to dynamics that extend beyond high finance and the

corporate world. In this sense, the paper contributes to a burgeoning agenda at the intersection of IR and IPE concerned with understanding the extra-economic foundations of capitalism and its implications for governing (Best, 2016; Clapp, 2014; LeBaron et al., 2021; Seabrooke, 2005; Tsingou, 2025), and follows calls for IPE to pursue 'more wide-ranging engagement' (LeBaron et al., 2021). Failure to do so risks overlooking both the malleability of capitalism and the ways in which it extends into domains where one would least expect to find it.

While the paper empirically focuses on malnutrition, the dynamics it highlights might well resonate beyond this domain. In fields where problems lend themselves to commodification and are increasingly governed by hybrid arrangements, such as those of the environment and health, similar justificatory practices are taking hold. There, too, calls for action are increasingly premised on portraying problems as 'opportunities', often in ways that appear naturally aligned with the pursuit of goals such as global solidarity, survival, and social justice. Recent example can be found in Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's 2024 speech at the UN Climate Change Conference (UNFCCC COP 29 or COP29), where she framed climate action as a moral obligation by invoking her identity as a mother and her intergenerational duty to protect future generations. Yet, this appeal to care and long-term responsibility was tightly interwoven with a market-oriented narrative, which describes climate action as a matter of fast technological innovation, investment, and public-private collaboration.[4] The irony is hard to miss: Market expansion and the financialization of climate, the very logics that have been shown to sustain climate migration, soil degradation, and capital accumulation, are reimagined as shared benefit and veiled in the very language that was once mobilized to contest them.

In these dynamics, not only does the public–private nexus collapse, but morality itself becomes a terrain for accumulation. Examining these articulations is a crucial step toward reclaiming alternative grounds for justifying why, and for whom, global problems deserve attention. This becomes ever more pressing in a moment where governance increasingly speaks in the moral language of 'stakeholder' inclusion and 'shared value' even as it widens the reach of privatization and market rule.

Notes

1. Throughout this paper, I use the term malnutrition with specific reference to undernutrition. While in food studies the concept often encompasses both undernutrition and overnutrition, my focus is on the former, which was most central to the global policy push between 2008 and 2016 and to the marketised approach that crystallised in this period. Much of the renewed attention to malnutrition during these years was framed in terms of

a problem amenable to 'solutions' in the form of fortified foods, micronutrient sachets, and other consumer goods.

2. See for example the website of the Clean Cooking Alliance, an UN-backed NGO: https://cleancooking.org/mission-impact/, last accessed 23 May 2025.
3. https://thousanddays.org/about/our-story/.
4. Available at: https://www.governo.it/en/articolo/president-meloni-s-speech-29th-conference-parties-un-framework-convention-climate-change. Last accessed 23 May 2025.

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