



**FOOD SECURITY, NUTRITION AND LIVELIHOODS:
A PEOPLE-CENTRED APPROACH TO ACHIEVE THE MDGs**

FAO and the MDG process

FAO's mandate is to raise levels of nutrition, improve agricultural productivity, better the lives of rural populations and contribute to the growth of the world economy. In the wake of the 1996 World Food Summit, FAO adopted a Strategic Framework, the first goal of which is to “ensure access of all people at all times to sufficient, nutritionally adequate and safe food - that is food security - ensuring that the number of undernourished people is reduced by half by no later than 2015.” This same goal was adopted in 2000 by the Heads of States and Governments gathered at the Millennium Summit as Target 2 of the 1st Millennium Development Goal: “Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger”. To this end, FAO adopted a corporate strategy on *Reducing food insecurity and rural poverty*:



“Halving the number of undernourished people by 2015 requires special efforts by, and on behalf of, those countries where the problems are greatest, i.e. those with widespread poverty, low growth in per caput food production, low and variable per caput food availability, and uneven access to food supplies. Also included in this group are countries afflicted by natural disasters and humanitarian crises, which are important causes of food insecurity”.

This corporate strategy has three strategic objectives, namely:

- (i) sustainable rural livelihoods and more equitable access to resources;
- (ii) access of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups to sufficient, safe and nutritionally adequate food;
- (iii) preparedness for, and effective and sustainable response to, food and agricultural emergencies.

This reflected the growing recognition that the concepts of Food Security, Nutrition and Livelihoods, which had developed from different entry points and within different development schools, are actually closely related and should be articulated for increased synergy. Malnourished people are usually found within poor households. Sustainable livelihoods are essential to achieving food security, health and care. Malnutrition can be seen as the final outcome of unsustainable livelihoods. People and vulnerability are at the centre of all three.

Sustainable Livelihoods

Sustainable livelihood approaches are increasingly recognised as providing a framework to address poverty and vulnerability in both development and humanitarian contexts. They have emerged from the growing realization of the need to put the poor and all aspects of their lives and means of living at the centre of development and humanitarian work, while maintaining the sustainability of natural resources for present and future generations.

A **livelihood** comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base

Source: Chambers and Conway, 1992

Livelihood strategies are the range and combination of activities and choices that people make in order to achieve their livelihoods goals. On the basis of their personal goals, their resource base and their understanding of the options available, different categories of households – poor and less poor – develop and pursue different

livelihood strategies. These strategies include short terms considerations such as ways of earning a living, coping with shocks and managing risk, as well as longer-term aspirations for children's future and old age. Livelihood strategies can be positive, helping households become more resilient and less vulnerable, or negative when they result in the further erosion and decrease of the asset base.

Understanding vulnerability: The impact of a crisis on any given population group results from the shock itself and the vulnerability of the affected people. A livelihoods analysis helps to understand better the actual assets of affected people, which eventually shape people's livelihood strategies (thus explaining their behaviour). People's ability to withstand shocks, will ultimately depend on their asset base.

Sustainable Livelihoods assessment and analysis are especially useful in identifying the poor and vulnerable groups, understanding the constraints and opportunities they are facing, and mapping both the positive and negative impacts of the "coping strategies" that households engage in. They can inform stakeholder consultations for national and international support, and raise awareness and a better understanding of the impact of policy decisions on the livelihoods of these marginalized groups.

Sustainable livelihoods approaches aim to build resilience of vulnerable households and capacity of local institutions in at-risk areas. They are essential to the protection and promotion of food security and nutrition. By focussing on people, they provide a common inter-sectoral framework which facilitates inter-institutional collaboration and can bridge the gap across sectors and institutions.

Assets are classified into:

- *human capital*, e.g. education, formal and informal skills, good or bad health
- *natural capital* e.g. natural resources such as land, forests, water etc
- *physical capital* e.g. infrastructure such as roads, buildings, transport
- *financial capital* e.g. cash, credit, savings in kind and cash
- *social capital* e.g. formal and informal institutions, associations, extended families, local mutual support mechanisms

Alleviating malnutrition

A similar result is actually achieved when planning nutrition strategies.

Understanding the causes of malnutrition

Nutrition interventions were first developed within the health sector, to identify and address the clinical signs of malnutrition. While significant success was achieved in terms of therapeutic care, it became clear that these were generally short-lived and did not provide a long-term answer to the problems of malnutrition, as they addressed the symptoms but not the causes. In order to improve nutrition in a sustainable way, one needs to understand why people are malnourished. Clinical signs of malnutrition may be identical between two malnourished children, but the reasons they are malnourished will differ widely according to their family background:

- What are they fed and why are they fed that way?
- Is the family too poor to give them the food they need (is it food insecure)?
- Is food available in this area at this time of the year?
- Are they sick, and if so why?
- Who feeds them and how often?
- Are the food practices in their family appropriate?

This implies a shift from "classical" nutrition assessments which focus on anthropometric data, broken down by age and gender and insist on statistical representativeness. It is important to understand food consumption patterns (in particular in terms of dietary diversity) and their evolution, to cluster the at-risk population according to their livelihood system (since this determines to a great extent household access to food and cultural practices) and to understand the causes of malnutrition for each group. This broader and more local specific assessment should preferably be carried out at local level and involve the different sectors operating at community level, thus allowing exchange of experience and knowledge and generating consensus of local stakeholders on the combination of causes which need to be addressed.

Local strategies for food security, nutrition and livelihoods

Given the multi-sectoral nature of malnutrition, improving nutrition requires an integrated response from the relevant development sectors. Nutrition strategies eventually combine community geared interventions (as most households in vulnerable communities will share similar food supply or information constraints) with livelihood support to the poorest households. FAO can assist its partner institutions (government and/or NGOs) in designing and implementing food and agriculture interventions aiming at ensuring local availability of safe foods throughout the year; strengthening the capacity of the most vulnerable households to access

these foods as well as cover their other needs (livelihood support); providing appropriate information for balanced and safe diets; and linking with the other development and/or humanitarian sectors – in particular the social sectors – health, education, social affairs. Together they can provide integrated, pro-poor, demand-driven support to the local population and link with their central offices to influence policy and obtain support.

Core principles of livelihoods approaches:

People-centred and pro-poor: they put people, and in particular poor people, at the centre of development and build on their strengths and assets

Responsive and participatory: participation is crucial for getting people's perspective on both their needs and opportunities. Participation of stakeholders (and in particular local institutions) at all levels is essential to ensure appropriate response and support and generate the necessary partnerships.

Holistic: they take into account all the factors that influence livelihood strategies.

Dynamic: they recognise that livelihood strategies are constantly changing and seek to understand and learn from change in order to support positive patterns of change and help mitigate negative patterns.

Sustainable: livelihoods are sustainable when they: are resilient in the face of external shocks and stresses; are not dependent upon external support (or if they are, this support itself should be economically and institutionally sustainable); maintain the long-term productivity of natural resources; and do not undermine the livelihoods of, or compromise the livelihood options open to, others.

Macro-Micro Linkages: livelihood approaches emphasise the importance of macro level policy and institutions to the livelihood options of communities and individuals, while stressing the need for higher level policy development and planning to be informed by lessons learnt and insights gained at the local level. This only can both give local people a say in policy and increase overall effectiveness of development and humanitarian programmes and projects.



Strengthening of local institutions through joint training-cum-planning for food security, nutrition and livelihoods can make an important contribution to operationalising the MDG process, by harnessing existing experience and resources and ensuring a people-centred and pro-poor approach to local development.

Ensuring Food Security

Food security is at the heart of FAO's mandate. The concept evolved from an initial focus by economists on national availability of staple food (usually cereal), with a major seasonal dimension. It became soon apparent that, given socio-economic disparities, this alone would not guarantee freedom from hunger. Increased importance was then given to access to food. At the same time it was recognised that dietary diversity and food safety were essential to alleviating malnutrition. The present definition of food security was coined in the 90s.

Food security exists when all people, at all times, have access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.

In order to achieve the 1996 World Food Summit goal to reduce by half the number of undernourished people in the world by the year 2015, FAO has focused on three major components:

- assessment and monitoring food security at national and global level. FAO coordinates the Food Insecurity and Vulnerability Information and Mapping System (FIVIMS) which includes nutrition information and provides increasing attention to food consumption (in particular dietary diversity) and livelihoods. Through the yearly issue of *The state of food insecurity in the world (SOFI)*, it reports on global and national efforts to reach the goal.
- assist member states, working closely with regional economic organizations in developing and implementing National Programmes for Food Security to reach the goal of halving the number of hungry in the world by 2015
- policy advice and resource mobilisation to support the formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of food security.

FAO advocates for a twin-track approach to food security associating specific policies for rapid food security and livelihood support of food insecure households and communities, with a long-term strategy for sustainable growth.

Towards integrated food security, nutrition and livelihoods (FSNL) approaches at country level

Increased awareness of the overlap and potential synergies of these different paradigms is compounded by a strong move towards people-centred and integrated approaches at country level. FAO, IFAD and WFP have set up Food Security Theme Groups (FSTGs) at country level which can take a lead role within UN Country Teams in mainstreaming FSNL in Poverty Alleviation Policies, thus accelerating the achievement of MDG1.

Livelihoods-based planning provides a common framework which allows all stakeholders focus on what it can do best, have its role recognised, and work in collaboration with relevant partners at national or local level. Finally the UN Standing committee on Nutrition provides a global forum which can advocate for food security and livelihood support as pre-requisites for good nutrition and promote truly inter-sectoral nutrition policies and initiatives.

SL should be considered as an overall approach to Emergency work and not as a specific sector to be covered along with others. SL Approaches can be useful in all the steps of the Emergency Response Cycle:

- **Preparedness:** Providing information on how people (and different groups of people) live and cope with crisis in at-risk areas through livelihoods assessments and profiles; identify relevant indicators and establish scenarios
- **Emergency:**
 - ★ Rapid livelihood assessment with a view to provide an intersectoral framework for humanitarian response
 - ★ Incorporate SL into sectoral assessments and response with a view to improve targeting and design, and ensure the appropriate flexibility in project/programme implementation
 - ★ Contribute to coordination mechanisms (OCHA, clusters, link with UNDAF) and joint programming (Government, other Agencies and NGOs)
 - ★ Use SL people-centred focus to improve communication on emergency interventions and strengthen appeals; promote livelihood rehabilitation programmes and umbrella projects in coordination with other Agencies to ensure better Donor support.
 - ★ Strengthen and make real the ‘build back better’ and “Do no harm” approaches through the adoption of a livelihoods approach
 - ★ Use SL framework and indicators for **monitoring** progress, adjusting interventions and evaluating impact
- **Recovery and rehabilitation and exit strategies:**
 - ★ by focussing on people rather than interventions, SL approaches will lead to a better articulation and integration of development and humanitarian projects and programmes, and will contribute to capacity building of local institutions. Exit strategies should focus on strengthening the resilience of local livelihoods to expected shocks.

