Towards a World of Adequate Food Security

Reality around us compels us to admit that even though much effort and other resources have been spent towards achieving SDG-2, the progress o far remains short of what we may reasonably have expected to make. True, in some countries, situation seems to be satisfactory, but as a rule, those are affluent and technically advanced. But even there, it is uncertain whether it would remain sustainable. This note discusses what we might do to make this sombre picture a little less gloomy.

I shall begin with a few obvious things we always need to keep in mind:

• Unquestionably, the value of food stems from its being essential to life, hence, securing its sustained availability at an affordable cost is of vital importance.

• Unless it is sustainable, food security is of limited duration, and as such of limited value.

• Today, food security exists in some places, but its distribution is highly fragmented.

• We need to decide on what food security means to a social group, which may be a country or some part of it.

• It should be remembered that what food security means for a group should not be imposed on it from the outside, but should be decided as objectively as possible with reference to the following:

1. Its food culture.
2. Individual nutritional needs of each member of the group.

• Production/harvesting (eg. fishing) depends on the adequate availability of ecosystem services; its inadequacy is countered by its supplementation by the use of fertilisers, biocides, etc., which often has adverse consequences.

• Wide variety of human activities reduce the availability of ecosystem services.

• Therefore, neither food security nor its sustainability can ever be achieved in isolation. It requires sincere and very close cooperation among a variety of human activities and their harmonious coordination.

• Mankind enjoys food; only babies can be fed according to some table of nutrients and energy content. Most cultures have developed its own culinary tradition in order to derive some ‘dietary enjoyment’ from its food. It is considered to bea a valuable social good.

• Vast majority of people today procure food by purchasing it; therefore, unless gainfully employed, a varied, wholesome and a balanced diet is available to them at an affordable cost, and they possess sufficient dietary competence, elimination of hunger and nutritional disorders would remain elusive.

Rest of this note will be devoted to ascertaining whether the current efforts to achieve sustained global food security pay sufficient attention to the points given in the above non-exhaustive list. It must be emphasized that all the points raised there represent knowable logical facts, and as such, they are not open to dispute as are contingent facts like ‘value chains’ where each of its elements is valuable only to a specific group. This is irrelevant, because the value of food is universal, hence the need for it cannot be adequately satisfied by catoring to what such a group desires.

I do not advocate a single solution, nor yet a limited bundle of them. But our hope lies in the fact that every good solution to global food security and nutrition has the same set of attributes or features that may take different forms depending on the location. For instance, low altitude dweller in temporate climes like Europe require more protein than those who live high altitude locales like Tibet or in Andean highlands. Even though it is cold in both places, low atmospheric pressure there makes it imperative to eat more carbohydrates and fats that are easily digested than proteins which requires a great deal more energy to digest. This is clearly reflected in the food culture of those peoples, and we ignore it at their peril.

So to recap the necessary conditions for a world with adequate food security and nutrition, we need to ensure the following:

• An adequate and sustainable food supply that enables the people to procure a wholesome, varied and balanced diet as close to their own food culture as possible. This last requirement makes a significant contribution to world’s agricultural bio-diversity as well as to environmental well-being as it is the best suited to the local geographic,soil and weather conditions.

• What food is best produced in a locale or harvested from its environment is not a given; hence food producers/harvesters have to acquire this knowledge by learning, while the skills needed to use it will have to be gained by training. This is the purpose of agriculture education.

• This food supply should be available at an affordable cost to everybody. Unless such affordability is ensured, the rest would be of limited use.

• Even if the two above conditions are met, they will fail to achieve adequate public nutrition unless the people know what to eat, where to procure the necessary ingredients and prepare them as meals for consumption. This dietary competence is not given to a person at birth, and it has to be acquired through dietary education and training. One has to acquire it at home and possibly at school or public education schemes. Unfortunately at present, insufficient attention is paid to this vital need.

• At this point, how to achieve an affordable wholesome food supply has to be addressed. It requires a two-pronged approach. The first of them involves enabling the end-user to purchase food, which requires creating the conditions under which one may legitimately earn a decent livelihood. Secondly, the large profits made by the innumerable intermediaries engaged in food trade and some of their practices such as speculation in commodity futures would make it extremely difficult to make wholesome food affordable even if near full employment is attainable. The reason for this is glaringly obvious, viz., not all the people have the ability and skill to procure the kind of work that would enable them to afford the comparatively high prices of wholesome and varied food. This would leave the majority especially in non-affluent countries to live on some cheap unwholesome and/or industrial food. This may be a version of ‘not leaving anyone behind’ where they will be limping on somehow. Therefore, the second essential prong of the approach is to streamline the human food system with reference to the soundest criteria of justifiability and common decency. Here, it may be hinted that such a food system would serve a common value, viz., the value of one’s own life to oneself from which food derives its own value as the third most essential thing for life after air and water.

• Thus, it is essential to render the human food systems in use today not just ‘efficient’, ‘highly productive’, ‘utilise the latest technology’, etc., but rather sustainable, yield wholesome and varied food items at affordable prices and serve as a benign employer to as many people as possible rather than being capital-intensive. In other words, embody a cooperative food production and distribution rather than competitive production and selling. I think it would repay to establish the structure of a justifiable generic food system through a really open and reasoned debate.

• Now one may wonder why I have not said a word about environmental degradation, climate change, global warming, right to food, etc. My reason is very simple, the first three are fully subsumed by the term ‘sustainability’ which also includes human over-population (an unpopular truth), while any right to food becomes less than academic if it is not affordable, unwholesome, and if one’s country simply cannot afford to provide sufficient social help., etc

Now another recap of what is necessary to ensure a sustainable and an adequate FSN:

• Sustainable food production/harvesting keeping as close as possible to what food cultures recommend.

• Appropriate agriculture/harvesting education and training.

• Corresponding dietary education and training of the end-users. Neither of these should be theoretical for they are required in real life, hence, should be practical.

• Justifiable streamlining of human food systems now in use; unless this is achieved without delay, no increase in world food production, nor yet increased GDP’s will ever enable us to significantly reduce the current levels of global hunger, malnutrition and NCD’s.

Let us assume for a moment that wholesome and varied food is available to all of us, we know where it is, how to prepare it, etc. Even a child would now cry out, but we don’t have money to buy it! So much for scientific availability. Come, let us see what to do to make it affordable. Streamlining the grossly obese present food systems clanking their value chains has already been mentioned. The hungry and the inadequately/inappropriately nourished need not only dietary competence, but some means of earning a decent living. What might one do for it? And this is the crux.

• Food production/harvesting may offer some employment, but is not sufficient toaccomodate sufficient numbers as decently rewarded employees. It seriously fails to open up its potential by the following:

1. Its increasing tendency to become capital-intensive even in the poorest countries where high unemployment is rife.
2. Its neglect of practical education and training.
3. Its failure to educate the public as to its vital importance to man above ‘freedom’, ‘rights’, ‘glamour’, simply because starving man has little use for those fine abstract entities while agriculture enables him to live, and then, conceive of those.

So, attaining our goal has to depend on other fields to provide people gainful employment so that they may procure food. This is becoming increasingly difficult as global unemployment figures clearly show, and it is most severe in poorer countries. In affluent countries, a wide variety of trivial jobs keep those figures apparently low, while that and dole ameliorate its worst physical effects on people. Ever growing world population keeps on exacerbating this serious social problem.

Therefore, a sustained and adequate global FSN requires an appropriate, just and devolved food production/harvesting and distribution system and suitable employment schemes, both of which are to be embedded in an envelop of sustainability.

In providing employment, apart from safety at work, reasonable pay, etc., theorists should remember that the unemployed are not concerned with the monotonous nature of some jobs as they are, and it is unreal to believe the poor unemployed are as interested in finding exciting or challenging work as many securely employed theorists seem to think.

I have already mentioned the necessity of streamlining the current food systems. Let us take a brief look at some of the conditions food production/harvesting, distribution should meet in order to be justifiable and sustainable:

• Economy is simply concerned with an exchange; it may involves an exchange of physical goods, physical acts or services, value tokens like conventional money or any symbol thereof, a promise or an undertaking to be fulfilled in the future, etc. Note that these transactions may involve any combination of items mentioned earlier. The sole raison d’etre of such exchanges is the belief that it would enable one to gain something of value.

• But this type of exchange could not have endured if all of them were biased in favour of one party and the other always sustained a loss of value. In other words, economy depends on a fair exchange of values, which is not the case at present. Enormous profits made by various types of food sellers, processors, transporters, speculators, the plight of rural and indded most farmers, huge farm subsidies affluent nations have to pay their farmers, and price of wholesome food, etc., are indisputable indicators of unfairness in the exchanges involved in food systems of today. They make up the ‘value chains’ that bind people tightly to inequity of poverty, hunger and indifferent nutrition, not to mention the non-sustainable nature of those.

1. What steps have those responsible for achieving SDG-2 taken to make ---

• Food producers/farmers receive a fair price and the end-users are able to purchase wholesome food at a fair price? These two things are logically inseparable if one wishes to achieve SDG-2.

• What steps have been taken to ensure that the end-users have reasonable access to fresh food?

• Why nothing has been done to ensure the freedom and independence of food producers/harvesters and end-users? Near monopolies of every ilk are encouraged, which puts both groups at the mercy of trade.

• Why the authorities and experts seem to be equally averse to a justifiable notion of human food system?

• Why has agriculture remained a despised kind of employment even though without it, we would still be just wandering groups of skin-clad savages wielding stone implements?

• How far have we come in reducing agro-industy farming, and supporting smaller mixed farms that are profitable?

• Have we stopped the rate of abandonment among small holders, and what have we done successfully to encourage increase of small holdings?

• How far have we reduced monoculture with a corresponding increase in multi-culture?

• By what percentage have we managed to reduce the use of mineral fertilisers and biocides? If so, has it been accompanied by a comparable increase in using their biological counterparts?

• What percentage reduction in soil pollution have we achieved?

• What percentage reduction of soil erosion have we managed?

• What percentage of polluted and/or eroded soil we have successfully restored?

• What percentage of solid and dissolved marine pollution (in both fresh water bodies and sea) have we managed to stopp?

•What percentage of total marine pollution have we remedied?

• What is the total extent of our successful re-forestation during the past two years?

• What is the total extent of our urban and village re-forestation during the same period?

• When are we going to admit a balanced diet is not just a source of nourishment, but it is also the source of a unique human enjoyment and valuable means of cementing relationships? Culinary art of most cultures bear witness to this fact.

• Will the experts immediately stop denying the future generations of their patrimony of food culture and the dietary enjoyment it offers even the present generation by their exaggerated claims concerning novel and scientific foods? When will they realize this is one of the reasons that motivates the rural youth in poorer countries to value ‘western’ industrial food and spend their meager supply of cash onit?

• How great is the proportion between the material resources spent on data collection and analysis, seminars, conferences, productivity research, etc., and that expended on actual agricultural projects and the acquisition of appropriate agricultural and dietary competence?

It is with much regret I notice that when answered honestly, replies given to the questions above are a cause for serious concern. However, we know already how to deal with the unsatisfactory answers to them. What we seem to lack is the will to direct our energies into the real world and make good use of the appropriate bits of knowledge and skills we possess. It would bode well for the future if we are ready to make a drastic cut in the indefensible disproportion I have refered to in the last question above. Then, let us leave our thinking pads and laboratories and go out into the barren fields and they may bloom yet.

Not quite yet; I have to say a few words on enabling people to buy food. Agriculture and food distribution can be expected to offer more employment through rational labour-intensive methods. But it will still leave a vast pool of unemployed labour, most of which comes from semi- or unskilled people. They need food now, and not after the completion of some scheme that may bear fruit in X years.

So, it would be essential to initiate immediate and vigourous action to bring about a dramatic rise in sustainable and dependable “employment in situ”. What this means is to employ people where they are or getting them back to their homes from city slums. Its advantages and vital importance is too obvious to be elaborated.

I cannot specify specific measures to be used unless the general conditions obtaining at a place are known. I do not mean the kind of data one might need ‘research’ to procure. Here, the local people in the area are the best source on which one may rely.

Let me outline some paths to explore towards the above objective. They do fulfill two essentials, viz., sustainability and fairness necessary in the type of value exchange we have discussed earlier. Let us remind ourselves that our future depends on the availability of renewable material resources is mediated by the environmental well-being, hence, the latter is the mediator of sustainability and indeed our survival.

• Immediate and effective steps to stop the global population increase, and promote effective ways of reducing it gradually.

• School and public education to inculcate into the people the vital importance of the well-being of the environment, agriculture, health, security, family planning, and civilized enjoyment, while money is desirable because it a tool that enables a person to adequately satisfy one’s fundamental needs i.e., nutrition, good health, education, security, procreation and civilized enjoyment in a way that does not harm anyone else or our environment. This may be scoffed at as impractical, but if you do, do you endorse the ‘glamourous’ a la tabloid or do you have a civilized alternative?

• Political devolution has become a fashionable necessity, but when economy is increasingly monopolized, it becomes an empty phrase. So, let us initiate real economic devolution so that the end-users have a real choice instead of itspathetic parody available in most affluent countries today.

• People are supposed to elect their leaders, but when the leaders (as long as they are sufficiently honest) will have no power to apply people’s will to the business of government when their economic hands are tied by monopolized finance. Hence, economic devolution including more power to national governments in economic affairs is essential. Otherwise, democracy is a joke and becomes a silky version of the late and unlamented Bolshevik dictatorship whose effect on humanity of man is awful. Let us bear in mind that there can be Gulags where one can be voluntarily kept inside with perpetual digital entertainment and cheap industrial food and drink.

• Promote labour-intensive clean small industries. This can be used to a surprising extent provided that we are willing to look at the aftermath of many a technical ‘advance’.

• Stop insisting that every youngster should seek a ‘higher education’. Let there be ample opportunities for all those who wish it and are capable of it. Let there be equal opportunities for those who want some professional training rather than ‘higher education.’

• End-users pay billions of US dollars per year to keep advertisers alive. People should boycott heavily advertised products and services and patronize those that simply give facts about them. Authorities should spare children from such misleading acts of mind management. Whether it is done by a noxious dictatorship or a tradesman for profit, it is equally unacceptable.

• Discourage consumerism and promote durable products. This is crucial for the well-being of our environment.

• It is fair that a trader should be rewarded for his services of convenience. However, as an intermediary, it is unfair that his reward should exceed that of the actual producers. As the backed financeial resources of the world are finite, it is certainly unfair for a few control a greater share of those than the rest of the world.Therefore, it seems reasonable to impose a certain limit on one’s economic resource ownership be it a physical or a legal entity.

These notes may seem somewhat hurried as they indeed are. They are by no means comprehensive, but they point towards an unpopular yet a fair way towards a world where hunger and inappropriate nutrition may loom less accusingly at our centuries of resounding words hiding our indifference.

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