



WHAT IS FOOD SECURITY?

The 1996 World Food Summit reached near-consensus on the main features of the global problem of food security. Food security is the adequate supply of food and food availability. This means stability of supplies and access to food and consumption by all. 'Food security... is achieved when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life' (FAO, 1996). The right to food is a basic human right, mandated in international law and recognized by all countries.

Food availability is necessary for food security, but is not sufficient. Food-insecure households may be in areas where there is enough food, but the household lacks the income or entitlements (production, trade or labour) to get it. Improving entitlements means expanding economic opportunities and making markets work better for the poor. Moreover, food-insecure individuals may live in food-secure households. Ensuring all family members have an adequate diet means overcoming gender or age discrimination.

A DEFINITION OF HOUSEHOLD FOOD SECURITY

Households are food secure when all members have year-round access to the amount and variety of safe foods required to lead active and healthy lives. At the household level, food security refers to the ability of all household members to secure adequate food to meet dietary needs, either from household production or through purchases.

State of world food security: There is no food scarcity for those who can afford to buy it. Although the global picture shows aggregate food surpluses and falling prices, food security remains a key concern. This is because millions of people do not have economic access to sufficient food:

- ⦿ over 826 million people are chronically hungry; they need to eat 100–400 Calories more per day;
- ⦿ worldwide, 32 percent of pre-school children are stunted, 26 percent are underweight;
- ⦿ Asia has more hungry people than anywhere else, but hunger is greatest in sub-Saharan Africa, and worst in countries affected by conflict;
- ⦿ poverty is the most widespread cause of food insecurity;
- ⦿ progress has been uneven, poverty continues to rise in sub-Saharan Africa and in Asia, the proportion living in poverty has declined dramatically, but progress has slowed recently.

Links to livelihoods analysis: The livelihoods approach, which considers people's assets and constraints, is a valuable tool for finding ways to improve poor people's access to food. It helps us to arrive at an understanding of transitory food insecurity and vulnerability. This includes, for example, how changes in vulnerability (HIV infection, drought), institutions (market reforms) or endowments (soil degradation) impact on livelihood outcomes (food security). Assets and livelihood strategies, including non-farm strategies, are valuable in that they allow us to move away from thinking of food security as being only focused on agriculture.



Biodiversity, and especially agrobiodiversity, are important assets that favour poor people's food security. Agrobiodiversity contributes to the achievement of sustainable livelihoods as it is an essential element of the natural resource base. Moreover, the greatest range and volume of biodiversity is held by developing countries. These genetic resources are particularly important for food and income security, health care, shelter, cultural and spiritual practices. This is true for many rural communities, in developing countries, as genetic resources are crucial elements for environmental risk management and food production. The importance of local knowledge is closely related to this aspect of food security, as it is not enough to have genetic diversity at hand. People rely on local knowledge for the sustainable management and utilization of these resources so they can benefit from them.

HIV/AIDS has been one important factor in the discussion of food security. From a livelihoods perspective, HIV/AIDS represents a severe shock, within the vulnerability context of many people around the world. HIV/AIDS typically strikes the household's most productive members first. When these people become ill, there is an immediate strain on the family's ability to work, feed themselves and provide care. As the disease progresses, it can become even harder for a family to cope. The state of poverty advances as resources are drained and valuable assets, such as livestock and tools, are sold to pay for food and medical expenses.

Without food or income, some family members may migrate in search of work, increasing their chances of contracting HIV – and bringing it back home. For others, commercial sex may be the only option to feed and support their family. Food insecurity also leads to malnutrition, which can aggravate and accelerate the development of AIDS. Likewise, the disease itself can contribute to malnutrition by reducing appetite, interfering with nutrient absorption, and making additional demands on the body's nutritional status. (www.fao.org/es/ESN/nutrition/household_hiv aids_en.stm)

References

FAO. 1996. Rome Declaration on World Food Security and the World Food Summit Plan of Action (available at www.fao.org/docrep/003/w3613e/w3613e00.htm).

Web site

FAO Web site for Agrobiodiversity: www.fao.org/biodiversity/index.asp?lang=en

FAO Web site for Gender, Agrobiodiversity and Local Knowledge: www.fao.org/sd/links

FAO Web site on Food Security: www.fao.org/es/ESN/index_en.stm

World Bank Web site on indigenous knowledge: www.worldbank.org/afr/ik/what.htm

Additional background papers

IUCN. Biodiversity in development, Biodiversity Brief No. 6, IUCN/DFID (available at www.iucn.org/themes/wcpa/pubs/pdfs/biodiversity/biodiv_brif_o6.pdf).



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