

# The household livelihood security concept

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In the past several years, much progress has been made in understanding the processes that lead to food-insecure situations for households (Frankenberger, 1992). In the 1970s food security was mostly considered in terms of national and global food supplies. The food crisis in Africa in the early 1970s stimulated major concern on the part of the international donor community regarding supply shortfalls created by production failures caused by drought and desert encroachment (Davies, Buchanan-Smith and Lambert, 1991). This primary focus on lack of food supplies as the major cause of food insecurity was given credence at the 1974 World Food Conference.

The limitations of the food supply focus came to light during the food crisis that again plagued Africa in the mid-1980s. It became clear that adequate food availability at the national level did not automatically translate into food security at the individual and household levels. Researchers and development practitioners realized that food insecurity occurred in situations where food was available but not accessible because of erosion to people's entitlement to food (Borton and Shoham, 1991). "Entitlement" refers to the set of income and resource bundles (e.g. assets, commodities) over which households can establish control and secure their livelihoods. Sen's (1981) theory on food entitlement had a considerable influence on this change in thinking, representing a paradigm shift in the way that famines were conceptualized. Households derive food entitlements from their own production, income, gathering of wild foods, community support (claims), assets, migration, etc. Thus a number of socio-economic variables have an influence on a household's access to food.

Worsening food insecurity came to be viewed as an evolving process in which the victims were not passive to its effects. Social anthropologists observed that vulnerable populations exhibited a sequence of responses to economic stress, giving recognition to the importance of behavioural responses and coping mechanisms in food crises (Frankenberger, 1992). By the late 1980s, donor organizations, local governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) had begun to incorporate more extensive socio-economic information in their diagnoses of food insecurity.

The household food security approach that evolved in the

late 1980s emphasized both the availability of food and stable access to it; food availability at the national and regional levels and stable and sustainable access at the local level were both considered essential to household food security. Interest was centred on understanding food systems, production systems and other factors that influence the composition of the food supply and a household's access to that supply over time. What was not clear was how nutritional outcomes were factored into food security deliberations.

Work on the causes of malnutrition demonstrated that food is only one factor in the malnutrition equation, and that in addition to dietary intake and diversity, health and disease and maternal and child care are also important determinants (UNICEF, 1990). Household food security is a necessary but not sufficient condition for nutritional security. Researchers identified two main processes that have a bearing on nutritional security. The first involves the household's access to resources for food. This is the path from production or income to food. The second process involves translating the food obtained into satisfactory nutritional levels (World Bank, 1989). A host of health, environmental, cultural and behavioural factors determine the nutritional benefits of the food consumed. This is the path from food to nutrition (IFAD, 1993).

This work on nutritional security demonstrated that growth faltering is not necessarily directly related to failure in household food security. It shifted the emphasis away from simple assumptions concerned with households' access to food, the resource base and food systems by demonstrating the influence of health and disease, caring capacity, environmental sanitation and the quality and composition of dietary intake on nutritional outcomes.

Research carried out in the late 1980s and early 1990s indicated that the focus on food and nutritional security as they were currently conceived needed to be broadened. It was found that food security is but one subset of objectives of poor households; food is only one of a whole range of factors that determine why the poor take decisions and spread risk, and how they finely balance competing interests in order to subsist in the short and longer term (Maxwell and Smith, 1992). People may choose to go hungry to preserve their assets and future livelihoods. It is misleading to treat food security

as a fundamental need, independent of wider livelihood considerations.

Thus, the evolution of the concepts and issues related to household food and nutritional security led to the development of the concept of household livelihood security. The household livelihood security model allows for a broader and more comprehensive understanding of the relationships among the political economy of poverty, malnutrition and the dynamic and complex strategies that the poor use to negotiate survival. The model places particular emphasis on household actions, perceptions and choices. Food is understood to be only one of the priorities that people pursue. People are constantly required to balance food procurement against the satisfaction of other basic material and non-material needs (Maxwell and Frankenberger, 1992).

### HOUSEHOLD LIVELIHOOD SECURITY

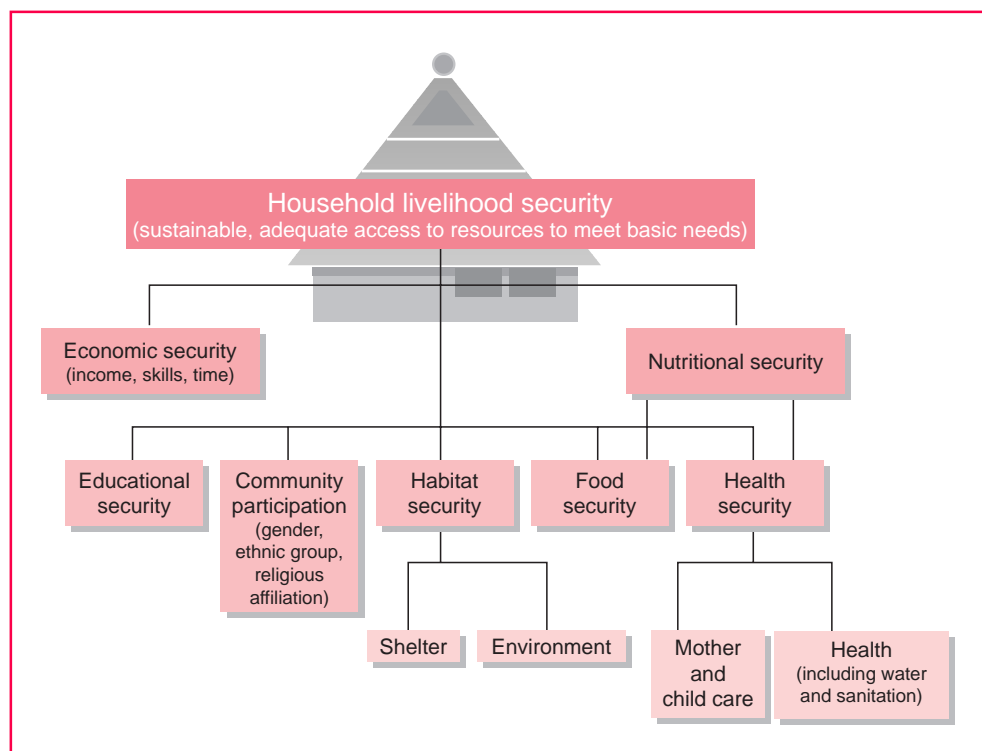
The NGO CARE USA, realizing the importance of viewing food security in a broader perspective, adopted household livelihood security as its organizing conceptual framework in 1996, understanding the contribution that this framework could make towards improved programming.

Household livelihood security is defined as adequate and sustainable access to income and resources to meet basic needs (including adequate access to food, potable water, health facilities, educational opportunities, housing, time for community participation and social integration). Livelihoods can be made up of a range of on-farm and off-farm activities

which together provide a variety of procurement strategies for food and cash. Thus, each household can have several possible sources of entitlement which constitute its livelihood. These entitlements are based on the household's endowments and its position in the legal, political and social fabric of society (Drinkwater and McEwan, 1992). The risk of livelihood failure determines the level of vulnerability of a household to income, food, health and nutritional insecurity. Therefore, livelihoods are secure when households have secure ownership of, or access to, resources and income earning activities, including reserves and assets, to offset risks, ease shocks and meet contingencies (Chambers, 1989).

A livelihood is sustainable, according to Chambers and Conway (1992), when it "can cope with and recover from the stress and shocks, maintain its capability and assets, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation...". Unfortunately, not all households are equal in their ability to cope with stress and repeated shocks. Poor people balance competing needs for asset preservation, income generation and present and future food supplies in complex ways (Maxwell and Smith, 1992). People may go hungry up to a point to meet another objective. For example, de Waal (1989) found that during the 1984/85 famine in Darfur, the Sudan, people chose to go hungry to preserve their assets and future livelihoods. People will tolerate a considerable degree of hunger to preserve seeds for planting, to cultivate their own fields or to avoid selling animals. Corbett (1988), in exploring the sequential ordering of behavioural responses employed in

**Components of household livelihood security**



periods of stress, found that in a number of African and Asian countries preservation of assets takes priority over meeting immediate food needs until the point of destitution.

Thus, food and nutritional security are subsets of livelihood security; food needs are not necessarily more important than other basic needs or aspects of subsistence and survival within households. Food-insecure households juggle among a range of requirements, including immediate consumption and future capacity to produce.

### **THE RELIEF-DEVELOPMENT CONTINUUM**

CARE recognizes that the ability of poor households to make a living is not static. A range of intervention options needs to be made available to poor populations facing various circumstances. To enhance the livelihood security of vulnerable populations at different levels, a three-pronged livelihood systems approach has been conceived based on the relief-development continuum: the notion that relief, rehabilitation/mitigation and development interventions are a continuum of related activities, not separate and discrete initiatives. Household food, nutrition and income security can be enhanced by one or a combination of the three intervention strategies described below.

#### **Livelihood promotion (development-oriented programming)**

Livelihood promotion involves improving the resilience of household livelihoods so that food and other basic needs can be met on a sustainable basis (i.e. development). Interventions of this type often aim to reduce the structural vulnerability of livelihood systems by focusing on:

- improving production to stabilize yields through diversification into agro-ecologically appropriate crops and natural resource management measures (e.g. soil and water conservation);
- creating alternative income-generating activities (e.g. activities to develop small enterprise);
- reinforcing coping strategies that are economically and environmentally sustainable (e.g. seasonally appropriate off-farm employment);
- improving on-farm storage capacity to increase the availability of buffer stocks;
- improving common property management through community participation.

Promotion-type interventions could also deal with meso-level development, where the linkages between food surplus areas and food deficit areas could be strengthened through investment in regional infrastructure and market organization. Such interventions could help improve the terms of trade for the poor by improving local access to income, enhancing food

availability and lowering food prices. In addition, livelihood promotion activities could focus on preventive measures that improve health and sanitation conditions and the population/resource balance to insure that any income and production gains are not lost to disease and unchecked population growth.

#### **Livelihood protection (rehabilitation/mitigation-oriented programming)**

Livelihood protection involves protecting household livelihood systems to prevent an erosion of productive assets or to assist in their recovery (rehabilitation/mitigation). These types of interventions entail timely food and income transfers which can reduce long-term vulnerability resulting from the forced selling of productive assets to meet immediate food and other needs. The negative impacts of livelihood insecurity can be reduced by timely detection of where livelihood and food insecurity are likely to occur and by establishing contingency plans that can be implemented rapidly before a significant erosion of household assets occurs and other erosive coping strategies are activated. The capacity to detect changes in livelihood and food insecurity at an early stage and to respond promptly could considerably reduce the costs of dealing with a full-blown emergency.

Protection-type interventions would include infrastructure improvements or soil and water conservation measures, carried out through food- or cash-for-work or some other means, to enhance the long-term viability and resilience of the communities. Child )e population from becoming more vulnerable to disease and malnutrition would also fall in this category of intervention approach. Recovery measures such as infrastructure repair and rehabilitation, distribution of seeds and tools, reforestation and repair of water sites would also be included in this set of interventions. The types of intervention pursued would be selected and implemented by the communities themselves.

#### **Livelihood provisioning (relief-oriented programming)**

Livelihood provisioning involves providing food and meeting other essential needs for households to maintain nutritional levels and save lives. Interventions of this type usually entail food and health relief for people in an emergency or people who are chronically vulnerable. Targeted food and health relief is critical and should be combined with promotion interventions where possible, to phase out the food transfers. In relief situations where people have left their homes (i.e. situations involving refugees and internally displaced populations), promotion interventions such as health and nutrition education and family planning initiatives will be limited to those activities that can be brought to the camps.

Community-focused interventions may be necessary for chronically vulnerable populations (e.g. mother and child health programmes) to allow for the provisioning activities to be taken over by the community on a sustainable basis.

## CONCLUSION

A broadened perspective emphasizing livelihood systems as key determinants of food and nutritional security reveals households as dynamic institutions, where power, control over resources, gender and culture all influence the households' ability to meet basic needs and negotiate survival. Establishing household livelihood security as CARE's organizing framework has allowed CARE to improve programming through holistic diagnosis and design using multisectoral teams, as well as to improve measurement of impact at the household level. While this comprehensive view has made the analysis of food insecurity more complicated, it has enhanced the likelihood of identifying the multiple constraints facing households.

Although it is recognized that the livelihood security framework can still be improved, it nonetheless represents a significant advance from previous conceptual models of food and nutritional security. As experience in its application accumulates, further refinements will be forthcoming. ♦

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In the past decade, it has been realized that food is only one of many competing interests which poor households must finely balance in order to subsist in the short and longer term. It is misleading to treat food security as a fundamental need independent of wider livelihood considerations. The concept of household livelihood security allows for a more comprehensive understanding of poverty, malnutrition and the dynamic and complex strategies that the poor use for survival. Household livelihood security is defined as adequate and sustainable access to income and resources to meet basic needs, which include adequate access to food, potable water, health facilities, educational opportunities, housing, time for community participation and social integration. The risk of livelihood failure determines the level of vulnerability of a household to income, food, health and nutritional insecurity. Therefore, livelihoods are secure when households have secure ownership of, or access to, resources, including reserves and assets, and income-earning activities to offset risks, ease shocks and meet contingencies.

Household food, nutrition and income security can be enhanced by following three intervention strategies: livelihood promotion (improving households' resilience for meeting food and other basic needs on a sustainable basis), livelihood protection (preventing an erosion of productive assets or assisting in their recovery) and livelihood provisioning (meeting food and other essential needs to maintain nutritional levels and save lives). This three-pronged approach should be seen as a whole rather than as separate parts, since the ultimate goal of any development intervention is to promote sustainable livelihood systems in intervention areas.

### Le concept de la sécurité des moyens d'existence des ménages

De gros progrès ont été réalisés dans la compréhension des processus engendrant les situations d'insécurité alimentaire pour les ménages. Dans les années 70, la sécurité alimentaire était principalement examinée en fonction des disponibilités vivrières nationales et mondiales. Au milieu des années 80, il est devenu clair qu'une offre adéquate de nourriture au niveau national ne se traduit pas automatiquement par une sécurité alimentaire au niveau individuel et familial. L'insécurité alimentaire naît dans des situations où les vivres sont disponibles mais non accessibles, à cause de la capacité réduite des gens de se procurer de la nourriture par leurs propres moyens – production propre, revenus, collecte d'aliments naturels, soutien de la communauté, avoirs, migration, etc. La conception de sécurité alimentaire des ménages, qui s'est développée à la fin des années 80, mettait l'accent tant sur les disponibilités de vivres que sur l'accès stable à la nourriture. Elle était axée sur la compréhension des systèmes alimentaires, les systèmes de production et l'accès durable des ménages à ces disponibilités. On a également reconnu que la nourriture n'est qu'un seul des facteurs composant l'équation de la malnutrition; l'apport et la diversité alimentaires, la santé et la maladie, et la prise en charge de la mère et de l'enfant sont d'autres aspects importants.

Au cours des 10 dernières années, on s'est rendu compte que l'alimentation n'est qu'un des nombreux éléments sur lesquels repose la subsistance à court et à long terme des ménages pauvres occupés à équilibrer leurs intérêts antagoniques. Traiter la sécurité alimentaire comme un besoin fondamental, indépendamment d'autres impératifs de subsistance plus vastes, peut être fallacieux. Le concept de la sécurité des moyens d'existence des ménages permet d'avoir une perception plus globale de la pauvreté, de la malnutrition, et des stratégies dynamiques et complexes auxquelles les pauvres ont recours pour leur survie. La sécurité des moyens d'existence des ménages est définie comme un accès légitime et durable aux revenus et aux ressources pour satisfaire les besoins fondamentaux, qui comprennent un accès adéquat à la



nourriture, à l'eau potable, aux installations sanitaires, à l'enseignement, au logement, à la participation de la communauté et à l'intégration sociale. Le degré de vulnérabilité d'un ménage à l'insécurité économique, alimentaire, sanitaire et nutritionnelle est déterminé par le risque qu'il encourt de manquer de gagne-pain. Par conséquent, les moyens d'existence sont garantis lorsque les ménages sont propriétaires ou bénéficient d'un accès sûr aux ressources, y compris réserves et avoirs, et aux activités rémunératrices pour contrebalancer les risques, atténuer les chocs et faire face aux imprévus.

La sécurité des ménages en matière d'alimentation, de nutrition et de revenus peut être renforcée en suivant une stratégie d'intervention sur trois fronts: promotion des moyens d'existence – en améliorant la capacité des ménages de satisfaire leurs besoins alimentaires et autres besoins fondamentaux de façon durable; protection des moyens d'existence – en prévenant un affaiblissement des biens de production ou en aidant à les reconstituer; et fourniture de moyens d'existence – en satisfaisant aux exigences alimentaires et autres besoins essentiels afin de maintenir les niveaux nutritionnels et sauver des vies humaines. Cette démarche à trois facettes devrait être considérée dans son ensemble plutôt que comme une série d'activités distinctes, le but ultime de toute initiative de développement étant de promouvoir des systèmes de moyens d'existence durables dans les zones d'intervention.

### El concepto de seguridad para la subsistencia familiar

Se ha avanzado mucho en el conocimiento de los procesos que dan lugar a situaciones de seguridad alimentaria en los hogares. En la década de los setenta, la seguridad alimentaria se consideraba casi siempre en relación con los suministros alimentarios en el ámbito nacional y mundial. A mediados de los años ochenta se advirtió que la suficiencia de disponibilidades alimentarias en el ámbito nacional no se traducían automáticamente en seguridad alimentaria en el ámbito individual y familiar. La inseguridad alimentaria se daba en situaciones en que se disponía de alimentos pero éstos no eran accesibles porque las personas no lograban obtenerlos con su propia producción, sus ingresos, la recogida de alimentos silvestres, el apoyo comunitario, los bienes de producción, la migración, etc. El enfoque sobre seguridad alimentaria familiar que se desarrolló a finales de los años ochenta insistía en la disponibilidad de alimentos y también en un acceso estable a los mismos. Se centraba el interés en comprender los sistemas alimentarios, los sistemas de producción y el acceso de los hogares a su aprovisionamiento a lo largo del tiempo. Se admitía que los alimentos constituyen sólo un factor en la ecuación de la malnutrición; también son importantes la ingesta y la diversidad alimentaria; la salud y la enfermedad y la asistencia maternoinfantil.

En esta última década se ha constatado que los alimentos constituyen uno de los muchos factores que determinan cómo los hogares pobres llegan a establecer un justo equilibrio entre intereses contrastantes para subsistir a corto y largo plazo. Es un error tratar la seguridad alimentaria como una necesidad, con independencia de consideraciones de subsistencia más amplias. El concepto de seguridad de la subsistencia familiar permite un conocimiento más cabal de la pobreza, la malnutrición y las estrategias dinámicas y complejas de que se valen los pobres para su supervivencia. Esa seguridad familiar se define como un acceso suficiente y sostenible a los ingresos y recursos para cubrir sus necesidades básicas (incluido un acceso suficiente a alimentos, agua potable, servicios de sanidad, oportunidades educacionales, vivienda, tiempo para la participación comunitaria e integración social). El riesgo de la falta de medios de subsistencia determina el nivel de vulnerabilidad de un hogar a la inseguridad en materia de ingresos, alimentos, sanidad y nutrición. Por consiguiente, la subsistencia es segura cuando los hogares tienen la propiedad también segura de los recursos y de sus actividades lucrativas y el acceso a ellos, en particular reservas y bienes, para aliviar los apuros y hacer frente a los imprevistos.

La seguridad familiar en materia de alimentación, nutrición e ingresos puede mejorarse aplicando tres estrategias: la resistencia del hogar para subvenir a sus necesidades alimentarias y otras de carácter básico de forma sostenible; la protección de la subsistencia impidiendo la erosión de los bienes productivos o ayudando a su recuperación; y el aprovisionamiento de víveres de subsistencia, cubriendo necesidades esenciales tanto alimentarias como de otro tipo para mantener los niveles nutricionales y salvar vidas. Este enfoque triple debe contemplarse como un todo, más que como elementos aislados, pues el objetivo último de cualquier actuación de desarrollo es fomentar los sistemas sostenibles de subsistencia en esferas de intervención. ♦