

As requested by the Minister for Agriculture of the Palestinian Authority (PA), FAO in cooperation with the World Food Programme (WFP) and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) undertook an assessment of the food and nutrition situation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (WBGs) February through July 2003. The purpose was to assist the PA and relevant stakeholders to better design, target and implement future development programmes and relief interventions for improving food security and nutrition as well as to provide inputs for the development of a national food security strategy. The mission was co-funded by the European Commission and the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

Using the UN system commonly agreed definition for food security the trends in social, economic and physical access to sufficient, safe and nutritious foods and in the availability, stability and distribution of food supplies were assessed both at the macro level and at the household level. Attention was given to trends in employment and earnings, remittances, financial assistance from friends, relatives and benefactors and food prices to describe economic access to food. Food security related humanitarian activities of the various stakeholders including the PA and their national and international partners were reviewed and a vulnerability assessment was conducted at local and household level to assess social access.

The assessment involved extensive field visits and information collected by semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, household observations and key informant and individual interviews. This provided the basis for estimates of the food insecure, those under threat of becoming food insecure, and those food secure as well as identifying where the vulnerable live, their main sources of livelihood, and their coping strategies. Details of estimated numbers of the food insecure per sampled area, their locations and major characteristics are provided in the report.

The assessment concluded that though food is generally available, access is limited due to physical (curfews, closures) and economic reasons (high unemployment, depletion of resources, exhaustion of coping strategies and strained social support networks). The assessment confirmed the findings of other recent studies that households have until now been able to manage in the difficult circumstances albeit with dwindling resources and increased vulnerability to shocks. However, resilience has been greatly weakened, vulnerability increased and coping mechanisms severely strained by the rapid and inexorable decline in the economy and the continuation and further tightening of closures and curfews.

With rising poverty and unemployment, the food security situation has considerably deteriorated over the past three years, with four out of ten Palestinians food insecure. Food insecurity is a reality for 1.4 million people (40 percent of the population) and a near constant worry for an additional 1.1 million people (30 percent) who are under threat of becoming food insecure should current conditions persist. People's physical access to food and farmers physical access to the inputs and assets to produce food have been severely affected by restrictions on the movement of people and goods and the damages to personal property. The massive loss of jobs, earnings, assets and incomes sharply reduced economic access to food with real per capita income decreasing by half since 1999 and resulting in six out of ten people falling below the US\$2.10 per day poverty line. The exhaustion of coping strategies and the inability of the social safety net to adequately protect have resulted in reductions in the quantity and quality of food consumed. These are all factors that place the Palestinian population at-risk of being food insecure.

The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics household surveys conducted during 1996-98 indicated that food energy and protein consumption by the Palestinian population was essentially equal to the levels considered sufficient for food security (2 100 kcal and 56 g protein) if distributed equally to meet daily energy and protein requirements. However, energy and protein consumption for those living in the Gaza Strip was significantly less than for the West Bank (1 912 kcal and 49 g and 2 227

kcal and 60 g respectively) due to food availability and economic access factors. Three-quarters of calories came from bread and other cereal products, oils and fats, and sweeteners, with nearly one-half (49 percent) from cereals.

Macro economic factors including employment and incomes, poverty levels, food production and trade data from the period from 1996 to the third quarter of 2000 indicated a relatively favourable food supply and demand situation. This was a time of sustained progress in food availability and access to food. The exceptional increases in employment, wages and earnings (access) as well as in animal product production (availability) towards the end of this period suggests that the quality of the diet was improving and that the proportion of the population food secure was increasing. Nevertheless, a small but significant share of the population at that time may be assumed to have been food insecure, with those residing in the Gaza Strip more so than those living in the West Bank.

Progress towards achieving increased access to food for all was abruptly disrupted following September 2000 when the imposition of closures and curfews curtailed the movement of people and goods and made routine household and business affairs, attending school, finding jobs and going to work, producing and marketing food and providing services difficult everywhere and in many areas impossible. Such restrictions seriously reduced investment, drastically raised transaction costs and restricted access to alternative markets for import or export as stipulated under the Paris Protocol. Domestic output and exports declined and labour flows to Israel were sharply cut, all of which led to rising unemployment, poverty and increased levels of food insecurity.

A major initial impact was the loss of 183 000 jobs from Israel and the settlements and within the WBGS, and the consequent slump in the Palestinian economy that reduced GDP by 6 percent despite robust growth in the first three quarters of the year. The aggregate loss in earnings was around US\$92 million a month or US\$1.1 billion a year that directly affected about 900 000 people and indirectly affected thousands more. The loss of jobs and earnings had a devastating impact on the food access component of food security. The initiation of “Operation Defensive Shield” in March 2002, further tightened the restrictions on the movement of people and goods, and this together with the ongoing construction of the separation barrier in the West Bank, has led to an even more difficult food security situation. Physical damages to homes and infrastructure, economic and human losses have reached a very high level and continue to mount.

Per capita incomes fell 23 percent in real terms during 2001 and by the same amount during 2002 increasing the share of the population below the poverty line from just above 20 percent in 1999 to 46 percent in 2001, 58.5 percent in 2002 and to around 60 percent early in 2003. Taking average wage rates, even with a fully employed wage worker, households with 5 members or more fall below the poverty line. With the average economic dependency ratio at 7, even those who had a job would have been hard pressed to ensure food security for their extended families.

The ability of the PA to adequately provide basic social services and to meet the increasing demand for social support was not possible from late 2000 to late 2002, when clearance revenues were withheld. Donors have provided budgetary support to keep government institutions operational as well as emergency humanitarian assistance including cash and food to those who had lost their main source of livelihood due to closures and curfews, the new poor, but this has not been enough to prevent the numbers of the food insecure from increasing. By the first quarter of 2003 the number of people in need of assistance due to too few jobs, the unemployed and their dependents, was between 1.4 and 1.7 million depending upon the labour force participation rate used, and the chronic poor households pushed those in need even higher.

This assessment confirmed that closures, constraints and the separation barrier had and were continuing to have a severe impact on livelihoods in both Gaza and in the West Bank although the

impact has been greater in the West Bank where the restrictions on movement have been tighter, especially after Operation Defensive Shield and where the separation barrier is being constructed. After almost three years of living under strict closures, the coping mechanisms of many households have been exhausted or severely strained. The chronic poor, those who had been in a near impossible situation before closures and curfews, are now in extreme circumstances with no savings, extremely limited assets and no regular source of income. Destitution is close at hand.

The WBGS is not self sufficient in food and relies upon commercial imports to supply domestic demand. Generally imports of cereals, sugar and vegetable oils accounted for 65 percent of dietary calories and this dependency on imports underlines the importance of maintaining sufficient growth in the economy, employment and per capita incomes to keep pace with the population growth rate. However domestic agricultural production is important and should not be neglected as in value or weight terms most of the food (vegetable and meat production) consumed by those living in the WBGS is domestically produced.

Relief food supplies are inadequate and the lack of resources prevents the full delivery of assistance as planned. The food basket is dominated by cereals mainly wheat flour that provides around 80 percent of the total dietary energy supplies (as compared with around 50 percent from cereals and cereal products in 1996-1998) complemented with edible oils, sugar and pulses.

Economic access to food in terms of the ability to purchase food rather than lack of food is the main constraint to securing a healthy nutritious diet. The numbers of meals, the portion size and the frequency by which certain foods are consumed have all been reduced. Many meals consist solely of bread and tea. Cereals and increasingly potatoes, pulses, the cheaper vegetables and fruits form the core of their diet. Though nutrition surveys are not conclusive, they do indicate that childhood malnutrition is a major concern for some groups and that some more widespread nutritional problems are emerging. Micronutrient deficiencies are also a concern, especially in iron, folate, vitamin A, zinc and iodine.

In seeking to cope the poor have cut expenditures on food, health, key social events and utility bills, sold assets, asked for assistance from relatives and friends, engaged in low-paid seasonal and casual work, petty trade, sold home-made food, sub-let homes and relied on credit. Their coping mechanisms are almost exhausted and the need for humanitarian assistance and support has never been as necessary as it is now.

The report provides recommendations for implementing and monitoring a national food security strategy and for the easing of restrictions on the movement of people and goods to ensure free access of farmers to their lands, animals and markets and the free and unhindered movement of food aid and humanitarian workers. "Food security" passes should be issued for the travel of essential workers involved in legitimate food related trade and production services.

To reverse the trend towards food insecurity, early action needs to be taken with respect to ensuring physical, social and economic access to sufficient supplies of safe and nutritious food. The greatest urgency is to take actions to improve economic and social access to food. For improved economic access to food, the first step is to launch a substantial employment creation programme, a large public works programme for the repair of damages and for the rehabilitation of infrastructure and rural roads, and a programme to compensate farmers and fisher folk for losses. At the same time and as a matter of the utmost urgency, actions need to be taken to improve social access to food. The first step is to ensure sufficient funds are available to fully meet the UNRWA and WFP food aid appeal target of 208 000 tons for 2004. Similarly, to increase donor support for the UNRWA regular and emergency programme budget and the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) income support programme to ensure all those who are eligible are enrolled and receive their full entitlement and to

enable larger cash assistance payments for the chronic poor. WFP's Food for Work and Food for Training programmes should be expanded and extended to other providers of food aid.

Agencies need to review the adequacy of the humanitarian assistance that is being provided, the eligibility criteria and standards being used and the priorities being followed with a view towards harmonization amongst the various organizations and agencies, especially by MoSA, UNRWA, WFP and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The basic food aid package should provide a more nutritionally balanced food basket and support should be given for the continuation and expansion of cash assistance programmes, drawing upon the results of the ICRC cash voucher system. The specific mix of interventions (food aid, emergency employment, cash assistance, food for work, income generation and support to household food production) needs to be identified for vulnerable groups. A minimum wage that enables public and private sector worker families to remain above the national poverty line should be established and used as the standard for job creation programmes. A comprehensive food security plan of action should be prepared and the monitoring of food security and of nutritional status, paying attention to micronutrients, should be strengthened.

In the medium to longer term there should be increased investment in agriculture (and other sectors) as it is pro-poor in that it creates labour intensive employment, provides food of a range and variety for promoting dietary diversification, encourages women's participation in the development process and prevents further asset depletion and welfare dependency. The Ministry of Agriculture of the Palestinian Authority, assisted by FAO, has prepared an Agricultural Revitalization Programme to maintain the agricultural sector and prevent its collapse. In the first phase activities will focus on those that improve rural livelihoods, contribute to household food security by creating employment and ensuring availability and access to basic foods, and prevent rural households from falling into extreme poverty. In the second phase priority will be given to the revitalisation and improvement of agricultural productivity. It includes technically feasible and economically viable interventions in five components: livestock production (improving animal feed and fodder and animal health, since the reduced availability of veterinary drugs and services is creating a potential risk for livestock and public health), horticulture (focus on vegetables and high-value export crops, orchards, greenhouses, and integrated pest management), the optimum use of water (water conservation, water harvesting, small-scale irrigation), marketing and capacity building at national and local levels.