

# THEMATIC brief



TO WORK TOWARDS  
A LASTING SOLUTION,  
YOU MUST  
UNDERSTAND THE  
CONTEXT, AND  
TO UNDERSTAND  
THE CONTEXT, YOU  
MUST UNDERSTAND  
THE PEOPLE.

## Food Security and Livelihoods



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The unequivocal goal of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) is to achieve a food-secure world, free from hunger and malnutrition for present and future generations. Since its founding more than 60 years ago, national and international action and advice on policies, programmes and research have been the driving forces of FAO's core programme in support of this goal. Today, an increased emphasis on securing household access to sufficient food and good nutrition is placing people much more at the heart of FAO's work.

FAO recognizes that for people, countries and the world to be truly food secure at all times, our livelihood systems must be economically, socially and environmentally sustainable. To achieve this requires support targeted towards food insecure people based on a realistic analysis of their livelihood strategies that provide an adequate understanding of how they live and make a living.

While it is accepted that food security- and livelihoods-based approaches are complementary, it is important to recognize that they also have a high level of commonality, in terms of their:

- cross-sectoral content,
- people-centred measures and outcomes,
- dynamic and process-oriented analyses and approaches,
- micro-macro linkages, and
- context-specific actions.

**Food security and livelihoods linkages.** Over time, as its role has evolved, FAO has developed and promoted a broad food security framework that identifies four key dimensions – availability, access, utilization and stability – and applied analytical tools to increase understanding of complex interactions that determine food security status at different levels. These tools can be used to address food security problems and identify opportunities, support policy and programme formulation and targeted action, while also measuring food security outcomes. By embracing the livelihoods approach, FAO has enhanced its understanding of local contexts and, in turn, has sharpened the focus of its food security initiatives, adding value to its traditional development approaches.

As FAO's food security information and analysis work has expanded from concentrating on national food availability to include household and individual food security, the livelihoods framework has helped refine socio-economic analysis. Disaggregating information by livelihood groups allows for the partial analysis of food security conditions in otherwise heterogeneous population groups and supports the design of more focused planning and actions that address the specific problems, as well as development potentials, of the different population segments.

Livelihoods-based analyses can hence lead to more appropriate and differentiated policies and actions. They not only distinguish between entry points for short- and long-term interventions, but also indicate the likely impacts over time of those interventions on people's lives. Furthermore, they can better inform and guide actions that:

- help ensure immediate access to food in emergency contexts,
- rebuild and enhance resilience to withstand shocks, and
- support longer term development initiatives for hunger and poverty reduction.

In addition, with urban areas increasingly facing food security concerns, FAO has recognized the importance of understanding urban livelihoods and rural-urban dynamics within the overall context of poverty alleviation.

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**Operationalizing a livelihoods approach.** FAO recognizes the added value of supporting and enhancing interdisciplinary work across its technical departments and divisions. Among the mechanisms it uses to increase its interdisciplinary capacity are formal and informal working groups that have a specific focus on livelihoods issues. Among others, the DFID-funded Livelihoods Support Programme (LSP) has helped raise awareness of the impact of livelihoods work and strengthened FAO's capacity to support livelihoods approaches across institutional boundaries through developing methods and providing experience in team building, planning, budgeting and management across the Organization.

FAO emergency relief and rehabilitation initiatives also incorporate livelihoods approaches extensively in the assessment, planning and implementation of field activities. FAO's Rapid Livelihood Assessment Guidelines were used successfully following major earthquakes in Pakistan (2005) and Indonesia (2006) to guide interagency efforts in analysing the impact of the crises on critical livelihood assets and to identify programme and policy options for building back those assets and local resilience.

Because of their holistic perspective, livelihood approaches also have been employed effectively in FAO's longer-term development projects that address cross-cutting issues such as nutrition, gender, HIV/AIDS, biodiversity and the environment. Traditional sectoral projects, particularly those working at local levels, have utilized the livelihoods approach to contribute to specific poverty reduction and food security objectives. FAO Representations also utilize the livelihoods framework for planning, managing and assessing FAO's country assistance programmes.

The livelihood framework also helps foster partnerships among different actors, including the range of governmental institutions that participate in development activities, a process that is increasingly important within the "One UN" initiative.

#### **The livelihoods approach adds value**

- Expands from a narrow focus on agriculture towards a range of interventions that support diversified agricultural and non-agricultural livelihoods strategies.
- Reflects the diverse and complex realities faced by poor people in specific contexts and allows that development priorities often differ from location to location.
- Builds interventions based on people's existing capabilities and assets, rather than relying on external expertise and inputs.
- Works with and through local organizations in order to reinforce self-help capacity and sustainability.
- Addresses and strengthens micro-meso-macro linkages, institutions and services.
- Pays particular attention to improving access of the poor to resources and markets.
- Gives priority attention to the sustainability of livelihoods, with less emphasis on short-term outcomes.

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Food and Agriculture  
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Support Programme  
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**Consolidating food security and livelihood linkages.** The organizing set of principles of the livelihoods approach has enabled FAO to address both content and process issues, to design activities in a more flexible and demand-driven manner, and make better use of its wealth of knowledge and information. Efforts to increase understanding and build upon the natural links between people's livelihoods and their food security status acknowledges recognition of the complementarities and potential benefits to FAO, its partners and its member states.

A livelihoods approach applied to FAO's food security work has functioned well in both development and emergency contexts and has added value to the food security paradigm.

### **FAO's Corporate strategy recognizes food security and livelihood linkages**

The very first corporate strategy put forward in the Strategic Framework for FAO 2000-2015, "Contributing to the eradication of food insecurity and rural poverty" – states FAO's aim of ensuring "sustainable rural livelihoods and more equitable access to resources".