

FOOD SECURITY ISSUES

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Summary

This article presents an overview of the basic framework on food security issues with a brief background on what is meant by food security, who the food insecure are, where they are found, the extent of their food insecurity, and the factors that explain why there is widespread hunger and poverty.

These provide the context to the discussion on the ethical dimensions on food security, particularly on food as a basic human right. Portions of commitments and plans of action to ensure food and nutritional security have been cited from the various declarations and conventions arising from the many world conferences that took place in the past decades of the twentieth century. These include the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the Rights of the Child, declarations from the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, the 1995 Copenhagen Social Summit, the 1995 Beijing Women's Conference, the 1995 Cairo Population Conference, and the 1996 Rome World Food Summit.

Aside from food as a human right, three other ethical concerns involving property rights, biotechnology, and food aid are discussed.

1. The World Food Situation Today

The world's human population is expected to exceed eight billion by 2030 and some 10–11 billion by about 2050, which is twice the level at the end of the twentieth century. With populations growing quite rapidly during this period, estimates show that food production must be doubled to meet minimum consumption requirements. Can the world's current human population and succeeding generations produce enough food to survive? It is debatable whether the world has reached its limits in food production capacity, particularly in the area of cereal production, which is the bulk of the world's food consumption.

Concerns are being raised that global food production remained generally stagnant in the 1990s and that there is a trend of world grain prices moving upwards, with world consumption regularly exceeding production. For example, with aquatic resources, 70% of the world's fish stocks are being harvested near or beyond what is sustainable. The forests that provide livelihoods for many rural people, especially the indigenous, have been badly depleted to the point that most of the planet's tropical rainforests have disappeared. The loss of much of the world's forest cover has caused massive erosion and degradation leading to worsening floods, etc. Land for agricultural production is shrinking because of rapid urbanization and desertification due to highly intensive chemical inputs in agriculture. Furthermore, while some view biotechnology as a major solution to sustained food production and food supply, many others are worried not only about possible negative effects over the long term on people's health but also about the ethical and environmental implications of tampering with nature.

While the world food situation appears bleak, in fact many contend that the world has been able to produce enough food for everyone and has the capacity to continue to do so in an environmentally sound manner, given certain conditions that go beyond increased food production. The critical issues have as much to do with equity and food distribution as with production (see *Population and Demographic Change*).

2. What Is Food Security?

Food security is defined in many ways. One definition, given by the World Bank in 1986, is access for each individual at all times to the food resources making possible a healthy active life. At the 1996 World Food Summit (WFS), organized by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and held in Rome, individuals were said to be food secure when they had physical and economic access at all times to healthy, nutritious food in sufficient quantity to cover the needs of their daily food intake and food preferences, in order to live a healthy, active life. Another understanding of national food security is when people do not fear not having enough to eat and when the most vulnerable groups, namely women and children in marginal areas, have access to the food they need. Civil society organizations (CSOs), such as those in many developing countries, connect food security with nutritional security that is supported by three pillars: food security, health security, and adequate mother and childcare.

CSOs, particularly nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and people's organizations (POs), further distinguish between food security and food self-sufficiency. Many governments, particularly those in the industrialized countries, would argue that national food security can be assured by obtaining food supplies cheaply through importation

rather than actually producing these at high costs. This would mean buying the food from efficient producers who generally come from the developed nations.

CSOs, on the other hand, consider a country to have food security when it is basically self-sufficient and self-reliant in the production of essential foods to meet the needs of its population, given that it has the capacity to do so, rather than relying primarily on the market to provide an adequate food supply. Several NGOs and POs go even further and advocate food sovereignty, wherein each country has the basic right to determine its own food policy, particularly on such an important issue as food security. These CSOs argue that a high dependence on importation of food leaves countries vulnerable to the vagaries of the world market that bring considerable risk to food-importing countries that often lack the income and foreign exchange necessary to import. CSOs also maintain that the freedom to choose what to produce and consume is being limited in the face of export-oriented agricultural policies, growing trade liberalization, and Westernization of cultures as influenced by media from the industrialized countries.

Food security needs to be considered at different levels:

- Individual: where differences and inequalities within a household can determine individuals' food access (e.g. children, women, the disabled, and the elderly are more vulnerable to food insecurity)
- Household: as the basic unit for consumption, and normally production, of food or resources to acquire food, the household is an essential determinant of food security
- Community/district: problems in distribution, particularly in transport and marketing of food at the community or district level are examples of how food security can be affected at this level
- National: government policies on agricultural production, pricing of products, inputs, trade, fiscal, and monetary policies
- Global: international policies such as trade influence and even externally determine national policies.

Malnutrition and hunger are the most evident expressions of food insecurity. Chronic food insecurity occurs when people are continually hungry as a result of their inability to acquire food. Transitory food insecurity happens when there is a temporary inability of households to obtain sufficient food because of inadequate food production, unstable food prices, natural calamities, etc.

To provide food security, several components are essential. First, there should be adequate food supply at all the levels previously mentioned. This food supply is achieved either through production or through the income and purchasing power of people to buy food. Second, distribution of food (physical and organizational possibilities) must be ensured to enable food and resources to reach people in need of it. The food must be locally and culturally acceptable and of good quality in terms of taste and texture. The quantity of food should be sufficient to meet nutritional and caloric requirements and it should provide all the essential nutrients, including micronutrients, vital to good health. Food should be safe from toxic elements. It is important to note that food security depends not only on overall availability of food but also on what are called "people's entitlements"—the household's real food purchasing power plus its own production.

3. Who Are the Food Insecure?

In the mid 1980s, average diets in many of the poorest countries consisted of 2100 calories a day even if an average of 2700 calories was available per person per day. It is estimated that more than 800 million people or over 13% of the world's population are food insecure and chronically undernourished. Nearly 20% of populations of developing countries suffer from chronic undernutrition. According to the World Food Program, somebody dies of hunger every 3.6 seconds. Nearly 13 million children under the age of five die from hunger and malnutrition annually, either directly or indirectly. There are two billion people worldwide who suffer from anemia; and of the 4.5 billion people in developing countries, one in every five persons has protein deficiency, with 192 million children below the age of five lacking sufficient calorie and protein intake. At the same time, the five richest countries in the world consume some 45% of all meat and fish consumption globally, compared to some 5% for the five poorest countries.

In most developing countries, those who are at greatest risk of being food insecure are the small and marginal farmers, small fishers, indigenous peoples, landless rural workers, tenants, sharecroppers, livestock raisers, refugees, urban poor, and artisans. However, even among these rural and urban poor households, the perennially vulnerable groups are the women, children, elderly, and disabled. Around 70% of malnourished people are estimated to be women.

In many parts of the world, there are those who suffer from seasonal hunger each year, for weeks or even months at a time, as the food from the previous harvest runs out. In the late twentieth century, there were famines that had devastating effects in countries such as Bangladesh, Cambodia, Nigeria, and many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. Civil strife in many countries has also caused massive hunger and food insecurity among large segments of the populations.

4. Where Are the Food Insecure Found?

Hunger and chronic undernourishment are not only found in the developing world but also to some extent even in the developed countries. In the U.S., for example, one out of every five children is hungry. The largest numbers of poor and hungry people live in some 88 countries that are either unable to produce enough food or unable to import food because of a lack of financial resources. These countries are what FAO calls "low-income, food-deficit countries" (LIFDCs). In terms of absolute numbers, the greatest number of poor people are found in Asia, with India having the biggest population living under the poverty line. The largest percentage of poor people, however, lives in Africa, where standards of living have been going down consistently since 1990. Highest poverty levels in the region south of the Sahara are in Yemen and Sudan.

Most of the poor in the world are still located in the countryside or rural areas despite the increased migration of the rural poor to the cities and other urban areas, and agriculture continues to be the source of livelihood for 80% of the population in the world's poorest countries. Rural people, however, have minimal access to resources to improve their livelihood and income, especially for those without land and necessary support services and resources. This situation is particularly true for indigenous peoples,

who have been even more excluded from the benefits of so-called development initiatives or programs, and who often constitute the poorest population groups in many countries.

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Biographical Sketch

Cristina M. Liamzon works as a development consultant on agrarian reform and rural development, food security, civil society organizations (CSOs), participatory development and gender issues. Since 1975, she has had extensive Asian and international nongovernmental organization (NGO) experience in her involvement with several NGOs such as the Asian Cultural Forum on Development (ACFOD), the Center for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Asia (CenDhrra), and the Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ANGOC). From 1983 to 1990 Ms. Liamzon served as the national coordinator of a Philippine NGO network (PhilDhrra), focusing on agrarian reform and rural development (AR/RD) concerns in the Philippines. Since moving to Rome in 1990, she has continued her involvement with ANGOC as its liaison representative to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). Since 1992, she has also worked with international and European NGOs such as the Society for International Development (SID) and the Development Networks and Innovations (IREN) on economic empowerment, sustainable livelihoods, and building the local economy. From 1999, she has also been active in conceptualizing and organizing the Economic Resource Center for Overseas Filipinos (ERCOF) to mobilize migrants' savings for local and national economic development. She has written articles on agrarian reform, CSOs, food security, gender and development, participation, and people's economic empowerment for such agencies as IFAD, IREN, OXFAM-U.K.'s Development in Practice, Bread for the World Institute, and ANGOC. Her academic background includes a bachelor's degree in economics, a master's in rural development planning, and a master's in public administration. She is currently completing her doctoral studies in development economics. Her other interests include tai chi, holistic health and well-being, spirituality, and sustainable development.