



## **Editorial**

# **People not Commodities: The political challenge of food security**

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We conclude volume 44 with a focus on food security and livelihoods. After opening with a look at health and poverty, women's rights and child rights and violence against women, we turn to the most basic issue of body politics – the need to nourish and sustain food security. As with health, child rights and gender violence, it seems almost gratuitous to state that food security and the livelihoods required for food self-sufficiency of an individual and community should be at the core of any development that works towards social justice. Unfortunately, once more, we see that food security, the basic right to livelihood, is not of priority to today's global actors. Food security is rarely perceived as a vital political issue, a 'hot' issue, but marginalized as a concern for the dwindling sources of development aid, a concern for charity not solidarity, not the real battle.

The message in this issue is loud and clear. Food security and livelihoods is a political issue, and part of a vital battle for thousands of millions of people today. It is an issue that, like health, like rights and like gender security, is critical for strategies of social and economic transformation of poor communities around the world. And again as with the other issues in this volume, it is a concern that is being taken up strongly by civil society, often in defiance of the more technical traditional approaches. In their approach, food security and livelihoods is deeply embedded in the complex array of political, economic and institutional concerns of today's globalized development arenas.

This journal issue comes at a particular historical moment of the international food security debate – with the upcoming 'World Food Summit, five years later' (commonly known as the WFS/fyl) and the increasing calls from civil society to link commitments of this forum to the international trends and deliberations on trade, intellectual property rights, gender, environment and

debt. The issue also comes at a turning point in the food security work of the Society for International Development (SID) with the completion of the Food Security and Sustainable Livelihoods initiative in 28 countries of the South. In this respect, the journal issue illustrates some of the messages emerging from the SID experience in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Central and Latin America – as well as discussing the main issues encountered in the food security international advocacy debate.

The starting point for this issue is that food security is about people, not commodities, and about access and entitlements rather than availability. The journal looks at food security as questions of political, social and economic democratization. It identifies a major policy challenge in the search for food security: the need to foster people's empowerment. The challenge requires good economic policy and technical knowledge along with fine-tuned analysis and strategies to bring in gender equality, social equity and environmental sustainability. Today's successful and innovative approaches to food security put people at centre stage with a participatory design of food security policies and initiatives. The holistic and assets-based sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA) leads the way in this field, building on a complex understanding of people's livelihoods and their interaction with institutions. Mainstreaming gender, vulnerability analysis, environmental assessment and poverty reduction efforts are all critical components to the SLA approach. The focus is on people's capacity to envision a desirable future and have the possibility of pursuing it.

Other perspectives complement and enrich this people-centred approach to food security. One approach couples the request for food sovereignty of people and nations with the need for social equity as a precondition for food security. Ecotechnology, the articulation of farmers' rights and the struggle for biodiversity and biosafety argue for the effective protection of local agricultural and knowledge systems, people's livelihoods and food security overriding trade agreements and policies. Others advocate social mobilization and community participation in order to establish closer links between relief and development work, and highlight the possible role of food aid in empowering the poor.

The journal points to a number of local innovations against hunger at the local level as the core of the SLA. A common entry point to food security at the community level is through women's role as the farmers, the providers and carers of family and community. If food security is to be achieved then the gender dimension needs to be understood. A particular need is to recognize women's multiple roles in their productive and reproductive capacity as actors and potential agents of change in addition to the problems posed by inequitable gender relations. Other important local innovations encompass activities for rehabilitation of the environmental setting, regeneration of the local economy, along with an animation exercise that encourages the celebration of community life and vision. It is here where many articles underscore the importance of social capital – the networking, partnership and trust across communities and civil society as well as between civil society and institutions. The articles in the journal highlight how social mobilization around food security issues can be a rallying flag for democratization at the local and national level.

What, then, is the role of international solidarity mechanisms for food security? General failure in delivering the promised outcomes is largely acknowledged by the main actors themselves, national governments and inter-governmental agencies. In this journal issue there is an exchange of opinions on how the role, structure and interaction of international food security gatherings with local initiatives, national policy design and international trends could be negotiated at the institutional level with civil society. The journal issue has greatly benefited from the views of the civil society organizations, members of country official delegations to the Committee on World Food Security (CFS), and representatives of UN agencies on the possibility of such negotiation. It is in this upfront exchange that we arrive at the heart of food security as a political issue in all its dimensions. In the discussion around the lead article by Franck Amalric, who has piloted SID's work on food security, we see how hard it is to generate the necessary political will to confront the sheer scale of world hunger.

We hope that this journal issue will help to

revitalize the debate on food security as one of vital political concern. This issue, together with SID's report 'From Aid to Community Empowerment: Food Security as a Political Project', will be central

to SID's contribution to the WFS/fyl, where SID and its civil society and UN partners plan to bring the messages of the journal.

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