



Sustainable Food Security: Moving beyond business as usual

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ABSTRACT Per Pinstруп-Andersen identifies the key driving forces that will influence the prospects for sustainable food security in coming years and proposes a set of high priority policy actions with a three-pronged approach: pro-poor economic growth, empowerment of the poor, and effective provision of public goods.

KEYWORDS hunger; political will; poverty; September 11th; World Food Summit

Introduction

The brutal terrorist attacks on September 11th call for two parallel campaigns. First, finding and eliminating organizations that sponsor terrorism; and second, undertaking and sustaining a campaign to eliminate poverty, hunger, malnutrition, and associated human misery and hopelessness. Widespread human misery and unequal material well-being provide a foundation and a perceived justification for terrorism, conflict, and a number of other actions destabilizing nations and the world. To illustrate the existing inequality of income, consider that the income of the richest one percent of the world's population is equivalent to the income of the poorest 57 percent. Moreover, the relative income distribution is getting worse. In 1960, average per capita incomes in the industrialized nations were nine times those in sub-Saharan Africa. Today, they are 18 times higher. Poverty, hunger, and malnutrition are widespread. Twenty percent of the world's population, equivalent to 1.2 billion people, earn less than a dollar a day. Eight hundred million people are food insecure and 166 million preschool children suffer from calorie/protein malnutrition. Many more suffer from micronutrient deficiencies. Between five and seven million preschool children die from nutrition-related illnesses every year. No society, national or international, will be stable when so many have so little, and a few have so much. Thus, whether from a humanitarian or an international stability point of view, high priority must be given to efforts to eliminate poverty, hunger, malnutrition, and related human misery.

While considerable progress has been made during the last three decades, food security, malnutrition, and unsustainable use of natural resources remain major problems, particularly in many developing countries of sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. International meetings have repeatedly issued official declarations decrying this situation as unacceptable and have agreed on action that would achieve measurable goals. Yet, available evidence indicates that few of these goals have been achieved and that, with business as usual, hundreds of millions of people will remain food insecure, millions of children will die each year from malnutrition, and environmental degradation will continue unchecked.

Past, current and future food security

The progress towards food security and good nutrition for all during the last 30 years has been genuine. It is worth remembering that in the late 1960s and early 1970s, much of Asia was written off as a 'hopeless basket case'. There were fears that the world faced a Malthusian nightmare of too many people and not enough food. It is also worth remembering that in the mid-1970s, the international community was willing to entertain large visions grounded in social justice, of how the future could and should look. The 1974 World Food Conference in Rome pledged that 'Within a decade no child will go to bed hungry, no family will fear for its next day's bread, and no human being's future capabilities will be stunted by malnutrition'. Then, as now, the political will and action to back such a vision remains the missing element.

As we move into the 21st century, South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa form the centre of gravity of food insecurity and malnutrition. These two regions are home to three-fifths of all food-insecure people and to three-quarters of the malnourished children. It is abundantly clear that, with business as usual, there is no possibility of achieving sustainable food security for all by 2020. International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) projections suggest that in the most likely scenario, the number of malnourished preschool children could decline

by about 20 percent during the next 20 years (Smith and Haddad, 2001). This means that, by 2020, as many as 130 million children would be afflicted by malnutrition. They will either die prematurely or will continue to fail to reach their full human potential and dignity.

The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) believes that the number of food-insecure people could decline from the current 800 million to 576 million people by 2015 (FAO, 2001). While this would be a significant improvement, it would not meet the goal set at the 1996 World Food Summit of halving the number to 400 million by 2015. The Summit target is now expected to be reached 15 years later, in 2030. However, excluding China, the trend in the number of food-insecure people in the world increased during the 1990s. If that trend is extrapolated to 2015, the number of food-insecure people in the world, excluding China, will increase by 20 percent over the number in the early 1990s. According to the FAO, four years after the World Food Summit virtually none of the 91 countries and nine international organizations that prepared follow-up reports had anything concrete to offer about progress on meeting these commitments.

Driving forces

There are many factors that will influence the prospects for sustainable food security in coming years. Nine sets of driving forces believed to be of global importance are identified here.

Accelerating globalization, including further trade liberalization

Globalization offers developing countries significant new opportunities for broad-based economic growth and poverty alleviation, but it also carries significant risks. There are five major pathways by which globalization may affect food consumption and nutrition:

- trade flows generate rural income, increase foreign exchange through agricultural exports, and alter prices in domestic markets. These changes in turn affect dietary patterns and food production composition;

- financial flows affect foreign exchange rates which ultimately affect the real incomes of farmers and households, which in turn affect a country's capacity to buy food imports;
- the major advances in technology, transport systems, and other new technologies, such as genomic and molecular breeding, transform the traditional organization of production and marketing, facilitate agricultural and rural development, and enable a more micronutrient-rich diet to be achieved;
- improved access to information and easier communications allow people to find out about new nutrition initiatives, help determine the latest thinking on existing nutrition problems, provide a forum for debate on nutritional issues and help map food production and malnutrition by country and region within country; and
- the increasing integration of labour markets implies opportunities for non-farm income, promising new avenues for exports and non-farm work. Continued protection of domestic agriculture and increasing food safety concerns in industrialized countries may limit access to their markets by developing countries. The most critical issue is how globalization can be guided to benefit low-income people, particularly their food and nutrition situation as well as the impact on natural resources. Without appropriate accompanying policies and institutions at both the national and international levels, globalization may either bypass or harm many poor people in developing countries.

Sweeping technological changes

New technological advances in molecular biology and information and communications offer potential benefits for poor people that may advance food security and improve the sustainability of natural resource management. However, there are serious concerns over whether poor and food-insecure people will have access to these technologies, many of which currently are focused primarily on non-poor people in industrialized countries. Rapid changes in the financing, management and organization of agricultural research, including widespread patenting of living organisms, may require new policy interventions to further

enhance the benefits obtainable by low-income people. Without such changes in policies and institutions, the current and expected future technological revolutions may leave the poor and food insecure further behind.

Degradation of natural resources and increasing water scarcity

Degradation of natural resources is rampant in many resource-poor areas of developing countries, particularly those areas with fragile soils, irregular rainfall, relatively high population concentration, and stagnant productivity in agriculture. Natural resource degradation is also occurring in agricultural areas exposed to misuse of modern farming inputs. While natural resource degradation often is a consequence of poverty, it also contributes to poverty. Such a downward spiral is found in many locations where low-income people reside. Water scarcity is emerging as the most constraining factor for food security in many regions in the future. Failure to effectively deal with the natural resource issue in the quest to achieve food security for all will not result in sustainable solutions.

Emerging and re-emerging health and nutrition crises

The tragic pandemic of HIV/AIDS, the persisting threats from malaria, the re-emergence of tuberculosis, the widespread prevalence of micronutrient deficiencies, and a variety of chronic diseases, caused in part by obesity, compromise food and nutrition security in many developing countries. This global health crisis is impoverishing those affected and contributing to rising health care costs, labour shortages, and declining asset bases. It is not only causing loss of human lives but also of opportunities. Achieving a food-secure world for all calls for a healthy population.

Rapid urbanization

Most of the population increase in coming years will occur in cities and towns of developing countries; by 2020, a majority of the developing world's population will live in urban areas. This will present new challenges to provide employment, education, health care, and food. While current actions must continue to focus on the rural areas where the

majority of the poor and food insecure reside, future policy actions must pay increasing attention to the growing poverty and food insecurity in urban areas.

Rapidly changing structure of farming

A number of factors such as the aging of the farm population, the feminization of agriculture, the labour shortages and depleting asset bases resulting from the HIV/AIDS crises, and the decreasing cost of capital relative to labour are conspiring to result in rapid changes in the structure of farming in many developing countries. These rapidly emerging factors call for new and innovative approaches to agricultural policy and rural institutions. Small-scale family farms, which traditionally have been considered the backbone of much of developing-country agriculture, are under threat as labour scarcity caused by out-migration and disease, becomes more pronounced, while globalization and domestic investment in infrastructure improve markets and make capital available for larger production units. The future of small-scale farming is increasingly uncertain.

Continued conflict

Violent conflicts continue to cause severe human misery in a large number of developing countries. The impacts on food security, nutrition, and natural resource management are severe. While humanitarian assistance may be effective in providing food and shelter for the many millions of refugees and displaced persons, policy action is needed to deal with the underlying causes and the resulting impact on the people in war-torn and neighbouring areas. Achieving sustainable food security for all is unlikely to be possible in the midst of conflict.

Climate change

Future policy action to achieve the 2020 Vision must incorporate the likely consequences of the ongoing climatic change and associated fluctuations in weather patterns. Policies and institutions will be needed to counter or compensate for negative effects. While agriculture may contribute to or reduce the increasing concentration of carbon dioxide (CO₂) in the air, the primary responsibility of future agricultural policies will be to find ways to

accommodate food, agriculture, and natural resources as the climatic change continues.

Changing roles and responsibilities of key actors

The diminished and changing role of national governments in many developing countries, which has been under way over the last couple of decades, is likely to continue into the future. Given the importance of public goods, what is the most appropriate role of national governments in efforts to achieve the 2020 Vision? Local governments along with the private sector and civil society, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), are taking on an increasing number of responsibilities for activities previously undertaken by national governments. Local communities, frequently with the help of community-based non-governmental organizations, are demanding an increasing say in policies and programmes that impinge on them. At the global level, transnational corporations and broad coalitions of civil society organizations are taking on increasingly prominent roles in policy debates and in actual national and international policy formulation. New emphasis on exposing corruption and other bad governance where it occurs is likely to contribute to the ongoing changes in the roles and responsibilities of the various actors.

Getting the priorities right

Achieving the 2020 Vision of sustainable food security for all will depend on policy action and institutions that address the causes of food insecurity, malnutrition, and unsustainable management of natural resources within the context of the driving forces, including those mentioned above. The specific policies that will be most appropriate will vary according to local and national circumstances.

While new policy action is also needed in industrialized countries where food insecurity, malnutrition, and unsustainable use of natural resources are significant problems, this article addresses these problems only as they apply to developing countries.

Rapid pro-poor economic growth together with

empowerment of the poor and effective provision of public goods will be the backbones of any successful attempt to achieve sustainable food security for all. Policies and institutions should be designed and implemented to guide economic growth and public goods creation for the benefit of low-income people, and the poor must be empowered through human resource development, access to productive resources, and participatory political systems. While policies and institutional changes must be tailored by each country, eight broad areas of policy action are likely to be relevant, both globally and for most developing countries.

Investing in human resources

Policies and institutional change should focus on improving access to health care, clean water, safe sanitation, and childcare. Efforts should be made to fight widespread micronutrient malnutrition, and reduce food contamination and food-borne illnesses. Universal primary education for girls and boys is of critical importance. Policies and behavioural changes should be pursued to achieve gender equity in human resource development, access to resources and decision-making.

Family planning

Closely associated with investments in human resources, it is important that families be given access to family planning in ways compatible with their desires and cultures. Efforts should be made to help families attain the desired number of children within the context in which they live.

Improving access to productive resources and remunerative employment

The rural poor must have secure access to land and/or other productive resources and employment. Policies and institutions are needed to facilitate access by poor rural families to inputs and appropriate technologies as well as non-farm rural employment. Promotion of small-scale rural enterprises providing goods and services for farm families as well as rural-based agro-industries that create employment and add value to agricultural produce should be pursued. Access to credit and savings institutions is of critical importance. Also,

rapidly increasing urban poverty requires new policy attention to enhance access to income-earning opportunities and to provide the necessary public goods in urban areas. Policies and institutions should facilitate effective contributions by civil society, including farmers associations and local and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs). National policies and institutions should complement and support community action, and include low-income people as active participants rather than passive recipients. Women should be empowered to gain access to resources and decision-making processes, and social and cultural institutions and practices that prevent women from reaching their full potential should be reformed.

Improving markets, infrastructure and institutions

Benefits from improved human resources and access to productive resources will be captured by poor people only if they have access to well-functioning markets for outputs, inputs, consumption goods, capital and employment. It is particularly important that governments assure that markets are not biased against small farmers, less-favoured areas, or poor consumers. Efforts to develop private competitive markets serving food-insecure people must include competent public administration for contract enforcement, grading and quality control standards, market conduct and investments, safety net programmes, public health and food safety, appropriate infrastructure such as roads, electrification, and storage facilities, and other policies and institutions. Explicit and implicit capital subsidies as well as infrastructure investments biased against small farmers should be eliminated.

Expanding appropriate research, knowledge and technology

Technological developments in the biological sciences, energy, information and communications offer new opportunities that could benefit poor people and their food security. Public investment in research and technology is needed to develop the kind of technology needed by low-income producers and consumers, and to help them gain access to such technology. Pro-poor agricultural research

must exploit all appropriate scientific tools and methods, and provide low-income farmers and consumers with choices. Farmers and consumers should be fully informed about their options and they should be participants in setting priorities for research. Every effort should be made to ensure that promising technological developments do not bypass poor people. Opportunities for using modern information and communications technology, along with non-traditional energy sources, should be fully exploited for the benefit of low-income people.

Improving natural resource management

Policies and institutions should be put in place to break the vicious downward spiral of poverty, low agricultural productivity and environmental degradation. Less-favoured areas, i.e. areas with irregular rainfall, fragile soils and low agricultural potential, are particularly susceptible to natural resource degradation. Public investment in agricultural research and development, as well as rural infrastructure, education, and primary health care, are urgently needed for those areas. Appropriate property rights and collective action are important components of sustainable natural resource management. Policies and institutions are needed to facilitate and support community action and to enforce appropriate property rights.

Unless properly managed, fresh water is likely to emerge as the key constraint to assuring sustainable food security in the future. Policy reforms are needed to provide secure water rights for individual users or group of users. Such reforms may include the development of tradable water rights or user associations. Reducing or eliminating explicit or implicit water subsidies can also improve efficiency of use.

Decreasing soil fertility is a major productivity and environmental problem in many developing countries. Policies and institutions are needed to help farmers replenish the plant nutrients removed from the soil through better utilization of available organic material, better production practices and use of chemical fertilizers. Proper attention will need to be paid to the new challenges posed by increasing CO₂ concentration, higher temperature,

changed rainfall patterns, and more severe weather fluctuations.

Good governance

Good governance, including the rule of law, transparency, lack of corruption, conflict prevention and resolution, sound public administration and respect and protection for human rights, is of critical importance to assure sustainable food security. While the role of the state has changed markedly in many developing countries during the last 10 to 20 years, national governments are still the most appropriate and frequently the only major supplier of essential public goods. Where national governments fail to take appropriate action, food security fails. Hunger persists largely because of governance and policy failure at the national level.

Sound national and international trade and macroeconomic policies

As globalization proceeds, new international institutions will be needed to assure that low-income people and low-income countries benefit. Industrialized countries should accelerate access by developing countries to their markets, and the WTO should work closely with civil society and national governments to identify and remove factors that are adverse to poor people, including price distortions, lack of competition in international trade, intellectual property rights regimes adverse to poor people, barriers to access to appropriate technology by developing countries, hurdles to labour movement across borders, and import barriers by industrialized countries to goods and services, including agricultural commodities and processed products, which generate employment and income among poor people in developing countries. Development assistance should be increased to at least the level of 0.7 percent of gross national product of donor countries, as agreed upon previously. Such development assistance should be targeted on the basis of needs and it should be focused on assisting developing countries in promoting broad-based agricultural and rural development, basic education, health services, and other public goods needed to assure sustainable food security for all. Ongoing negotiations for debt

relief for low-income developing countries should be accelerated.

Although national governments bear the primary responsibility for addressing food insecurity and nutrition, the action should be undertaken in partnership with civil society as represented by local community-based groups and NGOs. International organizations, transnational private corporations, and civil society can all play important roles in assisting low-income people, community organizations, and national governments in achieving the 2020 Vision, particularly through partnerships.

Conclusion

With business as usual, more than 500 million people are likely to be food insecure by 2020, more

than 130 million pre-school children would be malnourished, and natural resource degradation will persist. Such a scenario is unethical, immoral, and bad economics. It also supports armed conflict, disease risks, terrorism, large numbers of refugees and other aspects of national and international instability. With accelerated action and appropriate changes in policies and institutions, major progress can be made towards sustainable food security for all by 2020. The costs of making significant progress towards achieving the 2020 Vision are relatively minor. The question is whether the political will exists for assigning it the priority it rightly deserves.

Note

1 This paper is an abridged version of the 3rd Mansholt Lecture on 'Achieving Sustainable Food Security For All: Required Policy Action', given at Wageningen, 14 November 2001. The full text can

be obtained at the Mansholt Secretariat.

References

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