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SOPHIA MURPHY

**Food Security: What Is It and How Can Governments and Communities Achieve It?**<sup>1</sup>

We pledge our political will and our common and national commitment to achieving food security for all and to an ongoing effort to eradicate hunger in all countries, with an immediate view to reducing the number of undernourished people to half their present level no later than 2015.

*Declaration by Governments at the 1996 World Food Summit*

## **1. Introduction**

Food security is a state of being. Like literacy or good health, food security is a state that everyone wants to enjoy. Governments have decreed that every person has an inalienable right to food (see <http://www.righthtofood.org> on this right as enshrined in the UN body of human rights law). The fundamental purpose of economic activity is to ensure adequate access for oneself and one's family to food. The World Trade Organization (WTO) Agreement on Agriculture acknowledges the legitimacy of food security concerns. South Africa, Brazil and Norway have all enshrined the right to food in law.

If food security ultimately requires the realization of the right to food, the question arises *how* best to get there. It is useful to separate out the end goal – food security – from the strategies that governments and communities employ to realize the goal. Different definitions of food security are associated with different ways of realizing the objective. For example, many trade negotiators treat food security as synonymous with a country's access to food imports. In contrast, a village health worker might say food security is realized when women's nutritional status improves. These two very different measures of food security result in quite different strategies for achieving food security and in different assessments of when food security is attained.

Over time, definitions of food security have moved from a focus on supply (is there enough food available? Will there be enough tomorrow?), to include distribution (is the food where it needs to be? can it get there?) and access (can people afford to buy the food available?). Food security researchers now also look at food security within households (do women have as much access to food as the men they live with? How do the elderly fare?). Definitions of food security have also started to look at food quality. People need a wide range of vitamins and minerals to ensure proper physical and mental development; simple calories are not enough.

Food insecurity does not necessarily result in deaths from hunger. However, repeated exposure to hunger undermines health. Hunger compromises the body's ability to fight disease, compromises foetal development and stunts the physical and mental development of children. In turn, these problems reduce people's capacity to secure a livelihood. Persistent uncertainty about where and how to get enough food diverts energy and resources from longer-term investments that could improve economic wellbeing. Food insecurity encourages people to make risk-averse choices at the expense of investments that would allow much greater possible long-term returns.

## **2. Food Security: Three Core Elements**

### **2.1 Supply**

Global food production has mostly kept up with demand over the past century. The application of new technologies to agriculture, including mechanized vehicles to till, plant and harvest crops; improved seed and breeding stock; and the use of herbicides, pesticides and inorganic fertilizers, has vastly increased productivity. At the same time, one third or more of agricultural land used to be dedicated to growing fuel or feed for draught animals. With the shift to reliance on oil, much of that land is now available to grow food for humans instead (Ray 2004).

However, an adequate global supply of food does not necessarily translate into food security. The experience of persistent hunger amid overwhelming plenty in the United States shows that food security is about more than just supply. The U.S. Department of Agriculture reports that some eleven percent of U.S. households (and 18 percent of U.S. children) lack access to adequate food at some point in the year (Nord/Andrews/Carlson 2003). Yet, even after exports, the domestic supply of food in the United States could feed everyone in the country twice over (Nestle 2002).

At the same time as the world has seen a dramatic increase in production levels, food dependency in developing countries has grown. Parts of Latin Ame-

rica and much of Sub-Saharan Africa, both historically net food exporters, are now net food importers (FAOSTAT 2004). Food production per capita in Africa is now 10 percent lower than it was in 1960 (in Asia, it is 76 percent higher; in Latin America as a whole, 28 percent higher) (DFID/Pretty 2004).

Many developing countries need both to increase their domestic food production and to increase their imports to meet the demands of a growing population. In other words, some food demand will often have to be met through imports. In these cases, however, the government has to be sure imports complement an expansion of domestic production rather than displace it.

## **2.2 Distribution**

Distribution depends on how markets function (is pricing transparent?), transport infrastructure (do roads and railways serve remote areas year-round?), relative purchasing power and the source and nature of the supply.

International trade law and the technologies that underpin globalisation, such as satellite communications and the Internet, shape distribution networks in important ways. This extends from the global marketing of McDonald's (and the increased demand for beef that results), to the tariff structures that make it easier for Ghana to export raw cocoa than chocolate, to the explosion in demand for fresh vegetables, year round, in European and North American supermarkets, much of which is met by developing country producers (Lang/Heasman 2004; Lindland 1997).

Food storage and distribution for global trade is capital-intensive and complicated, which restricts the field to a small number of countries and companies. Developing-country firms face formidable barriers to entry in global market. At the same time, the relatively few companies that dominate the global food system are not interested in poor countries and their markets because they do not offer much profit.

The experience of a number of African countries that have disbanded their government-run agricultural commodity marketing boards over the past twenty years or so illustrate the problem: although the boards were often inefficient, and sometimes corrupt and oppressive, they also serviced the country as a whole, including remote regions. With the boards gone, producers far from the urban centres find themselves with a much smaller (and poorer) market, unable to pay to get their produce to the larger centres and unable to interest a private sector intermediary to help.

## **2.3 Access**

Food security is ultimately about individuals, families and communities, not about regional or national aggregates. Only rarely does a whole country face hunger or famine. Rather, when food is in short supply, those with greater purchasing power get food while those with less go hungry.

Whether in Canada or Chad, people mostly go hungry because they live in poverty. There is food in the market but they cannot afford to buy it. Access is about a person's relative position in the economic or social order. If one sector of the population starts to command higher wages, their ability to buy food in the local market improves. Other sectors of the population may then find themselves unable to afford food because of the resulting upward pressure on prices. In the long run, this price rise will normally fuel an increase in production. However, in the short run, people may die of hunger (Drèze/Sen 1989; Drèze/Sen 1990). To monitor food security, it is essential to track how the costs and benefits from a change in economic circumstances are distributed across a population.

Amartya Sen uses the notion of entitlements to explain the complexity of an individual's access to food. Entitlements encompass two dimensions: endowment and exchange. A person's endowment is determined at birth: male or female, a rich or poor family, the ability to run marathons or a gift for mathematics. An individual's endowment, which can be enhanced by education, healthcare and other services, has an exchange value. A runner may earn millions or nothing, depending on where he or she lives. A woman with a university degree may be penniless if her culture does not allow her to work. Governments are responsible to help people make the most of their endowments and exchanges, for example by outlawing fraud and providing educational opportunities to all.

## **3. Achieving Food Security: Four Approaches**

### **3.1 Food Self-Sufficiency**

It was once commonplace to think that food security was best met entirely by domestic food production. Many countries dedicated themselves to meeting their food needs from within their borders. Publicly maintained stocks of food were routine insurance against possible shortfalls in supply. Food security was defined as having the wherewithal to feed people without recourse to imports. Increasingly, however, the effort to ensure national food self-sufficiency has come to be seen as unnecessarily expensive and even risky.

There are a number of reasons for this shift. First, some countries have become the victims of their own success. The Common Agricultural Policy

(CAP) of the E.U. was designed to rebuild production in the original members of the European Economic Community after the devastation of World War II. The programme was an enormous success. However, the CAP failed to provide a mechanism to cope with over-supply. The authors of the CAP did not foresee the political difficulties inherent in removing production incentives when the need to expand production ended.

Second, some countries are rich in valuable resources, such as oil, or have a strong basis for employment and economic growth in services or other sectors. Such countries can afford food imports and are better placed to import food than to allocate economic resources to domestic production.

Third, self-sufficiency is an unrealistic, even impossible, goal for many countries. Some countries – islands such as Cape Verde or city-states such as Singapore – lack the necessary natural resource base to grow all the food they need. Some countries are the result of political histories that did not respect the food production and exchange patterns that had built up over centuries. The borders of Sub-Saharan Africa have more to do with the balance of power among colonizing European powers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries than with the historic production and trading patterns of the sub-continent.

Fourth, since the 1980s, there has been an important shift in international economic theory and practice. The dominant theory now favours market-based mechanisms of exchange. Much of the discussion of international trade today is premised on the notion of comparative advantage. In this view, international trade is the best tool to ensure efficient distribution of goods, allowing the lowest-cost producer to set world prices (Jackson 2000). This theory maintains that market barriers (such as tariffs) are impediments to the maximization of welfare.

This shift in economic thinking, together with the technological developments that underpin globalization, has eroded the support for self-sufficient food security strategies. Today, most governments believe trade should play a role in ensuring an adequate national food supply.

All the same, only about ten percent of food ever crosses an international border, making domestic production a vital element of food security in virtually all countries. Moreover, for all but the world's wealthiest countries, agriculture plays a vital role in employment, accounting for anywhere from 20 to 90 percent of jobs. Agriculture is also a vital safety net in economic downturns. During times of national crisis – the former Soviet Republics after the collapse of the U.S.S.R., Indonesia during the Asian financial crisis of 1998, or Nicaragua after Hurricane Mitch in 1999 – many people return to the land to eke out a living until the economy improves.

### 3.2 Trade Liberalisation

Many governments extol the virtues of liberalized global trade as a way to food security. In trade circles, food security is commonly defined as opening borders to global supplies. Distribution is sometimes an issue (open borders can facilitate the movement of food to where it is needed) but the question of access is not usually discussed.

Securing food from international markets offers important benefits to countries, including the possibility of cheaper, more varied food. Trade is an effective way to stabilize supplies when domestic supplies fall short. Bangladesh, for example, saw rice imports increase when floods destroyed about ten percent of the annual rice crop in 1998. These imports were only possible because the government had liberalised its trade policies shortly before, allowing the private sector to respond to demand (Murshid 2001; FAO 2003b).

However, trade liberalization can also hurt food security. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has documented a number of country experiences where liberalization has been negative. Too often, developing country producers face rising input prices, as governments cease to subsidize their import and distribution. At the same time, rising food imports lower prices on domestic markets. This hurts producers, yet consumers do not always benefit from the cheaper food. This is particularly true in rural areas, where the economy depends on a strong farm sector. When local farm prices are depressed, many rural workers lose income, potentially outweighing any advantage from cheaper food.

It is hard to isolate trade effects on the economy from other factors. Attempts to assess the impact of the WTO Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) on food security have proved difficult for this reason. Nonetheless, multilateral trade rules have clear and direct effects on food security (Diaz-Bonilla et al. 2000; FAO 2001, 2003a).

First, the AoA limits the tools governments may use in their domestic agricultural policy. The AoA prescribes how much money governments can spend on what kinds of programmes, both for farmers and the wider agricultural sector. Price support measures for farmers are prohibited (although countries with such policies have been given time to phase them out). Production-limiting programs are allowed for now, but are set for reduction in the revised AoA now being negotiated.

Second, trade liberalisation affects a country's fiscal position, its competition and investment challenges, its capacity to service external debt, the relative cost of imports and exports, and more. Each of these factors, in turn, affects wages, purchasing power, and employment levels – all factors that are central to determining access to adequate food (FAO forthcoming 2005).

Third, WTO members have bound their agricultural tariffs (they can lower but not raise them). WTO rules also prohibit many non-tariff market barriers. While measures to protect borders are not always efficient, they can help food security objectives by enabling governments to stabilize food prices and supply. The E.U., the U.S. and many others have at different times relied on market barriers to secure and stabilize domestic food supplies. Other countries (including early 20<sup>th</sup> century Germany, and Korea and Taiwan in the 1950s) exploited a protected agricultural sector to expand their manufacturing base. In these countries, the governments successfully encouraged inward investment in the protected agricultural sector while expanding the rural non-farm economy to diversify employment (Koning forthcoming 2005).

The rules of the AoA limit governments' ability to invest in agriculture in this way. The rules prohibit the introduction of new non-tariff border measures; set a ceiling on existing tariffs and some kinds of domestic support; and, cut most tariffs and some subsidies. Policies to manage price or production are prohibited or discouraged.

Obviously, price and production controls change the pattern of investment and trade opportunities. There are costs associated with trade restrictions. However, a number of developing countries need to increase their domestic production, often at the same time as they need to expand their trade. The AoA rules were shaped by a preoccupation with over-production in some OECD countries and the problem this created for the exports of others (in brief, dumped exports from the U.S. and E.U. hurt Australia, Brazil and Argentina in world markets). For most developing countries, however, food security demands make production incentives a necessity. The specific disciplines of the AoA are not that onerous for most countries, developed or developing, but the agreement makes it difficult, if not impossible, for countries to adopt some of the policies that make the most sense for food security. For example, stable domestic crop prices at a remunerative level are essential to support production increases. Such price stability is almost impossible to realize in an open, global market.

### **3.3 Food Sovereignty**

Food sovereignty is a term that was introduced to the multilateral system in the preparations for the 1996 World Food Summit. The phrase was coined by an organization that brings together peasant associations from around the world called "La Via Campesina" (see Via Campesina 2003). Today, a number of NGOs and Church-based organizations have adopted food sovereignty as the basis for their campaigns to end world hunger (Windfuhr/Jonsén 2005).

The NGO/CSO Forum for Food Sovereignty expressed its content in 2002 as follows: “Food Sovereignty is the right of peoples, communities, and countries to define their own agricultural, pastoral, labour, fishing, food and land policies which are ecologically, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances. It includes the true right to food and to produce food, which means that all people have the right to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food and to food-producing resources and the ability to sustain themselves and their societies” (<http://www.foodsovereignty.org/>).

Food sovereignty describes a process whose end goal, in part, is the realization of food security, in the sense elaborated in part two of this paper. However, the call for food sovereignty is also a political response to the use of food security as a justification for greater trade deregulation under bilateral, regional and multilateral trade agreements. For many advocates of food sovereignty, food security has become a tainted concept, too easily manipulated by food companies and their spokespeople to provide an adequate platform for reform. Somewhat confusingly, food sovereignty advocates use the term in preference to food security, although food sovereignty describes a process (how choices about agricultural policy should be made) while the latter describes a state of being. The terms cannot entirely substitute for one another.

During the November 2004 negotiations on agriculture at the WTO, representatives of both the World Bank and International Monetary Fund suggested that attempts to limit agricultural liberalization in developing countries would damage food security. They suggested that the proposal by a number of developing countries to protect crops they judge to be vital for their national food security was misguided.

This assertion contradicts the experience of many farm organizations and NGOs working in developing countries, as described in section two, above. Moreover, international commodity trading, food processing and food retail are characterized by heavily concentrated control. The dominant firms (including Cargill, Nestlé and Wal Mart) exercise huge market power, undermining ideal open market outcomes. Food sovereignty advocates see two visions competing for the future of agriculture: one globalized and dominated by private multinational companies – the current paradigm; the other locally controlled and dominated by diverse family-run farms – their ideal.

Food sovereignty asserts the right of nation states to determine their food policies and to have the policy space they need to put those policies into action. There is one caveat: the food sovereignty of other countries must not be compromised. Food sovereignty does not advocate a return to the national self-sufficiency in food but nor does it support a multilaterally determined trade policy

for food. Rather, governments should decide if and to what extent they want to engage in trade. Most supporters of food sovereignty accept the UN system as an appropriate forum for multilateral negotiations but reject the WTO.

The concept of food sovereignty still has unsolved tensions. Many governments are indifferent to the human right to food. For many peasant organizations around the world, the state is an enemy that blocks land reform initiatives, protects rural elites at the expense of rural labourers and small farmers, and maintains policies that depress agricultural prices to subsidize the cost of food for urban workers. Sometimes the best local food system outcomes depend on external pressure to complement domestic advocacy for change.

Nor is it clear how to reconcile competing visions of food sovereignty among countries. The vast majority of countries in the world depend on food imports to meet a small but important part of their food demand. These countries would be hard-pressed to accept an exporting country's decision to stop exporting. A small number of countries have hugely disproportional impact on global food markets, as major suppliers, producers or buyers. For a long time, China chose self-sufficiency for its food needs. Today, as it opens its economy to the world, it is relying on world markets much more, allowing parts of its agricultural base to wither in the process. The impact of this sovereign Chinese decision has enormous implications for world food markets and global food supplies.

At some point, sovereignty has to be compromised to fulfil everybody's right to food. Other challenges, too, such as the widespread dumping of commodities at less than cost of production prices – a recurrent problem in today's food markets – need a multilateral solution. Similarly, the excessive market power of global food firms requires coordinated multilateral attention. Food sovereignty is still looking for ways to address these challenges.

### **3.4 Multifunctional Agriculture**

Multifunctional agriculture (MFA) describes policies for agriculture that provide incentives for farmers to practice agriculture in a more sustainable way. MFA advocates say agriculture has other functions than the production of agricultural commodities, including the preservation of landscapes, protection of habitats and biodiversity, conservation of rare and threatened ecosystems, maintenance of rural employment, and slowing the rush to urbanization. Examples of agricultural policies that promote multifunctionality include payments for managing water quality, protecting against soil erosion, and protecting habitats for endangered species that live in farmed landscapes. These services are not reflected in market prices and yet have significant public value.

MFA also considers some level of domestic food production to be an essential component of food security, even if domestic producers are not able to grow food as cheaply as their competitors. MFA is another challenge to the notion that market forces alone can adequately meet key objectives, including food security and environmental protection.

MFA is rooted in a critique of the industrial agricultural practices that provide much of the food circulating in global markets and the domestic markets of OECD countries. Four main problem areas are identified: depleted and eroded soils; depleted and polluted water sources; heavy reliance on climate changing energy sources; and, reduced biodiversity.

There are still many debates about whether sustainable agricultural practices can provide enough food, and, if so, which practices to encourage. The world continues to need to expand food production yet the methods that were so spectacularly successful in the post-World War Two context have reached their limit: there is relatively little new land left to bring into cultivation and many of the high-yielding breeds have exhausted their potential (and have created a number of new environmental problems to solve). Also, few of the countries that most need to can afford to invest in the infrastructure they need – such as irrigation – to increase their domestic food supply.

A fuller exploration of MFA has been curtailed by the politics of ongoing negotiations on agriculture at the WTO. Advocates of MFA, particularly Japan, Switzerland, South Korea and Norway, have insisted that changes to their (very protected) agricultural systems are not possible on MFA grounds. This has provoked a strong reaction from the advocates of freer trade in agricultural markets, such as Argentina and Australia, who now block attempts to support MFA in other multilateral negotiations.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Governments have agreed to a comprehensive definition of food security in their agreements on human rights and on food and agriculture policy. Food security is a fundamental human right whose realization depends on collective, public action. The publicly agreed definition of food security provides an important benchmark for the assessment of trade policy, as well as fiscal policy, environmental rules and health directives.

National self-sufficiency for all is not the way to guarantee food security; nor is slavish devotion to free trade. Instead, a pragmatic approach is essential – an approach that accepts second-best solutions may be best, particularly for governments trying to reconcile a number of objectives, touching the eco-

conomic, social, political and cultural simultaneously. The trade system needs to be better integrated into the wider multilateral system, particularly if trade negotiators are serious about respecting food security and environmental constraints. The challenge to localize decision-making, a challenge clearly made by advocates of food sovereignty, is a reminder that the multilateral system must continually prove its worth to remain relevant and supported. Food security depends on strong but flexible trade rules; governments are still searching for the best framework to make that possible.

- 1 Endnote: The article is based on a paper for the International Institute for Sustainable Development, <http://www.iisd.org>

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## Abstracts

Der Beitrag bietet eine Einführung in das Konzept der Nahrungssicherheit und beleuchtet unterschiedliche Strategien diese zu erreichen. Zu Beginn werden die grundlegenden Elemente von Nahrungssicherheit (Angebot, Verteilung und Zugang) beschrieben. Daran anschließend werden verschiedene Strategien analysiert: die Festschreibung des Rechts auf Nahrung als Menschenrecht; das Konzept der Selbstversorgung mit Nahrung aus eigenen (nationalen) Ressourcen, Handelsliberalisierung sowie das jüngste Konzept der Nahrungsmittelsouveränität, bei dem nationale Entscheidungsmacht betont wird, ohne internationalen Handel zu negieren. Als letztes wird der Ansatz vorgestellt, der auf nachhaltige und multifunktionale Landwirtschaft zur Sicherstellung der Nahrungssicherheit fokussiert.

This paper offers a brief introduction to the concept of food security and ways to achieve it. In the first place, the core elements of food security – supply, distribution and access – are reviewed. In the second place, several different strategies that have been tried to realize the objective of food security, are introduced: writing it into international human rights law as the right to food; attempting to provide all of a country’s food entirely from domestic resources for food self-sufficiency; liberalizing and privatizing economic exchanges to give consumers access to an international food supply; and, more recently, either putting the emphasis on national decision-making without closing the possibility of international trade – a strategy known as food sovereignty; or, looking to build an approach to agriculture that focuses on environmental needs and constraints together with meeting food supply needs, referred to as Multifunctional Agriculture. The paper explains the fundamental elements of food security and these various strategies for its realization.

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