

Definition:

Food insecurity exists when people do not have physical, social and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active life. (FAO)

What is Food Security?

Food security encompasses three main factors:

- Food accessibility
- Food availability
- Food utilisation

All of these must be adequately addressed in order for a country to be food secure. For example, a country can produce enough food to feed its population, but will not be food secure if areas do not have access to the food, whether that be financial or physical access. Similarly on a global scale, it is arguable that there is enough food produced to adequately feed everyone. The problem is distribution. There are also often food security disparities within countries, usually between rural and urban populations, as rural are able to grow their own food, while urban populations rely on rural or imported supplies.

In today's economic climate, countries are usually only considered food secure if they are self-sufficient and are able to participate in the global markets. That is, they have enough food to export and enough income in import.

Consequences of Food Insecurity

Food insecurity impacts all aspects of a society, particularly vulnerable groups such as children, women and the elderly. Its direct results include: malnutrition and micronutrient diseases, particularly anaemia and vitamin A deficiency. These affects are particularly detrimental to maternal health, especially if left untreated, and may result in maternal mortality.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation for the UN estimated that at the end of 2008 there were 963 million undernourished people worldwide (FAO 2008). FAO has recently suggested that by the end of 2009 this figure will have risen significantly, to 1.02 billion (FAO 2009). It is essential to note that of this number only 15 million live in developed countries.

Current Food Crisis

The current food crisis resulted in a significant rise in global food prices, particularly grain. It was caused by a combination of increase in demand and a decrease in supply. The primary factor which contributed to the demand was the rise of the biofuels industry. Another minor contributor is the urbanisation of China's population, which has led to a reduction of rice production and an increase in the global rice demand as China is forced to import significant amounts of rice.

The drop in supply was mainly caused by the affects weather issues and natural disasters. For example, after the cyclone in Myanmar, local food prices rose significantly as the majority of the country's rice patties were destroyed, thus affecting the global rice supply.

The rise in food prices, combined with the current global economic crisis, has resulted in a significant increase in the number of undernourished and malnourished people world wide.

Food security and the MDGs

Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

All of the MDGs are inextricably linked. Hunger and malnutrition prevent people from working, going to school, caring for their families and causes severe complications during pregnancy. There are also direct links between poverty, hunger and agricultural production.

The majority of the world's population rely on agriculture for their livelihoods, but it is also these farmers that are the most vulnerable to food insecurity and hunger. Small scale farmers, with limited access to markets, technology and information are the most vulnerable. Increasing income-generating options for farmers, by increasing access to markets, seeds and technology, is essential in eradicating poverty and hunger. This in turn will lead to a greater availability of food, more income and a general reduction of poverty.

Equal access to land, credit and good infrastructure is also essential. It has been shown that females producing an income are more likely to spend it on their family's welfare, particularly food and education, than male headed households. It is difficult, however, for women to obtain access to land, seeds and micro-financing.

The impact of climate change on food security

Climate change has the ability to seriously impact the food security of the majority of the global population. The effects of climate change, such as rising sea levels, rises in global temperatures and the increased frequency of natural disasters, will all directly impact global food production and the availability of natural resources.

The erosion of coast lines and rising sea levels will significantly decrease the amount of arable land in several countries. Also, rising sea temperatures will result in the extinction of several species of fish, which will lower fishing levels. In terms of agricultural impacts, climate change may result in drier conditions in certain areas of the world which will further limit the amount of arable land for farming. An increase in natural disasters and the irregular rain patterns is already affecting regions and contributed to the global food crisis.

It is essential that farmers globally are educated about the impacts of climate change on their agricultural practises. New seeds are currently being developed which will be able to withstand long periods of drought and it is vital that farmers in developing countries have access to them, or climate change will have a devastating affect on the developing world.

Case Study: Liberia

In 2006, 11% of Liberian households were completely food insecure, while 40% of rural households were considered 'highly vulnerable' to food insecurity. There are several factors which cause these figures, namely the devastating civil war, a large scale lack of access to food, low agricultural productivity and limited market access due to poor road networks.

Causes of the food crisis

Liberia's food crisis has been primarily the result of the fourteen year civil war the country endured between 1989 and 2003, which led to the breakdown of infrastructure throughout the country. Nearly 1 million Liberians were displaced due to the war and it is those displaced families that remain the most vulnerable to food insecurity. Upon their return home, they were challenged with rebuilding their farms from scratch in an unstable political and economic environment.

Liberians generally have a very limited access to food, unless they produce it themselves. These limitations are principally economic and physical. The population has very

limited income-generation opportunities in all economic sectors, particularly the agricultural sector, making it difficult for households to escape poverty and hunger. The poor nature of the Liberian road network is also a problem, as the journey to the markets is difficult during the dry season, but in the wet season it is impossible. It is the urban population, who rely on the markets and the produce of the rural population to survive, who suffer during these periods.

UNIFEM's Action

The global food crisis has had a devastating affect on the developing world. It is essential for international organisations to recognise the essential causes of food crises and target those problems. UNIFEM is undertaking a project which is intended to promote women's empowerment in Liberia and support the development of women's participation in the agricultural sector, particularly through the growth of cassava.

The project will entail the transfer of 48 acres of land to the Ganta Concern Women's Group (GCWG), which has been divided into ten community farms and they will legally own for five years. The project will also ensure relevant technology and information, as well as seeds, are also provided. The challenges to food security and agriculture in Liberia, namely access to land, technology and information, are being addressed by UNIFEM in this project and it is hoped that promoting the empowerment of women, particularly in economically, will be beneficial for Liberia's entire population.

Useful Links

<http://www.fao.org/>

<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

References

Joachim von Braun, M. S. Swaminathan and Mark W. Rosegrant, *Agriculture, Food Security, Nutrition and the Millenium Development Goals* (2004).

Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, *Climate Change and Food Security: A Framework Document*, (2008).

Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, *Food Security Statistics: Liberia*, (2006).