

Food Security – a Regional Perspective

Main message – where we are

- In much of Sub-Saharan Africa people are trapped in a vicious cycle of low food security and human development
- Two disturbing paradoxes: 1) Recent significant economic progress has not had commensurate impact on malnutrition, and 2) Food insecurity exists and persists despite abundant natural resources
- This is mainly due to misguided policies, weak institutions and failing markets. Importantly, two biases persist: one against rural areas and one against women
- Changing course implies breaking with past practices while facing down new threats of population growth, environmental pressures and climate change

The Namibian economy grew by 4% per annum over the past decade. Agricultural sector (supporting, directly and indirectly, 70% of the population) grew at the same rate over the past six year. However, the country still imports an estimated 65% of her food requirements, mainly from Republic of South Africa.

In terms of human development, Namibia is ranked a lowly 120 out of 187 countries surveyed for the 2011 Human Development Report (HDR).

An estimated 24 percent of the children, i.e. one in every four, under the age of five years are malnourished indicating that an unacceptably large proportion of the Namibian population remain food insecure.

What to do

The recently launched African Human Development Report (AfHDR) recommends broad areas of policy options for strengthening food security and human development.

- Improve agricultural productivity by bringing yields up sustainably, to increase food production and to generate income and employment on and off the farm
- Advance nutrition outcomes through interventions that intercept malnutrition in children and mothers to stop forfeiting the future of families and countries
- Enhance the resilience of families and countries by implementing social protection to stabilize food systems
- Empower the rural poor and women by providing access to information, markets and knowledge, in order to unleash their transformative power

Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest prevalence of hunger in the world

As stated earlier, in Namibia an estimated 24% of children under 5 years are malnourished that is their dietary energy intake is below the minimum required. In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), 27% of the population are under-nourished.

In Sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, 27% of the population are under-nourished, that is their dietary energy intake is below the minimum required. This is the highest for all regions in the world. The range of undernourishment is wide even within Africa from nearly two-thirds of the population (in Burundi and Eritrea) to just 5% (in Ghana and Mauritius).

Linking Food Security and Human Development

Food security is “[the condition] when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food [to meet] their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”

This is a people-centred approach to food security, which makes it strongly linked to human development: the expansion of people’s capabilities and the freedoms that they have to lead lives they value.

Being well-nourished at all times without the threat of hunger is an important capability, which affects other capabilities such as education and health. In turn these tend to have economic development impacts through enhancing productivity and incomes, and social impacts by enabling participation and empowerment.

For adults, malnutrition has immediate consequences for instance in terms of inability to work. But for children the consequences of malnutrition are often ‘hidden’ where even short spells of hunger can manifest as deprivations in human development later in life. Moreover, the nutrition trap is inter-generational for instance as a malnourished girls are more likely to have malnourished children of their own. The Report argues that breaking the trap is essential and possible through public action.

Advances in human development can also strengthen food security, for instance, through greater social and economic stability, improvements in employment and other opportunities.

Less success reducing malnutrition in Sub-Saharan African than in Asia

The Human Development index (HDI) grew by almost 15% in Sub-Saharan Africa between 2000-2010 — more than in Asia during the same and previous decades. However, the degree of child-malnutrition as measured here, using underweight (low weight for age) and stunting (low height for age) in SSA, fell much less - 6% and 2%, respectively, compared to the more than 20% decreases that took place in each of the previous two decades in Asia.

Proximate and deeper causes of food insecurity

- High levels of rural poverty, low agricultural yields, poor infrastructure, limitations in access to health and education services in rural areas are key proximate causes
- Food price volatility, erratic weather patterns and violent conflict add to instability in food systems
- Deeper causes of food insecurity include:

- high levels of inequality, skewed control over resources and access to opportunities;
- policy bias especially against rural areas and against women;
- detrimental international practices, including the lingering effects of structural adjustment, lavish agricultural subsidies, the rise of bio-fuels and neglect of agriculture in ODA

Emerging threats

- Changing population dynamics as the world's fastest growing population is in SSA: from 856 million in 2010 to 2 billion in 2050, migration and urbanization
- Environmental challenges: in mid-1990s almost one quarter of agricultural land was degraded, up to 40% loss in yields
- Perils of climate change could increase water stress for 250 million people and halve yields from rain-fed agriculture, maize yields could fall by 30% by 2030; 25-40% of species habitats could be lost

Destabilizing effects of climate change

It is a sad irony that Africa is the region least responsible for the emission of green house gasses that are creating climate change, but it is the most severely affected when it comes to the negative consequences of global warming. Changes in rainfall and temperature patterns will have severe consequences for the stability of food systems and their ability to make food available, accessible and properly utilized. At the global level, agriculture needs to become a net sink of green house gases. In Africa more needs to be done to assist countries with financial resources and know-how so that they can adapt technologies and practices that enable them to cope with climate change.

Overarching policy focus

- No blue print for development—no silver bullet—but guidelines for countries and many examples that must be tailored to country needs and circumstances
- Food sector is not a narrow issue for line ministry or specialized agency alone—should be at the centre of national development
- Need to bring on board the Office of President or Prime Minister, and coordinated by ministries of finance, planning and/or economic development
- If addressed effectively the result can be profound structural change and human development

Cereal yields have stagnated for decades

In sub-Saharan Africa the availability of food has been curtailed by low agricultural productivity leading to trade imbalances and a heavy reliance on humanitarian aid. Since the 1960s the yield gap between Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia has widened from one half a tonne of cereal per hectare to more than 2 tonnes. Proximate causes for the lagging yields in Sub-Saharan Africa include low use of fertiliser, greater

dependence on rain-fed rather than irrigated agriculture, and low uptake of new technology and widespread use of outdated production methods.

Increase agricultural productivity

- Faster and more sustainable uptake of inputs
- Smart subsidies for fertiliser, new seed varieties and improved access to credit/insurance
- Investing in rural infrastructure (storage, roads, irrigation) to remove bottlenecks in marketing
- Investing in R&D and adapting new knowledge which is the key to raising productivity and engaging the youth

Strengthen nutrition

- Nutrition interventions such as school meal programmes, awareness raising, improve micro-nutrient (e.g. Vitamin A, iron and zinc)
- Fortification, including bio-fortification
- Improve basic services: health care, safe water and sanitation
- Remove inequalities in access to resources and opportunities, especially for women
- Integrate nutrition into national development policy

Change dynamics in food systems

Getting food from field to table is fraught with risk in Africa. Its food systems are exposed to numerous shocks, trends and cycles that hit with varying degrees of frequency, intensity and predictability. Instability in Africa's food systems result from erratic weather patterns that lead to droughts and floods, food price volatility such as global price spikes and seasonal changes, and disruptions from conflict that destroy livelihoods.

More resilient food systems can withstand political, economic, social and environmental shocks. Resilience makes individuals, households and communities less vulnerable and better able to prevent reversals in food security. Most important, it helps them withstand multiple stresses and break free of persistent poverty and accelerate human development. Policies need to focus on addressing some of the major causes of instability in food systems by reducing the frequency and duration of violent conflict, dampening food price volatility, introducing more sustainable practices in agriculture and reducing the pressures of population growth.

Example - food price seasonality drives child malnutrition in Malawi

While volatile international food markets continue to affect sub-Saharan Africa's food systems, the seasonal ups and downs in local food prices probably have a greater impact. These seasonal cycles, too often unnoticed, have major implications for Africans' well-being. Across the region smallholder farmers sell part of their food output immediately after harvest, when prices are lowest, to cover expenses and repay debts incurred during the lean season. Some six to eight months later, after exhausting their food stocks, farmers start buying food supplies just when

prices are highest, using money obtained by borrowing, selling small animals, doing casual work or enrolling in food aid programmes. The consequences are seasonal fluctuations in food prices and bouts of malnutrition. The impacts of seasonal fluctuations on human development are striking and entirely predictable and thus should be easier to address than the impacts of weather shocks. In Malawi seasonal changes in food prices are followed closely by rising numbers of children admitted to nutrition and rehabilitation units.

Build resilience

- Population growth can be slowed by addressing unmet needs for contraception and improving girls' education
- Agro-ecological approaches can relieve environmental pressures under specific conditions
- Conflict prevention and recovery is critical and interlinked with population and environmental dynamics
- Social protection can reduce vulnerability to shocks and improve risk management. Can also be a tool to leverage interventions for food security, human development and social justice

Equal ownership and inheritance rights

Women's empowerment, equality and non-discrimination are integral to human development. When women are curtailed in their access to and control over assets and resources they are denied some of their most basic human rights. That alone is grounds enough for action against discrimination against women, for instance in national legislation to secure equal ownership and inheritance rights. But promoting gender equality also makes sense in immediate economic terms. Ensuring that women have equal access to land and other inputs needed for agricultural production could lead to a one time increase in agricultural productivity of up to 40% further accelerating food security for human development.

Empower women and the rural poor

- Empowerment is intrinsic to human development but it can also be instrumental for food security
- Unleashing the power of markets by investing in infrastructure, encouraging innovation and harnessing new technologies
- Boosting participation and voice through local government, producer organizations and civil society groups
- Advancing social justice and accountability by defining rights, improving equity in land access and managing land acquisitions
- Unleashing the transformative power of women

Africa Human development Report available at:

<http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/hdr/africa-human-development-report-2012/>