



**SUSTAINABLE FOOD SECURITY  
FOR ALL BY 2020**  
September 4–6, 2001 ! Bonn, Germany



SUMMARY NOTE

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**Title:** Food Insecurity — A Symptom of Poverty

***Introduction***

It is surely one of the most morally repugnant features of our shrinking world that one half of the world is preoccupied with dieting and the other with the struggle to get enough to eat. I am grateful to the organizers of this Conference for giving me this opportunity to set out my thoughts on how we can ensure that everyone in the world has access to safe and nutritious food by 2002 at the latest.

The fundamental case I wish to make is that international efforts have been less effective than they might have been because we have muddled up questions about global and national food self-sufficiency, with the explanation of the suffering caused by hunger among one-fifth of humanity. The reality is, of course, that many people are hungry in countries that have more than enough food to feed everyone. And there are many countries that are not self-sufficient in food where no one is hungry. I therefore want to argue that we must reconsider the way in which we measure food insecurity and the policies we adopt to deliver adequate nourishment to all.

The World Food Summit in 1996 defined food security as a situation in which “all people at all times have physical 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 helpful definition because it emphasizes the importance of access to food over food production. We must be clear that poverty and food insecurity are closely linked. A review of the “Voices of the Hungry” showed that hunger is central to people’s experience of poverty. In many societies poverty is defined in terms of hunger. Worries about where the next meal is coming from tend to dominate poor people’s lives. Having to find food, day-by-day, is a common characteristic of poverty.

Hunger is, of course, a cause of suffering, but it has much deeper effects. Hunger leads to weak immune systems that make people more vulnerable to ill health. And ill health prevents breadwinners from working and leads to expenditure on medical treatment, thus increasing poverty. And children that are malnourished experience stunting in their mental and physical development, the effects of which last throughout their lives. Thus hunger traps families into an endless cycle of poverty and passes on to the children of the poor the likelihood that their development will be damaged. Such poverty also means that the children of the poor rarely have the chance to go to school and thus their poverty will be passed on to yet another generation.

***What is the size of the challenge?***

The World Food Summit secured international commitment to reducing the number of undernourished people by half by 2015. FAO estimates suggest that progress to date has been slow. Five years later some 800 million people, mainly women and children, remain food insecure.

This estimate contrasts remarkably with the progress that has been made towards achieving the International Development Target of reducing by half the proportion of the world's population living in absolute poverty by 2015. We are currently on track to achieve that target. The target was set in 1990 and by 2015, at current rates of progress, a billion people will have lifted themselves out of extreme poverty. We must ask how this can be. Is it really possible that we are making progress on reducing poverty and not in reducing hunger?

One important reason for this disparity rests on how we measure progress. FAO uses the concept of “undernourishment” for measuring progress in reducing food insecurity. This sounds reasonable until we discover that “undernourishment” is largely a measure of national level food supplies. These are calculated from data on domestic production, commercial imports, and food aid. Given the unreliability and unavailability of good statistics on development issues, I myself conclude that dependence on this one indicator casts some doubt on the validity of the figures used by FAO for measuring progress. I really do think that we should shift our focus from measuring the national availability of food to counting the number of people who do not have the means to obtain food.

### ***What causes food insecurity?***

The debate on how to improve food security globally has, until recently, been much too closely associated with food production. Of course we must take account of our global capacity to feed the population of the world. But old ideas that focus on national self-sufficiency in food rather than national capacity to purchase the food that is needed, are deeply outdated. And those who focus their efforts simply on increasing agricultural production must be under no illusions that they will therefore help the poor to obtain food.

In fact, over recent years global food supply has been outstripping demand. Food commodity prices are at an all time low. World cereal production has doubled in 40 years, reducing real food prices by 50 percent. Long-term forecasts suggest that food prices will remain low, at least in the medium term.

There are of course concerns. Demand for cereals has grown sharply. This is a result of population and economic growth, urbanization, and dietary changes with greater demand for livestock produce. Demand for cereals is expected to increase further by 30–50 percent over the next 20 years.

Environmental change will also affect productive capacity in many countries. Substantial climate change is inevitable. Desertification, water shortages, and loss of biodiversity will undermine the productivity of large areas.

Thus, although the overall conclusion is that global food supplies should keep pace with demand for the next 10–20 years, we cannot be complacent. Governments must continue to adopt informed policies, markets must function efficient and there must be continuing investment by the public and private sectors in agricultural research and new technologies. We must also monitor developments across the world.

But for those whose concern is focused on the needs of the hungry, the conclusion is clear; world food supplies are likely to satisfy global demand for at least the next 10–20 years. The real challenge is to ensure that poor people obtain adequate supplies of this food.

We need to be clear that most people buy food rather than produce it. Very few people, including small-scale farmers are entirely self-sufficient in production. Food insecurity and hunger are related to poverty and an inability to purchase food. For example, hunger and malnourishment can occur in the Highlands of Ethiopia, even after good harvests, when at a national level the country produces enough food for its own needs. The poor in the most badly affected areas cannot afford to

buy the food and therefore fail to generate a demand for it to be transported from surplus regions. Agriculture alone does not offer a way out of poverty for most poor people in the Ethiopian Highlands. Land availability per family is falling as populations grow, soils erode, and annual rainfall remains unpredictable. There is insufficient land to produce the food the people need. The symptom of poverty is hunger but it is wrong to assume that the solution is agricultural.

In parts of Northeast India many poor communities are dependent on rainfed farming for their livelihoods. They are rarely self-sufficient in food and many migrate to the cities to provide labor when food supplies run out. DFID-supported programs increased yields by some 50 percent. But these increases in productivity did not adequately address the problem of seasonal food insecurity for most families. What was needed was diversification of livelihoods beyond agricultural production so that communities had the income to purchase food for the hungry months.

### ***What do we need to do?***

Thus we must be clear that eradication of hunger and poverty are closely linked. Our strategies for poverty reduction and food security must also be closely linked. We are now in the process of developing poverty reduction strategies in all poor countries. These seek to put in place strategies to increase economic growth and improve health and education provision in a way that measurably reduces poverty. The lead is now local with governments discussing their plans with local people. And the development agencies are increasingly backing these plans by investing in strengthened government capacity and providing budgetary support to drive forward social development. Thus, National Poverty Reduction Strategies provide a way of incorporating food concerns into national strategic planning processes. However this way of working is new. All countries need to focus on increasing economic growth — for example, Sub-Saharan African countries need 7 percent economic growth between now and 2015 in order to halve the proportion of people living in poverty. But there must also be more effort to ensure that the increased growth benefits the poor — in both rural and urban areas.

My Department has been working with others to develop new ways of working on the needs of poor people rather than separate sectors of the economy. The sustainable livelihoods approach is a way of thinking about the causes and effects of vulnerability and poverty and building opportunities for poor people to improve their livelihoods in ways that make sense to them. This approach is now being used in preparing and implementing Poverty Reduction Strategies in several countries, including Malawi, Mongolia, and Uganda. DFID and its partners are using livelihoods, approaches in many of the poverty reduction programs we are supporting.

What do livelihoods approaches tell us about food insecurity and poverty? Firstly, that food insecurity and hunger afflict the urban as well as the rural poor. They also demonstrate that for many poor rural communities the scope for improving food security through increases in household food production is limited. The livelihood strategies of poor people are often diverse and complex. They include, but are not confined to, agricultural improvement.

For example, in some rural areas of Senegal the percentage of income derived from nonagricultural activities has more than doubled since 1960. One important factor is the growth in remittances from family members who have migrated to towns. In South Africa, the rural poor gain more income from remittances and small-scale trading than from agriculture.

In Bangladesh and India, improvements in access to savings and credit schemes by poor people has helped to promote this diversification in livelihood strategies. Credit may be invested in small-scale agro-processing or in other agriculture-related activities. However, often this is not the case with credit being used to invest in nonagricultural enterprises or for trading activities. I particularly

like the example of the community in Eastern India, which used a savings and credit scheme to buy an amplifier and loudspeakers, which they hire out for weddings and parties.

This work also underlines the dangers of food aid. In situations of conflict or natural disaster it will be necessary to prevent hunger through short-term measures like food aid. But food aid should always be a last resort and should be phased out as soon as possible. It should cease to be motivated in any way by the desire to dump agricultural surpluses in poor countries where it is needed. It is time to look seriously at the French proposal made in the recent untying negotiations in the OECD Development Assistance Committee that all food aid should be untied. A suitable target date for achieving this would be on expiry of the present Food Aid Convention in 2002. We would like to see the subject included explicitly in those negotiations. Food should be purchased as locally as possible; otherwise dependence on food aid undermines local markets and in the longer-term throws greater numbers of people into poverty.

As I have already argued, measurements of the number of food-insecure people based on national-level food supplies are, at best, inaccurate and at worst, misleading. The challenge for most poor people is to earn enough money to buy food. The International Development Target for reducing poverty is therefore a better indicator of national and global improvements in food security.

Beyond that, I believe we should give priority to identifying those groups where malnourishment and hunger are leading to deepening and chronic poverty. We must focus on communities with underweight children whose ability to develop mentally and physically is threatened. We should ask whether such households are mainly female-headed. Or are they distinct communities such as artisanal fishing communities or pastoralists whose livelihoods are under increasing strain?

The PARIS 21 Initiative, to help strengthen the capacity to measure poverty and progress in reducing poverty in developing countries, provides an opportunity for progress. We need better year-on-year indicators on the agreed development targets so that we can measure progress year-on-year, country-by-country and learn from success and failure across the world.

It is deeply shameful that hundreds of millions of people in the world are food insecure and often go to bed hungry. But let us be clear that hunger will not be eradicated simply by increasing food production globally, nationally, or at household level. Even in the richest countries there are poor people, living on the streets, often with alcohol or mental illness problems, who scabble through waste bins for food. In most developing countries there are rich elites that live well and frequently there are food exports whilst some go hungry. I strongly suggest that we would make greater progress if we focus on improving the lives of the poor rather than overall agricultural production in developing countries.

I leave you with a question. Is it sensible to try and measure progress in reducing food security globally in isolation from the International Development Target on poverty reduction? I suggest that we should be concentrating our resources, through PARIS 21, to help identify those groups where hunger is leading to deepening chronic poverty and then measure progress in reducing hunger through indicators such as the proportion of children who are underweight. This can help identify those groups where hunger is leading to deepening chronic poverty. When monitored regularly, such indicators enable us to gauge our progress in reducing poverty and hunger. I believe if we focused on this indicator we could make better progress.

*Note: The views expressed in this summary note are those of the author and are not necessarily endorsed by or representative of IFPRI or of the cosponsoring or supporting organizations.*