

# FOOD SECURITY: CONCEPT, ELEMENTS AND OPTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

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## **Abstract**

Food security is associated with food intake at the individual level and food availability at household, sub-national and national levels. In Nigeria today, the concept of food security is in a distressed state for many households due to a number of factors. Targeted policies such as food production rehabilitation; enhancing the skills of small holder, research and technology, protection of the environment and crucial roles of rural women among others, are discussed as veritable options for sustainability in food security.

## **Introduction**

In order to fully understand the concept of food security, one has to start by considering the household as a fundamental unit. A food secured household can be defined as one, which has access to enough food for individual members of the household to lead to a healthy life. At the sub-national level, the concept reflects the assured availability of food during the given period for individual households to draw on to meet their minimum requirements. On the other hand, national food security encompasses household and sub-national food security. Integrating the whole picture is the concept of food security at the global level. This is therefore the assurance of access for all to an adequate food supply. To critically understand food security, it is important to recognize that it hinges more on lack of purchasing power and entitlement as on variable production and supply. This implies that, to ensure food security, what is required is long-term solution taking account of socio-economic, environmental and political factors. What is really important for households and individuals is the availability and adequacy of food intake.

In the 1960s, the world economy was known to have expanded healthily with most developing countries attaining GDP growth rate of around 5-6% per annum (World Bank, 1988). These were actually maintained during the 1970s. Individual and household performance too varied widely. The same period also witnessed what we observed in Nigeria as a period of "Oil Boom". With the national increasing rate in oil production, which accounted for about 85% of total export earnings, there was also an associated low growth rate of agriculture, which was before then, the major export earnings for the economy. The result was that income distribution became increasingly distorted, economic growth faltered and poverty and hunger became wide spread. Adding salt to injury were the 1980s and the emergence of military juntas in the politics of Nigeria. The period featured a sharp fall in oil prices, high interest rates, gross mismanagement of resources and a worsening debt burden, which exacerbated external and internal imbalances. The full brunt of these events fell on agriculture which was before this time represented up to 76% of GDP and employed up to three-quarter of the total labour force. Worst hit have been the majority of the poor, under nourished marginal farmers and pastoralists who live in the countryside. These are the people that suffered from chronic food insecurity resulting from impact of adverse macro-economic movement on agriculture as food security is not only determined by developments within the sphere of agriculture but also by those occurring elsewhere in the economy. Food security therefore is basically a question of entitlement to food through access to land and other means of production or through productive employment.

## **Concept of Food Security**

Food security is associated with food intake at the individual and food availability at household, sub-national and national levels. For a household to be classed as food secured, it must have enough food

availability to ensure a minimum necessary intake by all members. Such minimum is related to body size, weight, sex, nature of work and for women, pregnancy or lactation status. Availability for a household is guided by many variables such as net food production, land, labour, capital, knowledge and technology and social production relations, food prices, food supply in the market, cash flow, income, wages, profit from enterprises gifts of C. Any adverse shift in any one or more of these variables will adversely affect the food security of a household. If such adverse shifts are temporary and household coping strategies fail, there exist a case of what is known as transitory food insecurity (WFP, 1989). On the other hand, if such shifts came from structural problems and continue over a long period, the situation can be referred to as one of chronic food insecurity. (Reutinger and Van Hoost ReDekaam, 1986). The key words in household food security are production, access and household coping strategies. At the sub-national level (villages, districts and local government areas), concepts of food security is somewhat less precise because the link with individual food intake is not always obvious. Here, food security means the assured availability of food for individual households to draw on to meet their minimum consumption requirements during a given period. Minimum here refers partially to tastes and preferences and household status. Variables affecting sub-national food security include the following net non-household stock held at village, districts or local government level by public entities and private individuals (traders), internal private trade flows between areas and net procurement in the area by public and parastatals bodies.

The key words relating to sub-national food security are production, internal trade and communal food security arrangements. National food security is the sum of household and sub-national food security and more. At the national level, food security can be defined as assured national availability of food to meet current minimum requirement per capita during a reference period, and also to meet any unexpected short-fall over a limited period (say 3-4 months). The determining variables are production, imports, exports, and stock exchanges. At the national level, food production is determined by land availability, crop yield, national environmental factors and socio-political and administrative environment.

hi order to complete the picture, the concept of food security has to be to global level. Global food security is the assurance of an adequate food supply and/or access to it for all both at national, and sub-national levels. The key words here are global production and stock, trade, food and capital aids, the distribution of global resources and income and regional and global food security arrangement. An imbalance in any one of these areas, creates the paradox of food insecurity which will extend to the national and sub-national levels. With respect to global production and stock, the relevant issues are resource management, irreversible damage to the resource base and the environment, permanent change in climate with global warming, the depletion of ozone layer and the destruction of the tropical rain forest, technological progress and transfer and policies of major food producers.

### **Elements of Food Security: Famine and Relief**

Chronic food insecurity is just like an open water in the forest where mosquito larvae flourish. In other words, it is a breeding ground for famine and famine on its own part gives rise to food insecurity by destabilizing social relations and eroding the capacity of households to absorb the shock. Famine is a general state of prolonged nutritional deficiency leading to excess mortality. It can be a universal phenomenon affecting all households in an area, religion or country or a class phenomenon, which claims victims selectively by socio-economic status. Famine usually results to death due to malnutrition, loss of body weight and resistance. During famine, households<sup>1</sup> communities go through a number of traumas such as migration, mental disorientation, wandering and separation. In the light of the above, the enormous task facing policy makers is to try to achieve the objectives of eliminating the threat of famine that may result from food insecurity.

Globally, famines that are caused from natural catastrophes (earthquakes, landslides, flooding) or as a result of long years of wars we have countries like Ethiopia, Somalia, Angola, Sudan, Liberia etc usually attract international relief. Relief usually are designed to stem hunger and starvation and they may be in the form of food procurement from international agencies, NGOs, as well as private organization. The result has been some relief, but not a permanent answer to the "Hunger Paradox".

### **Options for the Future**

The challenge for food security is a daunting one but the necessary material and technical means must be demonstrated at hand. The question is, how long will it take for the poor to gain access to this mean?

How long will it take to provide food security for the hundreds of millions of human beings whose lives continue to be blighted by deprivation and hunger increasingly important in food security is the issue of co-operation, which has to be maximized if all the stakeholders move en bloc towards a food secured world.

Since we are living in a world of contrast where in an era of luxury consumer goods and electronics, a large percentage of the world's population cannot afford three square meals a day. Most striking among these constraints is the "Hunger Paradox" in the light of the above, the following options for the future are suggested:

- 1) Food production rehabilitation programme should be vigorously pursued. Such programme must be free of too much paper work but practically oriented. Planting must be done at the appropriate time, farm inputs such as fertilizers, seedlings, tractors pesticides etc must be hand prior to planting so that they will be efficiently used at the appropriate time.
- 2) A new focus should be placed on mobilizing the under-utilized potential of small holder farmers, the landless, rural women and other depressed groups who incidentally bear the brunt of hunger paradox. Their maximum participation and involvement in the design, implementation and management of projects must not be overlooked.
- 3) Another option is to extend production to individual small holders so that they can raise productivity not only to meet their own needs but supply the requirements of other food deficit households. Again, their skills should be upgraded to enable them improve their productivity, take advantages of new technologies, use resources within their environment and improve the quality of their lives and contribute to the development of others.
- 4) There is that urgent need to invigorate the crucial role of rural women. These days in Nigeria, there is that increasing migration of the male gender to other endeavours for greener pastures and thus, more and more rural women are becoming farm labourers, processors and distributors. To appreciate this new role, a new policy of compulsory discrimination which will include both economic and welfare considerations.

The government should establish a functional macro-policy framework favourable to healthy rural credit as a major obstacle preventing small holders from purchasing inputs or making necessary investments. Complementary to this, is the need to improve access to markets and introducing a fair pricing system to sustain production. This is because a surplus is cultivated and sold if small holders have access to a marketing and distribution system for inputs and outputs respectively. To

achieve this, there should be adequate transport infrastructure; market centres; farm service centres; adequate storage and processing facilities and dissemination of market intelligence and information. Fair pricing policy would also promote efficiency in production, and consumption and guarantee food security at the household level.

- 6) Technological packages within the financial and technical reach of small holder farmers have to be developed. This package must be appropriate to enhance resource productivity as well as labour productivity thus increasing the productivity of the small holders system as a whole.
- 7) Protecting the environment. For sustainable food security, land productivity has to be raised through ecologically sustainable increases in yield and cropping intensity, measures have to be implemented to reverse environmental degradation, savannization, and drought especially in the core cattle producing zone of Nigeria in the south of Nigeria. Environmental preservation has to be joined with the poverty alleviation programme so as to break the vicious cycle between poverty and environmental degradation.

## **Conclusion**

Food security is primarily a question of purchasing power or entitlement. The question of entitlement is also pertinent to nomadic herdsmen and pastoralists who are among the poorest of the rural poor. The quest for food security starts at the small holder level but its effective pursuit will be a complex undertaking requiring sustained and demanding efforts at various levels over the medium term and long term not only to produce more food but also to remove poverty and create adequate entitlement for those who need food. Since the question of entitlement is also directed to nomadic herdsmen and pastoralists, aid must be directed not just to increase livestock production to the agro-pastoralists sector alone but to the development of small ruminants which are the animals that poor people keep, and also to

participatory rangeland management.

In a broader frame, of it, there is urgent need for re-orientation of domestic policies and priorities, tactical mobilization of the potentials of rural poor by encouraging their participation and a well articulated and prudently managed financial flow to agriculture.

On a closing note, entitlement to food is a fundamental human right of every person, irrespective of nationality or status and it is synonymous with the right to life.

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