

Food security

Representatives from 185 countries met November 13-17, 1996 in Rome to wrestle with the issue of the eradication of hunger in the 21st century. As the delegates met 800 million people in the world were undernourished. At the end of the meeting, the heads of state and national representatives adopted the Rome Declaration on World Food Security and the World Food Summit Plan of Action with the goal of reducing the number of undernourished persons in the world by half no later than the year 2015.

One of the key concepts in the work of the World Food Summit is the idea of food security. That is not to say that food security was a new idea introduced at the summit. Over three millennia ago, food security was the concept behind Moses' interpretation of Pharaoh's dream. As a result, Pharaoh established and carried out a plan to gather in the surplus of seven years' production to provide for the years of poor crops that would follow.

In recent years however, the concept of food security has become increasingly entwined in the debate over the nature of the trade rules that should be applied to agriculture. All sides in the debate claim, in one fashion or other, that the position they advocate will increase food security. A closer look at the positions of the U.S. Trade Representative, the Less Developed Country leaders who wrote the Dhaka Declaration and the farmers and agricultural workers who wrote the Dakar Declaration makes it clear that different people define food security differently and use different criteria to determine whether or not food security has been achieved.

Food security can be understood as a condition in which a household has the ability to obtain a sufficient amount of culturally appropriate food to meet the nutritional requirements of all its members on an ongoing basis. Depending upon one's perspective, the household can be a single family, a community, a nation, or the whole world. It seems reasonable to argue that food security needs to be achieved at each of these levels.

It is not enough to say that worldwide agriculture produces enough calories and other nutrients to provide each man, woman and child in the world with an adequate diet, if some people cannot afford or do not have access to their share of this food. An adequate level of food production is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for achieving food security.

Policies that promote food security need to take into consideration each of these levels (family, community, nation, and the whole world) so that a consistent strategy can be adopted. Otherwise policies adopted at one level may conflict with and even counteract those adopted at another. At the global level, one could argue that the immediate introduction of commercial agriculture in a Less Developed Country (LDC) can increase the total food supply and make the world more food secure. But if in establishing commercial farms, hundreds or even thousands of subsistence farmers are displaced with no alternate source of income, then at the family level, in that community/country, people have lost a degree of food security.

Likewise, even within a given level, policies may need to vary depending upon the situation on the ground. Policies that work for subsistence farmers in Low-Income Food-Deficit Countries (LIFDCs) will undoubtedly be different from those designed to meet the needs of commercial farmers in the United States. Policies that will be affordable and meet the needs of the unemployed in the shantytowns that surround metropolitan areas in LIFDCs may be different than those designed to meet the needs of the poor in Scandinavia with its social safety net.

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