

World Food Security. A History since 1945

Book Launch at the Overseas Development Institute, London:
World Food Day, 16 October 2007

I am most grateful to Simon and Anna for organizing this book launch and to Edward for agreeing to act as a discussant. I am pleased that my wife and daughter are here. As authors know, families often bear the brunt when books are written. I am externally grateful to them. I would also like to acknowledge the technical computer advice that Julia Botsford gave me and am delighted that she is also here.

Despite progress, it is still an appalling fact that in this globalizing world of increasing prosperity, in which the richest tenth own 85 percent of the world's assets, just under one billion people subsist on less than a dollar a day, 2.8 billion (almost half the population of the developing world) exist on less than two dollars a day, and 850 million suffer from hunger in dehumanizing, abject poverty. Hunger and malnutrition kill more people every year than AIDS, malaria and TB combined, and more people die from hunger than from wars. World leaders and international bodies have many times made a commitment to end hunger and poverty, and have acknowledged that there are sufficient resources and know-how to do so. This scourge is not only morally unacceptable but is a serious impediment to equitable and sustainable economic and social development, and to world peace. My book is about what attempts have been made over the past sixty years, since the Second World War, to address this problem in what I have called 'the graveyard of aspiration'.

It is particularly appropriate that my book be launched at ODI today, World Food Day. Simon Maxwell and Edward Clay, my friends for over thirty years, who shared many of my interests and concerns while I was at the UN World Food Programme (WFP), have done as much as anyone to focus attention on the critical issue of world food security, both while they were at the Institute of Development Studies and now here at ODI, as the literature on development studies and issues shows.

My own interest in the concept of food security, and the consequences of its antithesis, food insecurity, that dominates the lives and livelihoods of hungry poor people and households, was kindled during my undergraduate and post-graduate research work in such diverse places as Western Ireland, Morocco, Bosnia and Croatia. It continued during my seven years in the 1950s and 1960s teaching at the University of Khartoum, Sudan, when I was also a consultant for the World Bank, FAO and WFP. This involved visits to a number of countries in Africa and the Middle East. My interest and concern were strengthened further when I became a staff member of WFP – my association with WFP was to last for over thirty years – during which I travelled to most countries in Africa and Asia, and liaised with all the UN organizations and many bilateral aid agencies and NGOs concerned with issues relating to food security. Located at WFP headquarters in Rome, I was also able to consult the papers and documentation on the early pioneering work of FAO on food and nutrition security in its archives and library, many of which have long been forgotten, if they were ever known, and follow closely discussions in FAO's principal committees.

This rich experience convinced me of the need for an historical account of attempts to set up some form of world food security arrangement since the Second World War and the establishment of FAO as the first UN specialized agencies to be set up after the war. This is the first comprehensive account of the numerous attempts that have been made over the past sixty years. But why a history, which is dedicated to the memory of Hans Singer, my friend and mentor for over forty years, who devoted his long and productive life to addressing the problems of developing countries? I was motivated by three main concerns. First, I felt that a comprehensive history was necessary not only to show the many ways in which attempts have been made to achieve world food and nutrition security unfolded, and the sequence in which they occurred, but why they did not succeed, and what lessons can be drawn for the future. Secondly, I also felt that such a history was necessary as a point of reference for all those individuals and institutions interested and involved in achieving food security for all who come at the subject from many and diverse perspectives and specialities. Thirdly, and more personally, I felt a strong compelling obligation to write this book based on the privileged positions I occupied over many years. In this respect, the book represents the fulfilment of a professional career and experience that took me to many countries and to meet people whose predicament needs to be exposed.

The history is arranged in three parts. The first (1945-70), gives details of the early, pioneering work of FAO and the development of food aid. The second part (1970-90) deals with the world food crisis of the early 1970s and the World Food Conference of 1974 and its aftermath. It includes the first, comprehensive account of the work of the World Food Council that was set up after the conference to coordinate and stimulate the work of the UN system relating to food security and the reasons for its demise in 1993. It also shows how the concepts of basic needs put forward at the ILO World Employment Conference in 1976, and of food entitlements by Amartya Sen in the 1980s, began to broaden the concept of food security and take it out of the agricultural sector, to include the importance of access of poor people to the food they need through increasing their employment and incomes. The third part (the 1990s and beyond) describes the numerous international conferences and their outcomes that were held during the decade of the 1990s that led up to the UN Millennium Summit in 2000 and the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals that offer a framework and a clear set of targets for measuring and tracking improvements in the human condition to 2015. I was concerned to describe the result of fifteen international conferences that took place, so that the reader could see not only the full panoply of concerns and issues that were addressed, and commitments made, but also to show their interrelationships and how they impacted on what I regard as the central and defining issue of world food security.

The final part of the book assesses where we stand today, following the commitments made in the past, by examining food security in relation to various other dimensions of poverty and progress, or the lack of it, in meeting the millennium goals and targets. I offer a redefinition of a broad concept of food and nutrition security as the eye of the storm of a series of interlocking local, national and global concerns. This broader concept carries two important implications. First, it highlights the problem of institutional incoherence that Simon Maxwell emphasized at the time of the 50th anniversary of the United Nations and Edward Clay after the World Food Summit of 1996. With so many organizations and institutions involved - my count includes over thirty UN bodies alone - food security has tended to become everybody's business

and so, in reality, no one's concern. And it has made the problem of developing common and coherent policies, priorities and programmes to attain world food security especially difficult. This broadening of the concept of world food security in many ways mirrors the evolving views on development theory and practice. It also reflects the large and dramatic ways in which the world food system has developed since the Second World War and the changing patterns of food consumption with the development of the fast food industry and supermarket chains, and the emergence of obesity, not malnutrition, as a major killer in the developed world and in parts of the developing world as well. It would be grotesquely perverse if attention to world hunger and malnutrition were to be diverted by a focus on the obesity epidemic. Both crises must be overcome.

I felt it important in the final part of the book to show the current status of food insecurity, not in isolation, but as part of the other dimensions of poverty - population growth, the income factor, education for all, employment and poverty reduction, international trade, and human security. I have also highlighted three major issues that could have a profound effect on future food security and economic and social advancement generally on which opinion, particularly between the United States and Europe, remains dangerously divided: genetically modified crops and food (to which I should now add the drive for biofuel to provide fuel security for the rich at the expense of food security for the poor); climate change and global warming; and globalization of the world economy.

It now seems likely that for many developing countries the millennium goals and targets set for 2015 will not be met, including a halving of the proportion of the world's hungry and poor. My history is a story of good intentions, as can be seen in the graveyard of noble aspirations, depicting a civilization that now seems able to live with the ignominy and shame of knowing that a large number of its citizens continue to live in hunger and poverty, while the knowledge, resources and commitment to end this scourge exist. Could it be, as C. P. Snow said in 1968, that seeing people die on our television sets 'inside our safe drawing-rooms' that the power of communications makes us callous, and leads to 'the unadmitted thought that human lives are plentiful beyond belief'? Or, as Amartya Sen wrote in his *Development as Freedom* in 1999 that: 'What makes this widespread hunger even more tragic is the way we have come to accept and tolerate it as an integral part of the modern world, as if it is a tragedy that is essentially unpreventable'?

I hope that my history as well as showing the lessons of the past will help to inspire a renewed determination to end this great paradox for the sake of sustained and equitable development and peace. What are some of the major imperatives for future food security?

First, is to re-establish food security as a central development goal both as an important outcome of, and a vital contributor to, the development process and to the achievement of the millennium development goals.

Second, is the realization that a combined attack on all the dimensions of poverty will make the biggest and most sustainable advance on the conquest of hunger and malnutrition. For this, an incremental strategy, with carefully designed priorities and sequences, will be necessary at both the national and international levels.

Third, a major increase in the combined efforts of poor and rich countries above past trends is necessary to meet the millennium development goals. A redirection of the resources of the developing countries will be necessary and donor countries must honour the pledges they have already made to increase their external assistance.

Fourth, the dimensions of poverty and hunger need to be fitted together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle and dealt with holistically if progress towards their reduction and eventual elimination are to be achieved. For this, the institutional incoherence that exists at both the national and international levels needs to be removed. At the national level, where responsibility lies with national governments, institutional and administrative capacities must be improved with the help of the international community. At the international level, reform of the UN system should be completed to ensure, among other things, that there is a focal point on food and nutrition security at the highest political level to ensure that it is advocated and managed as a central issue embedded in world action for equitable and inclusive economic and social development and lasting peace, with cohesive and coordinated programmes of international development and humanitarian assistance.

Fifth, it has been proposed to shift the focus from engendering ‘political will’ towards establishing ‘obligations’ in addressing world hunger and poverty by adopting a human rights approach. The argument in favour of such an approach is that policy objectives come and go with changing governments while legal obligations would remain of constant value beyond the volatility of politics. Several UN bodies have adopted a statement of common understanding regarding a rights-based approach to their cooperation and development programmes. And the FAO Council has adopted a set of voluntary guidelines to support the progressive realization of the right to adequate food in the context of national food security. Getting all countries to adopt this approach, particularly the United States that has shown aversion in the past, and translating legal commitments into operational strategies and action, would present formidable challenges. It remains to be seen whether the human rights approach will prove to be more successful than the other commitments made over the past sixty years.

Finally, I have highlighted the importance of leadership at the national and international levels and the need for institutional change and coherence. To foster both, I have also called for a global coalition of UN and international organization, bilateral agencies, development institutes, civil society bodies and NGOs that have all professed to have concern in achieving world food security. This would effectively link their resources, expertise and experience to the mutual advantage of all, and especially for the benefit of the hungry poor. As the UK’s leading think tank, ODI has a special responsibility to focus government and public attention on the importance of world food security and to monitor and assess progress in achieving it.

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