

Food Security: An ODA View

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Introduction

Whether people have enough food is politically highly sensitive in all but the most totalitarian societies. And it is a matter of life and death to the poorest and economically most vulnerable people in any country. So food issues are likely to remain high on the agenda for developing country governments and aid donors alike. But how far should food issues be handled in order that they be given due weight without undesirably distracting attention from other worthy emphases and objectives of economic and social development? This paper discusses the usefulness of the concepts of transitory and chronic food insecurity, first in general terms and then in the context of ODA's own activities.

The World Bank's definition of food security as 'access by all people at all times to enough food for an active and healthy life' [World Bank, page 1] is a useful one. Its focus on *access* to food highlights the fact that food security is more about consumption than production while the phrase *at all times* underlines the security aspect. Simon Maxwell's definition sharpens the focus on who the food insecure are: 'the poor and vulnerable, particularly women, children and those living in marginal areas' [Maxwell, page 1] and highlights the possibility of inequitable intra-household allocation of resources. The distinction the Bank makes between transitory and chronic food insecurity is also helpful because the two types of insecurity are best tackled by different sets of interventions.

Transitory Food Insecurity

Transitory or short-term food insecurity is a temporary loss of access to food caused by a relatively sudden or unexpected loss of production (for instance because of drought or crop disease), loss of income (for example due to hostilities or redundancies) or increased prices (which cut real income). The loss of access may be very severe and to prevent starvation may require emergency action. Typically this will involve subsidy or transfer arrangements to stabilise real incomes and command over food. To minimise costs these arrangements should be targeted on the most needy. Subsidies or income transfer may be in

cash or in kind (i.e. food) and be provided free or in return for work (as in emergency public works employment schemes).

Additional food imports are likely to be required to stabilise supplies following a production shortfall in a normally food deficit country — and where the country is poor there is a case for this food being provided on aid terms — but may not be needed in other circumstances. Where additional food is imported, direct distribution to the food insecure may not necessarily be the best use of it; there may be more sense in monetising the food by selling it in local markets and then using the counterpart funds to make cash payments to the target group.

Many governments have been attracted by the idea of using food buffer stocks to stabilise supply, but experience has shown that keeping large stocks of food tends to be inefficient and costly. Kenyan experience in 1984/85 demonstrated that it can be more cost effective to use foreign exchange reserves and aid money to finance extra food imports, although a modest level of domestic stocks is still likely to be justified as an emergency stopgap; emergency additional imports may take several months to arrive. But targeted programmes for affected households, food aid and buffer stocks are not the only responses to transitory food insecurity. The effectiveness of emergency measures are enhanced if approaching transitory food insecurity problems can be detected early and requisite action taken speedily. It is therefore appropriate for donors to support the development of the institutional capacity of governments at local as well as national level to mobilise and channel emergency assistance quickly to where it is needed — though taking care not to damage existing community and household mechanisms for coping with food insecurity — and also to promote the development of early warning systems. The latter may monitor indicators related to food production such as rainfall, crop growth and food prices, or indicators of food insecurity at household level, like food consumption, food expenditure, and anthropometric and other measures of health status especially among vulnerable groups like pre-school children.

Chronic Food Insecurity

Chronic food insecurity is a long-term lack of secure

access to enough food. There is a grey area between transitory and chronic food insecurity since the former may be a symptom, brought on by external shock, of longer run problems which require different solutions. For instance, the proximate cause of a famine may be a drought but the underlying causes may be over-population, public neglect of agricultural and infrastructural services, inappropriate agricultural policies and absence of ecologically sustainable agricultural technologies.

Some of the strategies to eradicate chronic food insecurity are extensions of those used when transitory insecurity occurs, by increasing (rather than stabilising) food supplies or real incomes and command over food. Thus in food deficit countries, raising food production — especially by small farmers — is likely to be an important element. And subsidy and transfer schemes to raise real incomes also have a part to play. But tackling chronic food insecurity is not a matter only of increasing production — food security is not synonymous with food self-sufficiency — or only of subsidising consumption, or even both these together. Chronic food insecurity reflects poverty and the key to its eradication is therefore poverty alleviation more generally.

Poverty alleviation programmes include a range of activities some of which may not be food-related or may not even be targeted on the poor, but which nevertheless are successful in assisting the poor, alongside the better-off (e.g. primary health and primary education programmes). But poverty alleviation is a long-term process so it is important that poverty alleviation programmes are as sustainable as possible.

Sustainability of poverty alleviation efforts has a number of aspects. One is that the emphasis should be on interventions designed to enhance the income generation capacity of the poor. Important elements of this are ensuring provision of essential infrastructure services and creation of a policy environment enabling private small enterprises to flourish, and, for the long term, human resource development (HRD) investment through effective health and education service expenditure. A second aspect of sustainability is an emphasis in food production on conservation-oriented technologies. And a third aspect is that services helping the poor must be designed to be highly cost-effective. This again highlights the potential value of targeting interventions. Targeted income transfer and food distribution schemes can have significant impacts on the welfare of the poor but generalised subsidy schemes tend to be very costly, often with a majority of the subsidy benefitting better-off consumers.

More broadly, sustainability requires economic growth at least as fast as population growth, so that fiscal support for public services is adequate in the

long term. In countries with serious macroeconomic imbalances and incentive distortions, economic stabilisation and structural adjustment programmes are therefore integral to poverty alleviation efforts, because they are necessary to lay the foundations for the steady long-term growth to fund poverty alleviation efforts.

Inevitably, conflicts will arise between the objectives of poverty alleviation and economic growth, especially in the short term. Stabilisation and structural adjustment programmes may increase transitory food insecurity, for instance through devaluation and food price liberalisation or food subsidy removal programmes or through retrenchment of civil service and formal sector workforces. In agriculturally sub-marginal areas it may be impossible for projects to earn positive economic rates of return. And countries very short of financial resources may find it impossible to guarantee food security for everyone in the short run. The challenge is to design growth-oriented development programmes which simultaneously at least attain the minimum poverty alleviation objective of ensuring none of the most vulnerable are made worse off (for instance by assisting people hard hit by adjustment policies) and which also make the most cost-effective use of resources targeted on the poorest, primarily to achieve short term social or food security objectives. For the longer term, the objective should be to incorporate the poor more directly in the growth process.

Food security issues can thus be seen as a subset of wider poverty and growth issues and a comprehensive, effective and sustainable poverty alleviation programme will reduce chronic food insecurity *pari passu*. It is not necessary to highlight food security as a separate development objective. Indeed, there are risks that using a food security approach might impart a biased or partial understanding of poverty by neglecting such aspects as asset-holding or dependency, or might lead to overemphases on consumption-oriented interventions which prove to be unsustainable.

Practical Usefulness of a Food Security Approach

However, food insecurity is the most fundamental manifestation of absolute poverty. It is a less nebulous concept than poverty, and it emphasises more clearly the importance in understanding poverty of perceived and actual risks of going hungry, i.e. of vulnerability. For these reasons a food security approach, rightly applied, can have practical usefulness in development planning in at least two areas.

First, food security indicators (e.g. measurement of food consumption or nutritional status) can be more meaningful measures of poverty than standard average income per head estimates because they take

better account of geographical, intra-household and inter-temporal variations in the prices and accessibility of food. Poor people spend a high proportion of their income on food so it is unlikely that many of the poor will be missed using food security yardsticks to identify them. Thus food security indicators can show who the poor are and can be used to monitor the impacts on them of policies and programmes. But pragmatism is needed in deciding where and how much effort to invest in collecting information on food security taking into account the opportunity cost of the financial and manpower resources required and the potential improvement in the effectiveness of poverty alleviating programmes that might result.

Second, a focus on food security can improve the quality of action-oriented analysis. It can lead the analyst more directly than an income-based poverty approach towards the key economic and political factors, relationships and processes which make poor people vulnerable and which efforts to assist them must take into account. Also, a food security perspective in policy analysis is less likely to overlook the indirect impact on the poor of macro-level policies, such as the effect of stabilisation policies to reduce erosion of real incomes by inflation, or the effect on food production and consumption incentives of exchange rate devaluation and trade liberalisation policies. These aspects ought to be taken into account in the course of policy analysis already but are not always spelt out. A food security focus can help redress this.

ODA's Approach

ODA's approach to the planning and utilisation of bilateral aid funds is pragmatic and country specific. For our larger country programmes, problems and potentials are assessed using a system of annual country review papers (CRPs) which examine the economic context, review past aid effectiveness and set priorities for future aid and specific objectives for the year ahead. The CRP also examines the problems facing the poorest people in the country, assesses the effectiveness of existing ODA activities directly helping these groups (whether targeted on them or more broadly focussed) and makes recommendations on increasing the emphasis in the country programme on such activities, paying particular attention to the role of women.

The potential usefulness of food security approaches can thus be considered as part of ODA's regular country programme planning. Where it is decided to increase our poverty alleviation efforts, food security studies can help identify target groups and appropriate programme designs. And even where country programmes already give an appropriate emphasis to activities directly assisting the poor, food security indicators if available may serve as a helpful cross-check on the effectiveness of these programmes. Recent examples of ODA using a food security perspective are the provision for a food security study focused on women's needs in food crop production in the ODA-CDC funded South Nyanza Sugar Project in Kenya, and an ODA-funded rainfed agriculture project in eastern India where the key objective is to diminish food insecurity among poor families on the Chotanagpur Plateau.

Conclusion

A food security approach can be practically useful in targeting and monitoring poverty-oriented programmes and as an element in programme planning. But it is no panacea; the relabelling does not make social, political and economic problems of relieving poverty any more tractable. And the usefulness of food security as a specific donor objective must be kept in perspective. Food security issues are best dealt with as a subset of poverty issues more generally; in the longer term, economic growth is the solution to both poverty and hunger. Donors should avoid seeing food security as a problem separate from that of poverty or as justifying a new breed of food security projects distinct from others; this confusion can only lead to attention and resources being drawn away from worthwhile poverty alleviating and growth promoting programmes.

References

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