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Addressing poverty and food insecurity: the quest for effective social protection

Introduction

The purpose of this background paper is to flag some key issues pertinent for the forthcoming EGM meeting organized by the Division for Inclusive Social Development of the UN Secretariat on the priority theme of the 60th session of the Commission for Social Development, facilitating preparation of the respective Report of the Secretary-General. Specifically this paper aims at addressing a range of food security concerns in respect of COVID-19 crisis as well as possible policy responses. As the world grapples with an unprecedented pandemic and its negative impacts, overcoming old and new challenges associated with food insecurity could be seen as one of the main objectives of the socio-economic and agricultural policy. While there is no universally accepted definition of food security or its measurements, in the context of this paper the FAO definition of food security is adopted, namely "when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life."¹

Sustainable poverty eradication cannot be achieved without addressing the threats to food and nutrition security and implementing a well-focused set of mutually reinforcing social and economic policies attuned to the national circumstances and implemented in an integrated manner. Recognized as a multifaceted challenge, food security is high on the political and socio-economic agendas of many countries. A range of different national perspectives on food security as well as analyses of responses to food insecurity have been presented in several recent analytical studies.²

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing systemic weaknesses and it has both direct and indirect impacts on food security and economic well-being. The full impact of the pandemic is still unclear but due to this global calamity, the nutritional status of the most vulnerable population groups is likely to worsen and

¹ http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/faoitally/documents/pdf/pdf_Food_Security_Concept_Note.pdf
<http://www.fao.org/3/MD776E/MD776E.pdf>

² See for example, *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World- 2020*, Rome, 2020; Ian Christoplos and Adam Pain (eds.) *New Challenges to Food Security. From Climate change to Fragile States*. Routledge, 2015;

their risks of falling deeper into poverty is likely to increase, adding millions of people to the ranks of the hungry and undernourished.³ World Food Programme (WFP) estimates that a record 270 million people worldwide are acutely food insecure or at high risk this year, a 40 per cent jump from 2020.⁴ According to joint statement of ILO, FAO, IFAD and WHO “the pandemic has been affecting the entire food system and has laid bare its fragility... In the COVID-19 crisis food security, public health, and employment and labour issues, in particular workers’ health and safety, converge.”⁵

Multidimensional perspective

In its most generalized form food security could be seen as the vector of movement of any national food system towards an ideal state. In this sense, the pursuit of food security is a continuous process. At the same time this strategy requires adjustments or even shifts in development priorities and implementation mechanisms of agricultural policy.

Chronic hunger and food insecurity also imply the violation of human rights, as food constitutes a basic social and economic right, enshrined in national constitutions and international covenants. More recently, ‘Zero Hunger’ has been adopted as a key sustainable development goal to be met by all nations over the coming decade but the world is not on track to reach this goal by 2030 as has been anticipated earlier.

It is self-evident that COVID-19 has had a negative impact on all dimensions and interrelated constituent elements of food security, in terms of availability, access, utilization and stability. In many food insecure-countries countries the pandemic further disrupted food supplies making *availability of food* problematic both in terms of quantity, quality and diversity of food. COVID-19 has jeopardized *economic and physical access to food* and disrupted stability in terms of reliable food supply. *Utilization* closely linked to person’s health, including feeding practices has been also negatively impacted.

³ According to analysis carried out by *Save the Children* and UNICEF, child poverty alone is likely to have increased 15% due to COVID-19. Source: <https://data.unicef.org/resources/impact-of-covid-19-on-multidimensional-child-poverty>

⁴ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/07/1095482>

⁵ <https://www.who.int/news/item/13-10-2020-impact-of-covid-19-on-people-s-livelihoods-their-health-and-our-food-systems>

Several factors, such as rising food prices, disruption of livelihoods through conflicts, climate change or economic policies, declining agriculture, growth of informal economies, extreme poverty, inadequate opportunities for education and employment and the absence of affordable health-care, all contribute to the generation and deepening of food insecurity. The comprehensive multi-agency report “2020- Global Report on Food Crisis” provides analysis of drivers of acute food insecurity, including obstacles in food access and availability. It also highlights the situation in specific countries facilitating understanding of both general and country-specific problems and possible policy responses.⁶

Poverty and hunger are closely connected. According to FAO’s definition hunger “is an uncomfortable or painful physical sensation caused by insufficient consumption of dietary energy. It becomes chronic when the person does not consume a sufficient amount of calories (dietary energy) on a regular basis to lead a normal, active and healthy life”.⁷ It leads to a distress associated with a lack of sufficient nutrition. Economic growth, along with such factors as literacy, population growth, access to food, and women’s empowerment are important for fighting hunger. Not only availability of food is important, but also availability at affordable prices.⁸

Malnutrition, in all its forms, has very serious developmental, economic, social, and medical impacts which are long- lasting for individuals and their families, for communities and for countries. Chronic malnourishment of children stands out a particularly serious blow to the future of a given country as it appears to be a contributing cause of reduced infant and child survival rates. Inadequate access to food, including nutrients, insufficient maternal and child care, and lack of essential health services represent key factors explaining child malnutrition, but adverse political, economic and cultural environments also play a role.⁹ Recent research demonstrates that malnutrition continues to be a major determinant of child health and survival in low and middle-income countries, and is strongly associated with household wealth and education. Following calls from UNICEF and the WHO,

⁶ 2020 Global Report on Food Crisis. *Joint analysis for better decisions*, accessed at: https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000114546/download/?_ga=2.232249759.1616097235.1608685456-751775083.1608685456

⁷ <http://www.fao.org/hunger/en/#:~:text=Hunger%20is%20an%20uncomfortable%20or,insufficient%20consumption%20of%20dietary%20energy.&text=For%20decades%2C%20FAO%20has%20used,be%20referred%20to%20as%20undernourishment.>

⁸ Shiladitya Chatterjee, Amitava Mukherjee and Raghendra Jha. *Approaches to combat hunger in Asia and the Pacific*. ADB, 2010

⁹ Ibid

such indicators as Stunting and Wasting were included to reflect progress towards SDG target 2.2. Unfortunately, little progress has been made on that front. The co-occurrence of different forms of malnutrition in young children is known to carry differential risks of morbidity and mortality.¹⁰ In 2019, more than nine of ten stunted children lived in Africa, representing 40 percent of all stunted children in the world.¹¹

In view of the above national efforts to fight malnutrition cannot succeed as a piecemeal endeavor and require a joint effort of all key actors. Gaining a better understanding of the multidimensional nature of the challenge of food insecurity can facilitate concerted actions and better targeting of interventions by national governments, international bodies and civil society organizations. In addressing these issues, the long-lasting collaboration of all these stakeholders is important because poverty and food insecurity is intertwined with multiple social, cultural and economic determinants.

Scope of the challenge

According to the recent report “*The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World- 2020*” prepared jointly by FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO almost 690 million people in the world are estimated to be undernourished in 2019 and the number of people affected by hunger has been on increase.¹²

The existing food insecurity in Africa is a huge and complex challenge that is closely linked to the risk of malnutrition, health care, education, political stability, poverty as well as overall national development priorities and directions.

According to the above mentioned report the prevalence of undernourishment in Africa was 19.1 percent of the population in 2019, or more than 250 million undernourished people, up from 17.6 percent in 2014. This prevalence is more than twice the world average (8.9 percent) and is the highest among all regions.¹³ In terms of the distribution of total food insecure (moderate or severe) people in the

¹⁰ Marco Pomati, Shailen Nandy. Assessing Progress towards SDG2: Trends and Patterns of Multiple Malnutrition in Young Children under 5 in West and Central Africa. *Child Indicators Research*, (2020), 13, p. 1847-51 accessed at <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12187-019-09671-1>

¹¹ *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World- 2020*, Rome, 2020

¹² *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World- 2020*, Rome, 2020
<http://www.fao.org/3/ca9692en/ca9692en.pdf>

¹³ *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World- 2020*, Rome, 2020

world, out of the 2 billion people suffering from food insecurity, 675 million are in Africa.¹⁴

Even more undernourished people live in Asia—the estimated number was 381 million, representing more than half of the world total. Yet the prevalence of undernourishment for the region is 8.3 percent, below the world average (8.9 percent) and less than half of that of Africa”.¹⁵

COVID-19 has emerged as a new challenge to global food security and a test of global, regional and national resilience. This crisis has ravaged the world and dealt a blow to economy and living standards, reversing hard-won gains made towards SDGs goals. Nutritional insecurity in the times of pandemic has increased, particularly in a low-income countries often becoming an entrenched phenomenon. The above mentioned ‘*2020 Global Report on Food Crisis*’ identifies multiple impacts of COVID-19 on food security and economic well-being. Pandemic negatively affects health and nutrition, food availability and food access, also having impact on displaced populations, social tensions and conflict. In terms of indirect impacts, the pandemic could drive further conflict due to high unemployment, increased poverty, and social unrest. The pandemic may well devastate livelihoods and food security, especially in fragile contexts and particularly for the most vulnerable people working in the informal agricultural and nonagricultural sectors.¹⁶

Measurement efforts and predicaments

The accurate measurement and tracking of food security, hunger and related indicators is important to measure progress and come up with policy adjustments. Equally important is measurement of sufficiency of dietary energy consumption related to both children and adults.

Countries and the organizations of the UN system must have at their disposal reliable, high-quality data to access progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, and particularly SDG 2.2, which is, by 2030, to “*end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving, by 2025, the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age, and address the nutritional*

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000114546/download/?_ga=2.70655635.2098978050.1613355285-751775083.1608685456

needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women and older persons". But quality data must be available also at the national level to facilitate better policy decisions and necessary intermediate adjustments. Availability of such data may be problematic: according to recent analysis the conventional indicators of malnutrition among children may "miss" substantial number of children who experience malnutrition, making the scale of the challenge facing communities, governments and international agencies even greater.¹⁷

Widely used Global Hunger Index (GHI) scores, for example, are based on the values of four component indicators: undernourishment (share of the population with insufficient caloric intake), child wasting (share of children under age five who have low weight for their height, reflecting acute undernutrition), child stunting (share of children under age five who have low height for their age, reflecting chronic undernutrition), and child mortality (mortality rate of children under age five, partly reflecting the fatal mix of inadequate nutrition and unhealthy environments).¹⁸

Affecting diet adequacy and quality, including the quality of children's and women's diets, food insecurity is a threat to survival, development and well-being of people. Moderate food insecurity is generally associated with the inability to regularly eat healthy, nutritious diets. Severe food insecurity is more strongly related to insufficient quantity of food (energy) and therefore strongly related to undernourishment or hunger¹⁹, ²⁰ FAO measures severe food insecurity by the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES).

Universal social protection

The ultimate solution to mitigate multiple risks and vulnerabilities and resolve the issue of food insecurity, hunger and malnutrition is universal social protection. The ILO recommendation 202 on social protection floors (SPFs)²¹ provided an

¹⁷ Marco Pomati, Shailen Nandy. Assessing Progress towards SDG2: Trends and Patterns of Multiple Malnutrition in Young Children under 5 in West and Central Africa. *Child Indicators Research*, (2020), 13, p. 1848, accessed at <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12187-019-09671-1>,

¹⁸ <https://www.globalhungerindex.org/ranking.html>

¹⁹ <http://www.fao.org/in-action/voices-of-the-hungry/fies/en/>

²⁰ See also: Max Roser and Hannah Ritchie. Hunger and undernourishment. University of Oxford, Oxford Martin School <https://ourworldindata.org/hunger-and-undernourishment#:~:text=Moderate%20food%20insecurity%20is%20generally,outcomes%20such%20as%20micronutrient%20deficiencies.>

²¹ https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:R202

important boost to the discussion on the feasibility and affordability of such schemes and systems. SPFs schemes have become an important element of the Agenda 2030 and are closely linked to achieving several SDGs goals. At the same time while efforts at increasing social protection coverage are present on the political agendas of many developing countries -- admittedly with different time horizons,-- a practical, down to earth approach aimed at satisfying basic food requirements at the household level is an affordable and achievable solution in most poor countries. Cash transfers to the poorest or direct feeding programmes for the weakest groups (including school feeding schemes) could be appropriate steps in many countries fighting pandemic to improve food security through better-designed social protection.

The FAO study called “Nutrition and Social Protection” concludes that social protection schemes- if well-designed and well-targeted --can help address the multiple dimensions of malnutrition, being “the most effective means to reach marginalized, resource-poor and nutritionally vulnerable populations”. By reducing poverty and improving food security, social protection schemes can address the root causes of malnutrition. By stimulating economic activity, enhancing social inclusion and increasing access to sanitation, health, and education it further promotes better nutritional outcomes. Social protection will be most effective when embedded in such a multi-sector approach.²²

According to the GIZ analysis based on national case studies social protection systems improve the quality of nutrition, cushion immediate risks of poverty, contribute to better education of women and girls, improve the productive and social infrastructure in rural areas, conserve resources and galvanize the rural economy.²³ Food insecurity is clearly a multifaceted challenge that requires multifaceted response.

Social protection is a human right. It could be seen as an investment into human capital rather than expense and is one of the best ways to deal with poverty, inequality and their dire consequences for society. It requires both domestic resource mobilization and international efforts, including ODA in the context of better coordination and policy coherence. The defensive, sustaining and transformative functions of social protection are realized in a better manner when

²² FAO. Nutrition and social protection, Rome, 2015 accessed at <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i5021e.pdf>

²³ The role of social protection for food and nutrition security: Examples from practice and international discussion; A contribution by Barbara Rohregger. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), 2017, accessed at <https://mia.giz.de/esearcha/browse.tt.html>

the key stakeholders work together from the inception to the implementation of the respective schemes.

The critical role of stakeholders

Overcoming food insecurity is impossible without the active engagement and a concerted action of all key stakeholders such as the state, the private sector and the civil society. While public policy and action have important impact on the extent and magnitude of hunger and food insecurity, effective state policies are also essential in promoting child-sensitive social protection. The role of other key partners and stakeholders have been also significant in both areas.

Public policies

Government involvement and improved public institutional capacity are essential for strengthening food security through fighting poverty, promoting productive employment and policies aimed at reducing social exclusion and inequality as well as reducing market volatility, better land management, agricultural rehabilitation, water governance and other security-enhancing measures. In many cases public policies have a direct impact on the supply of food and its price. The State commitment to rights-based agenda might be equally important for strengthening food security through human rights.²⁴

Government involvement in this area is indispensable. Neither food insecurity nor hunger problems can be resolved without a simultaneous, coordinated provision of services and public investment to poor and marginalized population groups, accompanied by actions on several fronts as mentioned above. Lessons learned in the countries with similar circumstances in different world regions provide a vivid manifestation that all government agencies must be involved including those concerned with agriculture and irrigation; health care issues, including reproductive health, food supply and distribution; water and sanitation, education and literacy; welfare on women, children, minorities and socially excluded groups.²⁵

Given that extreme poverty and hunger in many developing countries are mostly rural phenomena, investment in agriculture and rural development are vital

²⁴ Ian Christoplos and Adam Pain (eds) ,New Challenges to Food Security, op.cit

²⁵ Shiladitya Chatterjee, Amitava Mukherjee and Raghendra Jha. Approaches to combat hunger in Asia and the Pacific. ADB, 2010

pre-requisites for eradicating hunger. Improving agricultural production and integrating social protection schemes for "consumers" with social protection for "small/local producers" could be seen as a way to address the poverty and insecurity of the latter in the context of promoting sustainable development.

The private sector

The improved cooperation of the state and private actors has multiple benefits. There should be some specific strategies designed by the state to involve the private sector as well as specific schemes to encourage its participation. Promotion of private sector investment along the whole food chain, (recognizing the heterogeneity within, from subsistence farming through monopolistic traders), especially improved agricultural trade logistics, fostering public-private dialogue to unlock investment bottlenecks are particularly relevant in the food security context²⁶ For example, better water and energy usage, improved access to portable water or more efficient irrigation or land reclamation in many case could be achieved with involvement of the private sector. Improved cooperation could help with overcoming the digital gap to address food insecurity in a better way with the use of artificial intelligence practices. Such advanced technologies can play an important role in transforming food systems by performing tasks that are otherwise conducted by people such as planting and harvesting. This can help to increase productivity, improve working conditions and use natural resources more efficiently with better knowledge and planning management.²⁷

Digital technologies may be also used to improve efficiency of agrifood systems, which is critical to food security. New mobile applications can provide timely weather-based information as well as other essential information to farmers.

Growing role of civil society organizations

Civil-society organizations (CSOs) can play an important role in moving forward the fight against poverty and food insecurity. Their focus on specific communities and issues gives them in-depth knowledge and expertise needed to devise practical interventions. Their role in advocacy is also critical in changing existing approaches. Use of evidence is essential when advocacy strategies are

²⁶ Private Sector for Food Initiative, EBRD, accessed at <https://www.ebrd.com/downloads/research/factsheets/foodsecurity.pdf>

²⁷ <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/overcoming-digital-gap-and-food-insecurity-complementary-target>

conceptualized and implemented. CSOs are typically highly motivated when working together, particularly when joint advocacy activities is undertaken.

When the engagement of nonpublic stakeholders such as civil society and communities results in a meaningful involvement in an effort to reduce food insecurity, the results are beneficial for society as a whole. This involvement might be partially effective to address the needs of socially exclude groups, but it goes much beyond that in promoting improved service delivery by government agencies.

According to a study based on the project done by International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) in Washington DC, a policy framework in this area focusing on capacity strengthening of CSOs for “lobbying and advocacy” may aim at enhancing the overall effectiveness of CSO’s by joining forces with strategic partners “to coordinate their lobbying and advocacy goals, instruments and methods”. Improving the immediate environment is often an immediate goal; contributing to country structural change by “embedding community interest into policy and practice” and “by improving the position of affected groups, or the organizations that represent them” may be a longer—term goal.²⁸

Policy recommendations.

Addressing food security challenges in a decisive manner requires complex solutions and the commitment of multiple stakeholders to viable social protection strategies. The collaborative action of the stakeholders is essential to address intergenerational poverty and vulnerability in a way that can break the cycle of disadvantage across generations and build intergenerational solidarity that facilitates overcoming adversities such as food insecurity within families and communities.

The Commission may wish to focus its attention on the role of key stakeholders and their interaction, highlighting measures aimed at promoting inclusive growth, including programme design, policy and strategy development, and impact evaluations.

The Commission may wish to consider specific multidimensional steps, including investing in social services aimed at capacity-development and rebuilding human

²⁸ SNV Voice for Change Partnership accessed at: <https://snv.org/project/voice-change-partnership-v4cp>

capital in the areas negatively impacted by COVID-19, paying particular attention to food insecurity in rural and urban contexts.

The Commission may wish to recommend strengthening public institutional capacity in all forms aimed at overcoming hunger and insecurity, particularly strengthening social protections systems and mechanisms that proven their effectiveness at the national level and focusing at bolstering COVID-affected communities, promoting their resilience and sustainable development.

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