

Food and Nutrition Security

Evolution of Concept and Way Forward

fact sheet

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Background

The prevalence of undernourishment has declined worldwide, but progress has been insufficient and uneven. Malnutrition is responsible for about half of all deaths of children under 5 years of age, causing over three million deaths every year globally. Moreover, it is increasingly recognized that most countries and households worldwide are burdened by multiple types of malnutrition. Globally, around 160 million children aged under five are stunted or chronically malnourished while over 2 billion people suffer from one or more micronutrient deficiencies, while over half a billion are obese. This policy brief presents the evolution of the concept of food and nutrition security, and identifies policy recommendations aimed at ending all forms of malnutrition.

Evolution of the food and nutrition security paradigm

Post Second World War– Freedom from Want

- The basic concepts underlying the terms ‘food security’ and ‘nutrition security’ were articulated during the Second World War. In 1943, forty-four governments met in Hot Springs, Virginia, United States of America, to discuss the goal of ‘freedom from want’ in relation to food and agriculture. They concluded that ‘freedom from want’ meant a secure, adequate and suitable supply of food for every man, woman and child, where ‘secure’ referred to the accessibility of food, ‘adequate’ referred to quantitative sufficiency of the food supply and ‘suitable’ referred to the nutrient content of the food supply. Participants believed that in the immediate post-war period, the most urgent demand would be for cereals and other food items needed for minimum levels of dietary energy. Once production of staple food had been restored, increasing production of food rich in protein and other nutrients would be necessary for good health. They also stressed that poverty was the primary cause of hunger and want, and noted that, in the longer term, global economic growth and employment creation would be necessary to reduce poverty and achieve adequate nutrition for all.
- Food and agricultural policies in the 1950s and 1960s focused mainly on increasing productivity, production and marketing of major staples, principally wheat and rice. The longer term goal of achieving freedom from want by reducing poverty dropped out of sight.
- In 1966, the United Nations adopted the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights which enshrined the right to adequate food and the right to be free from hunger, and underlined the obligation of States to take measures “to improve methods of production, conservation and distribution of food by making full use of technical and scientific knowledge, by disseminating knowledge of the principles of nutrition...” and “...to ensure an equitable distribution of world food supplies in relation to need” (Article 11). This laid the foundations for the broad concept of food security while recognizing the importance of nutrition.

Green Revolution – focus on caloric food

- In the early 1970s, a succession of poor harvests worldwide led to a drawdown on global grain stocks, market shortages, rising food prices in many countries and a significant decline in per capita availability of grains and other starchy staples. The World Food Conference (WFC) was held in Rome in 1974 to address the crisis. It developed the following food supply-based definition of food security: “Availability at all times of adequate world food supplies of basic foodstuffs to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption and to offset fluctuations in production and prices.” In response to the WFC recommendations, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the

United Nations (FAO) Committee on World Food Security (CFS) and the Administrative Committee on Coordination Sub-committee on Nutrition (ACC SCN) were created. At that time, the focus of CFS was on increasing global grain production and stabilizing world grain markets on the assumption that this would be enough to ensure that all people everywhere had enough food to eat. The responsibility for ensuring that nutritional activities and programmes of the United Nations system focused on securing access of all people everywhere to a well-balanced diet that would provide the essential nutrients needed for a healthy and active life, was left to ACC SCN.

- At the height of the second world food crisis, caused by a series of poor grain harvests in the early 1980s, a revised and broadened concept of food security was proposed by FAO and endorsed by CFS in 1983. It was linked to three specific goals: (1) adequacy of food supplies, (2) stability in food supplies and markets, and (3) security of access to supplies.

Central role of nutrition for development

- Looking at both adequate food availability and access to food in the 1980s, brought about a new understanding of hunger and malnutrition, including undernutrition and micronutrient malnutrition. In 1990, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) introduced a Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Causes of Malnutrition, which made a clear distinction between food and non-food factors (care and health) that were deemed essential for child nutrition. This was expanded by the 1992 International Conference on Nutrition (ICN) as the very first intergovernmental meeting on nutrition, which developed and adopted the World Declaration and Plan of Action on Nutrition.
- As the term 'food security' evolved, the term 'nutrition security' emerged in the mid-1990s. Nutrition security focuses on food consumption by the household or the individual and on how that food is utilized by the body. Building on the UNICEF Conceptual Framework, the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) proposed the following definition in 1995: *"Nutrition security can be defined as adequate nutritional status in terms of protein, energy, vitamins, and minerals for all household members at all times."*
- In 2006, the World Bank published "Repositioning Nutrition as Central to Development" which has a more elaborate definition of nutrition security: *"Nutrition security exists when food security is combined with a sanitary environment, adequate health services, and proper care and feeding practices to ensure a healthy life for all household members."*
- The Scaling-Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement was established in 2010 by a range of stakeholders concerned with the lack of progress towards reduction in hunger and undernutrition and the achievement of food and nutrition security for all. The Road Map for Scaling-Up Nutrition (SUN), 2010 edition, elaborates the definition as follows: *"Nutrition security is achieved when secure access to an appropriately nutritious diet is coupled with a sanitary environment, adequate health services and care, to ensure a healthy and active life for all household members."*
- Emphasizing that nutrition security is only achieved when individuals actually consume the food they need rather than simply having access to it, FAO developed the following draft formulation in 2012: *"Nutrition security exists when all people at all times consume food of sufficient quantity and quality in terms of variety, diversity, nutrient content and safety to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life, coupled with a sanitary environment, adequate health, education and care."*

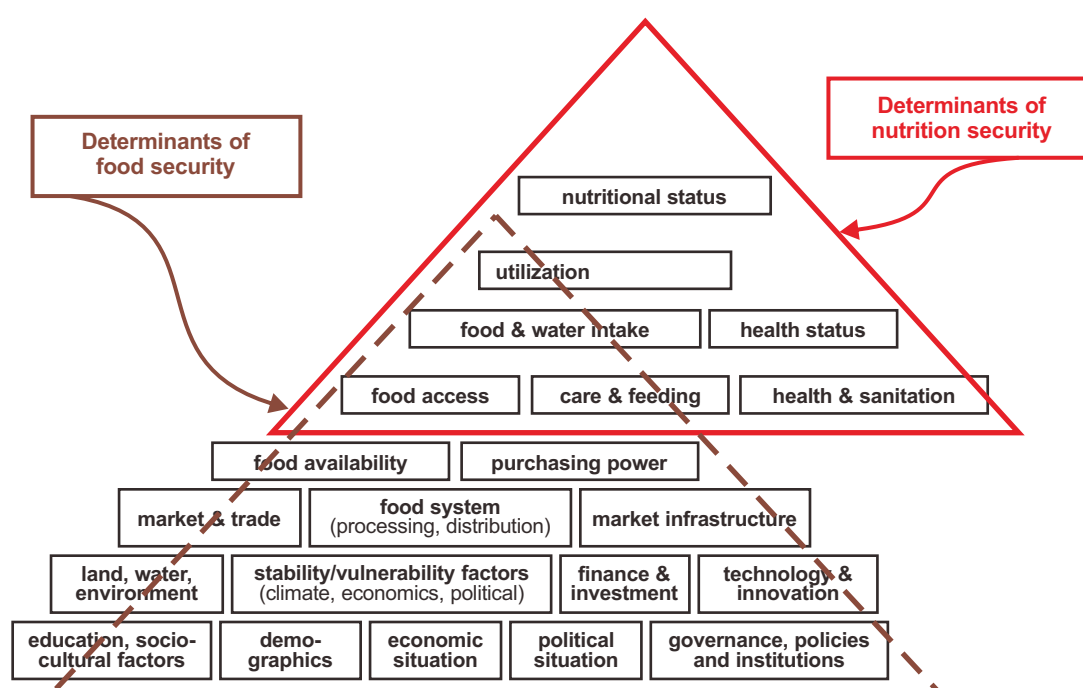
Towards food and nutrition security

- While the broad definition of food security embodies key determinants of good nutrition, the term 'food security and nutrition' has been used as a way to combine the two concepts described above. This is the most commonly used term and is used by the food and agricultural communities of practice, in recognition of the traditional emphasis on the food availability, access and stability dimensions of food security. In addition, it acknowledges the importance of key nutrition concerns such as care and feeding practices, public health and sanitation issues. In line with this, the Secretary-General's Special Representative carries the title "Special Representative for Food Security and Nutrition".
- The terms 'Food Security', 'Nutrition Security', 'Food Security and Nutrition', and 'Food and Nutrition Security' are used interchangeably across disciplines and languages which has often

prevented meaningful discussion on how best to achieve food security and improved nutrition. Therefore in 2012, the Committee on World Food Security acknowledged in its draft document 'Coming to Terms with Terminology' that the term 'food and nutrition security' best reflects the conceptual linkages between food security and nutrition security, while also expressing a single integrated development goal to guide policies and programmes effectively, and recommends the Committee should use, as appropriate, the following definition of 'food and nutrition security':

"Food and nutrition security exists when all people at all times have physical, social and economic access to food, which is safe and consumed in sufficient quantity and quality to meet their dietary needs and food preferences, and is supported by an environment of adequate sanitation, health services and care, allowing for a healthy and active life."

Figure 1. Determinants of food and nutrition security



Source: FAO

Policy recommendations

- The primary responsibility for addressing food and nutrition security in its integrated sense rests on governments which have to act at country level, in dialogue with a wide range of stakeholders, including affected communities. Thus, national plans and policies to improve food and nutrition security need to be developed and implemented where such policies are not in place.
- Better guidelines and definitions are required to understand what makes a diet, food- and nutrition- secure, and to give policymakers the support and space required to find solutions to address country contexts and issues.
- Several policies addressing food and nutrition security are likely to be relevant in many contexts. These include policies for increasing incomes of the poor, reducing the unit cost of nutrient production and nutrient prices for consumers, and pursuing diversity in production and consumption.
- Considering the equal importance of a balanced diet in addressing the double burden of malnutrition (undernourishment and obesity), and the role of agriculture in environment-friendly production, it is important to integrate and mainstream nutrition aspects into agricultural production and food systems. Moreover, given the cross-cutting nature of the issue, multisectoral,

multidisciplinary and multi-stakeholder approaches and collaboration are necessary.

- An overarching goal should be to break the two-way causal link between production and consumption of energy-dense, nutrient-poor processed food, using incentives and regulations in the value-chain, and focusing on knowledge-sharing with consumers.
- All this will not be possible without increased investment, including in sustainable agricultural production.

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