FOOD SECURITY AND FAMINE AND HUNGER

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From the outset, it is important to note that food security and famine and hunger are different concepts, although they deal with the same, most basic, need of life: food. Food security indicates the availability of food, while famine and hunger refer to the effects of the non-availability of food. Famine and hunger, in other words, are the result of food insecurity. This discussion paper deals with the concepts of food security and famine and hunger, and then attempts to relate them to famine early warning systems.

Concept of Food Security : Food security, as an issue, became prominent in the 1970s and has been a topic of considerable attention since then; thirty definitions of it have been identified by Maxwell and Frankenberger (1992). Originally, there was a tendency to understand the issue of food security only from a supply point of view. In 1979 the World Food Programme Report conceptualized food security, equating it with an "assurance of supplies and a balanced supply-demand situation of stable foods in the international market." The report also emphasized that increasing food production in the developing countries would be the basis on which to build their food security. This would mean that the monitoring by famine early warning systems for food insecurity should focus on the availability of food in the world marketplace and on the food production systems of developing countries. However, global food availability does not ensure food security to any particular country because what is available in the world market (or the surplus in the US or Canada) cannot be accessed by famine-affected people in African countries, as the economies of these countries, in general, cannot generate the foreign currency needed to purchase food from the world market.

The concept of food security would have more meaning if it were understood in line with the legal commitments of the United Nations: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), which accepts the "right to adequate standard of living," including food; the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1966), which ensures "an equitable distribution of world food supplies in relation to need"; and the Universal Declaration on the Eradication of Hunger and Malnutrition (1974), which declares that "every man, woman, and child has an inalienable right to be free from hunger and malnutrition." Each of these tenets (as quoted by Maxwell and Frankenberger, 1992) suggests implicitly or explicitly the distribution of world food to the needy.

Had these United Nations declarations been adhered to by all nations, the availability of food at the global level would have been one basis for food security in the proper sense of the concept, as defined by the World Bank in 1986. Although member countries accepted these declarations, responding to food needs of other countries is left to the discretion of individual surplus-producing countries. The UN has no power to enforce such declarations. Therefore, a global concept of food security does not guarantee food security at either the household or the national level.

By the same token, an increase in national food production does not by itself guarantee food security. Availability of food at the national level is but one factor for food security. Supporters of this idea try to work out a food balance sheet for a given country and, if food availability is more or less equal to the food needs of the country's population in general, they conclude that the country is food- secure. Given this perspective of food security, the basis for famine early warning would then be the monitoring of food production at the national level and may not take into consideration other important and relevant social, political, and cultural factors.

The assumption underlying this perspective is that whatever food is produced in the country will be evenly distributed to each region and to each household. But the facts are different. Those who failed to produce will have access to the surplus in the country (through the markets) if, and only if, they have purchasing power. In most poor countries, however, many people do not have such power. National governments, too, often lack the necessary financial resources to purchase the surplus and to distribute it to the have-nots, especially when millions become destitute. Therefore, food availability at the national level does not provide food entitlement to households and individuals.

Food security at the household level has been defined by Eide (quoted in Maxwell and Frankenberger, 1992) as "access to adequate food by households over time." This implies that each member of the household is secure, if the household in general has access to food. The assumption here is that household members' strong family ties would ensure that food is shared equally by each. The basis for early warning of food insecurity (famine and hunger) would then rest on the identification of the inadequacy of food supplies at the household level. It would focus on monitoring the food stock of the households.

Although food availability at the household level is a key issue, there are intra-household factors that may affect equitable and adequate access to food by all members. Maxwell and Frankenberger (1992) have said that "it is misleading to assume that household members share common preferences with regard to (a) the allocation of resources for income generation and food acquisition or (b) the distribution of income and food with the household."

The head of the household may have more power in determining the use of food resources and may misappropriate it. Moreover, household members' nutritional requirements may vary, for example, if some exert more energy in work than others. Cultural factors can also deprive members of the household (i.e., women and children) from getting an equitable share. Thus, the concept of household-level food security, in general, does not fit into the accepted definition of food security.

One of the most influential definitions of food security is that of the World Bank in 1986. The Bank defined it as the "access by all people at all times to enough food for an active and healthy life." This definition encompasses many issues. It deals with production in relation to food availability; it addresses distribution in that the produce should be accessed by all; it covers consumption in the sense that individual food needs are met in order for that individual to be active and healthy. The availability and accessibility of food to meet individual food needs should also be sustainable. This implies that early warning systems of

food insecurity should monitor indicators related to food production, distribution, and consumption. The performance of these indicators, therefore, will detect whether a certain area or population is food secure or insecure in relation to the spirit of the above definition. This is now a conventional concept of food security. What, then, are famine and hunger?

Famine and Hunger : Food security, on the one hand, and famine and hunger on the other, are inversely related concepts. Ensuring food security is equated to avoidance of famine and hunger. Famine and hunger result from the lack of food security. Famine is an absolute lack of food affecting a large population for a long time period. Famine is a disaster of food insecurity. Robert Klinterberg (1977) described famine as "an event which disrupts the functioning of a community to such an extent that it cannot subsist without outside assistance." According to Wolde-Mariam (1984), famine is a "general hunger affecting large numbers of people ... as a consequence of non-availability of food for a relatively longer time." Wolde-Mariam described it as a human tragedy: "a husband has eaten his wife, a mother has eaten her babies ... and free men have turned themselves into slaves. This is famine." This tragedy can be avoided.

The one "good" thing about famine is that it does not strike unexpectedly, but builds up slowly and provides a lead time before it occurs. In other words, the predictability of famine makes it possible to prevent it. If a food shortage develops to the scale of a famine, it must therefore be the weakness of society in general and government in particular. In this sense, famine is a man-made disaster (Ayalew, 1988).

Hunger is not famine. It is similar to undernourishment and is related to poverty. Mainly in poor countries, there are always undernourished and hungry people. In many poor countries there is seasonal hunger, usually in the months just before the coming harvest. People become weakened as a result of not having had adequate food for days. When hunger persists for a longer period, covering a large number of the population and resulting in mass migration and death, it then becomes famine.

Famine and hunger are both rooted in food insecurity. Food insecurity can be categorized as either chronic or transitory. Chronic food insecurity translates into a high degree of vulnerability to famine and hunger; ensuring food security presupposes elimination of that vulnerability. Vulnerable populations can reach the stage of famine with slight abnormalities in the food production-distribution-consumption process. Therefore, in conditions of chronic food insecurity there is always an impending famine.

Transitory food insecurity is a temporary or seasonal shortage of food because of unexpected factors for only a limited period. In a chronically food-insecure society or in situations of chronic hunger, it may lead to famine, whereas in normally food-secure populations, it does not turn into famine because of the resilience of the population. Repeated seasonal food insecurity, however, could deplete the assets of the even seemingly secure societies, exposing them to a higher level of famine vulnerability. If this is the relationship between famine and food insecurity, is there any relationship between food security systems and famine early warning systems (fews)? [Famine Early Warning System (FEWS) refers to the USAID-sponsored system. When referred to using lower case letters *(fews)*, it means generic early warning systems focused on famine.]

Food Security and Famine Early Warning Systems : As noted in the preceding sections, food security is a broad concept dealing with production, distribution, and consumption vis-a-vis food entitlement for all household members. Famine early warning is specific to the monitoring of selected indicators of food insecurity. Famine early warning systems are tools and components of food security systems because early information on the decline of food to all could enable a timely counteraction. However, as an early information system, a famine early warning system *(fews)* alone does not contribute much to food security. It contributes to the higher systems (e.g., food security systems), as long as those higher systems are linked with response mechanisms. It is the response component that will put *fews* in a better position to ensure food security at the household and national levels. Thus, in order not to conceptualize separately *fews* and a response to *fews*, should one think of a Famine Early Warning and Response System (FEWRS) as a single system? Should those involved in such an expanded system be responsible for both warning and response? Does this assume that any institution that develops a warning should also have the capacity to respond, or are the resources with which to respond under the authority of others? These issues, among others, must be considered with the development of a combined system of *fews* and response.

What about the credibility and timeliness of *fews*? Some *fews* focus heavily on food production, while others concentrate only on leading indicators such as rainfall. Meteorological drought is a phenomenon which does not necessarily lead to a famine or even to a food shortage. Unless it occurs repeatedly, a single drought will not result in famine within food-secure populations, as they will likely have some carryover stock from past harvests. Drought, however, can affect food production, particularly in rain-fed agricultural areas, and can trigger famine within vulnerable populations, even within countries that may be considered to have food security at a national level.

Moreover, increased production in general (e.g., at a national level) does not avoid the possibility of famine in local areas. A focus on production neglects the role of distribution or exchange and fails to address the issue of entitlement, which is a core aspect of food security.

The relatively better *fews* are those which have tried to observe all indicators related to production, exchange, and consumption. On the production side, they tend to focus on rainfall, pastures, water, pests, agricultural inputs, crop performance, etc.; on the distribution and exchange side, they tend to focus on food prices, purchasing power, market and market prices, etc.; on the consumption side, the focus has been on health and nutritional status. The performance of these indicators will tell whether there is an impending famine in a given area and also will help to estimate the number of people likely to face acute food shortage or famine. Who the specific adversely affected individuals in that area are, is not necessarily known because the targeting of individual at-risk victims is a problem when responding to early warnings. Would existing *fews* help to identify individuals likely to be affected? This is an important issue that modern *fews* should investigate, as it challenges the timeliness and precision of a *fews*.

In relation to timeliness, the main problem is not the time lag of problem identification, but the time spent to screen the population and identify those in real need. This problem exists because *fews* is not very precise on facts about households and individuals.

Famine early warning systems, therefore, should include other inputs in addition to what they now use, such as a vulnerability analysis. As impending famine exists in a vulnerable population, a warning of possible famine should start when a society is acknowledged to be chronically food insecure or vulnerable. This would be *the* earliest famine warning. It would require the development of an area-specific vulnerability profile that includes, among other things, trends in production, price and nutritional status, coping mechanisms, rainfall patterns of past years, changes in soil fertility, environmental status, income, household food stocks, endemic diseases and pests, the culture of food allocation and consumption within a household, household size, and other basic information on households. The analysis of these basic data and determination of degree of vulnerability would provide a warning of impending famine well ahead of the actual onset of the famine process that may be triggered by a slight deviation from the norm of rainfall or other factors adverse to food production.

Record-keeping of household data for use in vulnerability analysis will also facilitate the timely identification of households that would need external assistance when famine strikes. It also facilitate the identification of likely famine-affected populations, by monitoring the performance of only a few well-selected indicators that are known to affect people's livelihoods. It could also provide the best and most reliable mechanism for monitoring food security (or insecurity) at the household level.

But, one must ask, would there be adequate resources to keep records of all basic data, updating them periodically? Would the direct involvement of communities help to reduce resource requirements? Would the cost of such an exercise be reduced once vulnerable areas and populations have been identified, as the follow-up would tend to concentrate only on food-insecure areas? Does it need a demonstration in order to establish the feasibility of baseline vulnerability assessments in terms of credibility, timeliness, and cost effectiveness? These, and the approach itself, are issues for serious discussion among those seeking to bring an end to famine in Africa.

References

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