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AFRICA

Assessing Africa's Food and Nutrition Security Situation

Todd Benson

Food and nutrition security are the fundamental challenges to human welfare and economic growth in Africa. Low food availability and profound poverty have caused the number of undernourished people on the continent to rise considerably in recent years (Figure 1, inside on page 2). An estimated 200 million people in Africa can now be classed as undernourished—almost 20 percent more than in the early 1990s. The dismal level of food and nutrition security obvious in many African countries at both the national and the household level means that while 14 percent of the global population is undernourished, the figure is nearly double (27 percent) for Africa.

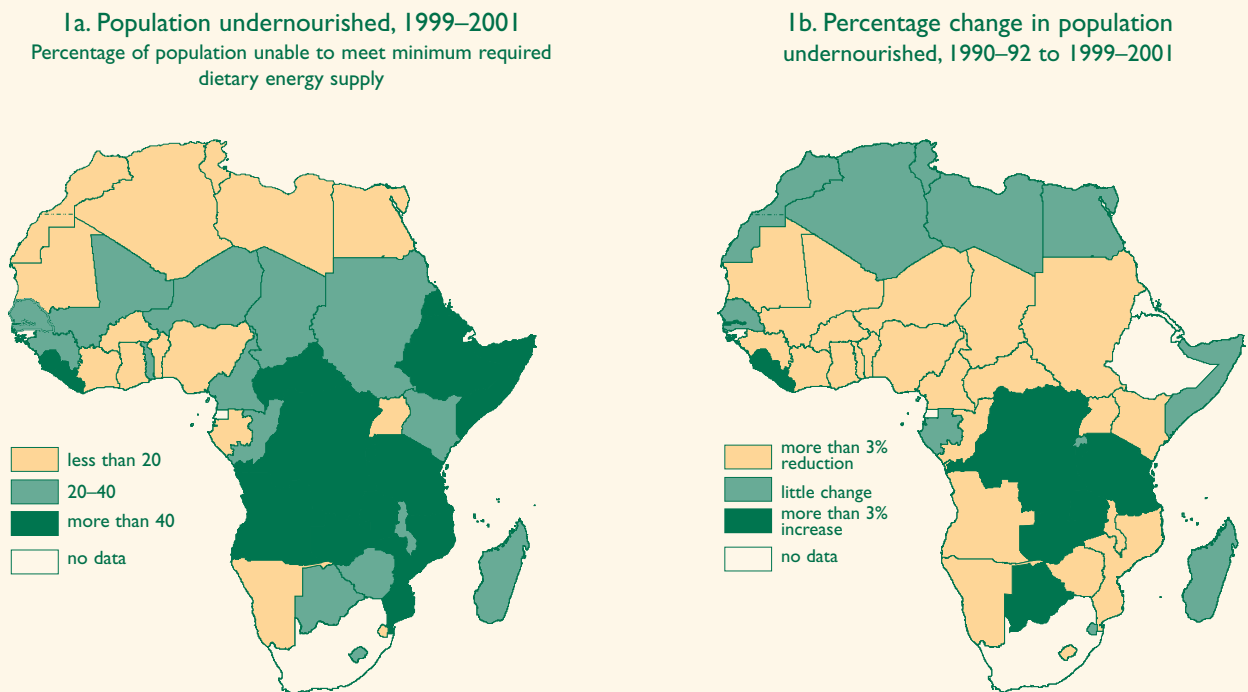


In fact, in more than a dozen African countries the rate of undernourishment is more than 40 percent, exceeding 50 percent in those countries experiencing or emerging from armed conflict. As a result, more than a third of African children suffer stunted growth and face a range of physical and cognitive challenges not faced by their better fed peers. Ultimately, undernutrition underlies around 2.9 million deaths in Africa annually—more than a quarter of all the deaths occurring on the continent each year.

The economic costs of such widespread undernutrition are enormous. This is because the economic growth of each nation—which requires enhanced economic productivity—depends upon broad improvements being made in the intellectual and technical capacity of its population. But, this in turn depends upon people receiving adequate nutrition, particularly women in their childbearing years and young children. So, only once African countries have secured the basic food and nutritional needs of their populations will they be able to achieve the broad-based economic growth necessary to reduce poverty. This brief therefore explains the issues underlying food and nutrition insecurity, before outlining the actions needed to effectively address the problem.



FIGURE I Prevalence of undernourishment by country in Africa, 1999–2001; and changes in undernourishment, 1990–92 to 1999–2001.



Source: FAO, 2003.

DEFINING FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY

Food security and nutrition security are not necessarily the same thing. A household is food secure if it can reliably gain access to food of a sufficient quality in quantities that allow all its members to enjoy a healthy and active life. But, individuals in food-secure households may still have deficient or unbalanced diets. Nutrition security is only achieved when secure access to food is coupled with a sanitary environment, adequate health services, and the knowledge and care needed to ensure the good health of all individuals in a household. Whether or not an individual attains his or her full personal and economic potential, however defined, depends to a large degree on the level of his or her nutrition security. The availability of nutrition resources and the degree to which an individual has access to such resources are a function of how a society is organized economically, politically, ideologically, and administratively. Consequently, nutrition security must be a subject for political debate and of immediate concern to any national development strategies.

CURRENT STATUS AND TRENDS

Though nutrition insecurity is generally being reduced worldwide, the problem is actually growing worse in Africa, where child stunting rates (an indicator of undernutrition) declined by less than 4 percentage points between 1980 and 2000. Consequently, as a result of population growth, the number of stunted children actually increased by more than 12 million, to 31 million.

Child malnutrition

When considering the status of children on the continent as a whole, North Africa stands out as an area in which child malnutrition is being addressed quite effectively. In Sub-Saharan Africa, however, the pattern is less encouraging and somewhat more complex. Countries in coastal West and Central Africa and Southern Africa have lower rates of child malnutrition than the countries of East and Central Africa and those with a large proportion of their population in the interior of the continent. Thus, the picture painted of poorly nourished popula-

tions in the Sahel and Ethiopia in the 1980s remains relatively accurate today. However, the highest prevalence of stunting occurs in countries in East and Central Africa, reflecting the civil conflicts, droughts and floods, and economic downturns (resulting from macroeconomic mismanagement or commodity price shocks) that have affected those areas. Finally, any effort to reduce the level of malnutrition in Africa must target Ethiopia, Nigeria, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, home to 40 percent of all the stunted preschoolers on the continent.

Micronutrient deficiencies

Because they reduce the productivity and the potential of the workforce, policymakers need to be as concerned with micronutrient deficiencies and the quality of food consumed as they are with the broader issues of hunger and the quantity of food consumed. Deficiencies of vitamin A, iron, zinc, and iodine are the four main micronutrient deficiencies affecting public health in Africa. Many Africans still consume insufficient amounts of these nutrients, even though they are only required in relatively small quantities. As a result, between 15,000 and 20,000 African women die each year of severe iron-deficiency anemia, while hundreds of thousands of children suffer a lowered intellectual capacity as a result of iodine deficiency. Vitamin A deficiencies in children are also common, reducing their ability to resist infection and contributing to the deaths of more than half a million African children annually.

Occurrence of undernourishment

Globally, progress has been made in reducing undernourishment. However, Africa is lagging behind. The proportion of undernourished people in Africa dropped from 29 percent in the period 1990–92 to 27.5 percent in 1999–2001—a fall of only 1.5 percentage points. So, as a result of population growth and the poor progress being made in many countries, estimates of the overall numbers of undernourished people in Africa have actually been rising over the past few decades—from 111 million in the period 1969–71, to 171 million in 1990–92, to 204 million in 1999–2001. Moreover, food shortages so severe that they require an international response continue to occur regularly.

Access to the components of food and nutrition security

For all Africans, food and nutrition security are closely tied to agricultural productivity. In the case of producers—farmers and herders—increased production

ACTIONS TO ADDRESS FOOD AND NUTRITION INSECURITY

enhances household food security. For purchasers, higher levels of production generally mean lower food prices; so, more food can be purchased by families with a given income level. In many countries, however, particularly those in East and Central Africa, the food crop sector is deteriorating and individual purchasing power is very low. Many persons living on less than one US dollar per day are unable to purchase or otherwise obtain all the staple foods they require, whether from domestic or imported sources. If the market is to reliably provide people with access to sufficient, nutritious food, the marketing system must both supply food to those who need it and simultaneously provide incentives to those who produce it for sale to increase production. In most parts of Africa, the marketing system is not effective in this regard.

The above factors mean that undernutrition in its various forms is primarily a chronic condition in Africa. Up to 40 million Africans annually face acute hunger that requires concerted international efforts to prevent widespread starvation. Another 160 million Africans also suffer from hunger and malnutrition, but in a less dramatic manner. For many of them such undernutrition is a permanent characteristic of their lives. Although they may have access to food, that access is not secure. When the chronically food-insecure suffer either large-scale negative shocks (drought, floods, economic downturns, and conflict, for example) or more individual shocks (such as chronic illness or the loss of an income source), most quickly face an acute hunger crisis. Food aid and social safety net institutions therefore remain important components of food security for many vulnerable Africans.

Access to the components of nutrition security, over and above those required for food security, is also a challenge that must be addressed. Investments in education, sanitation, and access to health care must continue and be increased if the advances required in nutrition security are to be made. There is, for example, considerable evidence that the nutritional status of children is related directly to the educational level of their parents, particularly their mothers. More educated mothers are more knowledgeable about the care they need to provide. Although not an obvious element of strategies to enhance nutrition security, ensuring that girls are better educated is a critical, but currently neglected, component of the efforts being made in Africa.

Clearly, the wealth of a country affects its people's access to food and helps to ensure that the additional requirements necessary for nutrition security (such as better levels of education) are met. The countries of North Africa, among the wealthiest on the continent, are the most secure nutritionally (Figure 1). By contrast, those African nations that have experienced conflict and ineffective government in recent years, unsurprisingly, are the most nutritionally insecure. Because conflict exacerbates poverty and poor governance, the governments of these nations are unable to provide basic public goods, resulting in a lack of access to food, education, health care, safe drinking water, and adequate sanitation.

The countries in which the majority of Africans live fall between these extremes of relative wealth and of conflict and destitution. These countries exhibit poor to fair progress in assuring the nutrition security of their citizens. Assessing what such nations might do to significantly improve nutrition security can only be done on a case-by-case basis. Where food availability is poor, food production must be enhanced and trade policies reexamined, to ensure a more reliable supply of food from the global market. Other countries may be food secure but still have crippling rates of malnutrition. In these countries, attention should be focused both on household access to food and the prerequisites of nutrition security—sanitation, health services, health education, and so on. It should also be recognized that the quality of policy-making, and the effective and responsible implementation of the policies formulated, are important basic determinants of the degree to which food and nutrition security can be assured in any country in Africa.

Ultimately, responsibility for assuring that individuals are able to attain food security lies with national governments. They have a duty to establish the conditions and institutions necessary to enable their citizens to access the basic requirements of nutrition security: (1) access to sufficient quantities of the foods necessary for a balanced diet; (2) the means to acquire this food, whether through cash incomes or access to productive resources; (3) education, so that people can provide themselves and their dependants with nutritionally balanced, hygienically prepared food; (4) clean water and adequate sanitation; and (5) effective health services.

Of course, a single detailed policy and action prescription will not enable national governments in different countries to effectively address malnutrition. Because of the different historical factors, agroecological conditions, economic comparative advantages, and institutional structures at play in each, the basic determinants of food and nutrition security in any one African country will never be exactly the same as those of another. That said, we must recognize that all African countries can attain nutrition security if sufficient commitment exists. Political will must be applied and dedicated efforts made to marshal the human, institutional, and material resources necessary for the task.

If food and nutrition security is to be improved, national governments must address the issues identified below.

- Policy must be formulated to produce sustained, broad-based, economic growth. It is estimated that, to end hunger in Sub-Saharan Africa by 2050, a 3.5 percent annual average growth rate in per capita gross domestic product (GDP) is necessary in the region. In the last decade, however, only half a dozen countries had growth rates greater than 2.5 percent. The challenge is immense.
- Efforts must be made to open national markets to international trade, both within Africa and globally, as national food availability should not depend upon national food production alone. The nutritional security of the population of a country is enhanced by the degree to which it invests in building the institutional and legal frameworks and physical infrastructure needed to facilitate open, reciprocal trade.
- Agricultural production must be improved. The effectiveness of on-farm production determines the level of access to food enjoyed by both farmers and the broader population to whom they are linked through the market. Increased food supplies simultaneously increase the income of farming households and reduce the prices people pay for food in the marketplace, both of which enhance nutrition security. Moreover, increases in the production of both food and nonfood crops contribute to the broader economy, both in rural areas and in urban manufacturing centers.
- Levels of education should be improved, particularly for girls, because the knowledge imparted is critical both to achieve nutritional security and to enhance productivity for economic growth.

- Direct nutrition interventions to provide food to those suffering from acute hunger and malnutrition and nutrition information and supplements to women of childbearing age and young children are necessary. Such interventions are a vital component of any effort to build the quality of human capital, encourage economic growth, and improve standards of living.
- The issue of gender equity must be addressed, as a close link exists between improved child nutrition and the extent to which women participate in making economic decisions within their households. Greater social equity enhances women's access to resources, so increasing the diversity and quantity of food they can provide and improving the level and quality of the care they can give to their dependents.
- Locally conceived and implemented action has been shown to be the most effective way to improve food and nutrition security. National governments should give broad direction to local efforts and facilitate the success of such efforts through resource allocation, institutional support, and the provision of necessary expertise.
- Central governments should ensure that budgetary allocations reflect the central importance that food and nutrition security have for the welfare of all people, as well as the immense economic benefits they provide for relatively little cost. In this regard, donor funding should be viewed as a secondary resource, and used to complement the resources allocated by governments.
- Dedicated advocacy should be used to inform policymakers at all levels of the critical role that improved nutrition plays in development and poverty alleviation. Without this, it is unlikely the malnourished will receive any attention in any planning and resource-allocation decisions made in the democratic, decentralized, bottom-up political systems emerging across Africa. The need to improve food and nutrition security must be communicated effectively and understood widely; its significance for the welfare of all members of society must be recognized. Ultimately, advocacy must build the political will needed to ensure that resources are provided to help individuals and households attain food and nutrition security.

As noted above, responsibility for assuring food and nutrition security ultimately lies with each national government. Thus, it is vital that the poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs) many African nations have developed within the past five years (many of which

have been used as master development plans) explicitly state the importance of investing in food and nutrition security to reduce poverty and generate sustained economic growth. Similarly, sectoral plans, most notably agricultural sector strategies, should include food and nutrition security objectives. Advocates promoting food and nutrition security must engage in the higher level policy processes that determine what revisions are made to PRSPs and sectoral strategy documents. The key message should be this: just as income and broader economic growth enhances nutrition security, an important precondition for sustained growth in income is a healthy, active, well-nourished population. Nutrition and food-security concerns must therefore be among the primary components of poverty-reduction strategies and related sectoral plans.

At the local government level, direct action must be taken to improve the nutrition security of individuals and households. Global and national policies are meaningless if they do not translate into local-level actions that improve the nutrition security of individuals in real, measurable ways. Policy processes, capacity, and resource allocation at the local level all pose important challenges that must be successfully addressed if local residents are to attain food and nutrition security.

The costs of attaining food and nutrition security in Africa are high. For instance, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) has proposed the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) as a way to reverse the crisis situation facing Africa's agriculture, reduce the incidence of hunger, and raise farm output. This will entail the investment of US\$251 billion between 2002 and 2015, or just under US\$18 billion per year. However, the ben-

efits of the security attained through such an investment can easily be shown to outweigh the costs. Moreover, there is a moral obligation to address hunger and nutrition insecurity. This being the case, it is important to recognize the power of political will and effective leadership in marshalling the resources needed to take effective action.

CONCLUSION

Food and nutrition insecurity is both a critical constraint to economic growth in Africa and an immediate cause of widespread suffering. Millions of Africans seek enhanced food and nutrition security. National governments and their development partners can do a great deal at many different levels to facilitate and ensure their citizens' access to the tools that will allow them to meet their food and nutrition requirements. The solutions are known. Now we must build the broad political will to address this issue and to foster the leadership necessary to effectively implement the solutions.

For further reading: United Nations System Standing Committee on Nutrition, *Fifth Report on the World Nutrition Situation* (Geneva, 2004); FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations), *The State of Food Insecurity in the World, 2003* (Rome, 2003); NEPAD (New Partnership for Africa's Development), *Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme* (Rome: FAO, 2002); C. F. Runge, B. Senauer, P. G. Pardey, and M. W. Rosegrant, *Ending Hunger in Our Lifetime: Food Security and Globalization* (Baltimore, USA: Johns Hopkins University Press for IFPRI, 2003); L. C. Smith and L. Haddad, *Explaining Child Malnutrition in Developing Countries: A Cross-country Analysis, Research Report 111* (Washington, DC: IFPRI, 2000).

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