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Book review

Food Policy for Developing Countries: The Role of Government in Global, National, and Local Food Systems, edited by Per Pinstrup-Andersen and Derrill D. Watson II. Published by Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 2011, pp. xx + 400, ISBN 978-0-8014-4818-8, \$45.00 (hardcover).

One of the Millennium Development Goals agreed by all member states of the United Nations is to halve the proportion of people who suffer from hunger by 2015. From where we currently stand this goal is unlikely to be met. Therefore, *Food Policy for Developing Countries* is timely because fresh thinking on how to tackle world hunger and related food issues is long overdue. At its core, this is a book on development economics related to food policy. As the title of the book suggests, governments in developing countries have a key role to play in ensuring that problems associated with food policy are addressed to enhance the welfare of their citizens.

This is a very nicely written book that links the various parts of the food system and discusses some of the major problems. The demand for food has been increasing; poverty, hunger and malnutrition are on the rise; and overweight, obesity and chronic diseases are issues that cannot be ignored. At the same time, natural resources have been mismanaged, and there is a growing perception that the poor have been marginalized.

Aiming to address these pressing problems, this book includes 11 chapters that cover different facets of food policy. Chapter 1 provides theoretical foundation of the food system and demonstrates its complexity in this globally interdependent era. The history of food policy and theories behind its creation is discussed in Chapter 2. Because health and nutrition are important components of a food system, Chapter 3 deals with human health and nutrition policies. The reverse causality between food system and health and nutrition is also explored there. In Chapter 4, food security, consumption and demand policies are discussed. The focus is not just on food production, but also on the three burdens of malnutrition: hunger, 'hidden' hunger (nutrient deficiencies) and obesity – each requiring different policy prescriptions. As the ultimate goal of food policy in developing countries is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, Chapter 5 describes poverty alleviation policies. Various definitions of poverty are provided first, allowing readers to appreciate the extent by which poverty alleviation numbers differ based on the definitions used.

The importance of domestic market policies in addressing food concerns cannot be underestimated. In the light of increased market dominance of higher-value agricultural products, and a shift from farmers to processor and retailers, serious thought should be given to how smallholders can be linked effectively with supermarkets, which are expanding at a rapid pace in many

developing countries. Chapter 6 emphasizes market institutions, infrastructure and other public goods to raise agricultural productivity. Food production and supply policies are explored in Chapter 7. This chapter investigates possible ways to increase food production and productivity, including using fertilizers, pesticides and new farming techniques while eliminating production bottlenecks. In addition, programmes to increase adoption of better technologies and research to increase yields in developing countries are sorely needed. The authors also recommend that farmers be provided with affordable insurance and credit schemes to improve agricultural production and yields.

Chapter 8 focuses on climate change, energy and natural resource management policies. As agriculture affects natural resource degradation, such as air pollution, soil erosion and grassland degradation, interventions towards sustainable natural resource management and sustainable food system are necessary. To realize these goals, environmental externalities should be internalized. Policies related to deforestation, soil degradation, water scarcity, chemical contamination, biodiversity and bioenergy should also be carefully devised.

To ensure that the benefits of food policies are shared by as broad a group as possible, sound governance and institutions such as effective competition among market agents, rule of law and strong contract enforcement are necessary for food market integration. Chapter 9 deals with the governance and institutional issues. The increasing integration of goods and services as a result of globalization has huge implications for poverty, health and nutrition. These issues are outlined in Chapter 10. The degree of price transmission, domestic market structure and power, physical infrastructure, access to knowledge and technology, access to physical, financial and human capital are all important to predict how countries can benefit from globalization. Even in situations where this is undoubtedly the case, globalization is likely to hurt some groups and as a result poverty and hunger may increase. This, together with the pervasiveness of trade-distorting policies in global food markets, is the highlight of this chapter. Although the authors also defend the role biotechnology plays in addressing food problems, they are acutely aware of the need for national and international biosafety programmes to oversee biotechnology risks.

In the first half of Chapter 11: Ethical Aspects of Food Systems, the authors discuss various schools of thought in relation to food security, while the second half includes issues such as food sovereignty, biotechnology and animal welfare. This chapter explores topics such as whether denying genetically modified foods on the ground of possible health threats is ethical, and the role that financially well-off people and countries can play to help the less fortunate. By its very nature, this chapter delves into subjective territory. In this chapter, the authors try to explain how enlightened self-interest could benefit the richer countries because new markets in poor countries could open up if these nations develop.

The case studies used in the book can be downloaded online, and they discuss specific issues in greater detail. Interested readers can refer to case studies from various countries to understand the intricacies involved in designing better food policy at a local or national level. The case studies nicely complement the big picture focus of the book.

As the developing countries have many pressing issues to confront, I believe many readers would have wanted to see some sort of a roadmap that identifies specific areas that need to be urgently addressed so that the goal of improved food security and better nutrition is ensured. It is not unreasonable to expect this, especially because the authors have extensive and distinguished research experience in the food sector. Policy choices need to be made all the time, so I, as a reader, would have preferred to see a section where the authors spell out the priority areas.

Having said that, the book is successful in imparting the need that those involved in making food policy decisions should have a deeper understanding of complex and diverse global food problems so that relevant policies that adhere to integrated, multidisciplinary approach can be espoused. The intended and unintended consequences of policies, short-run and long-run impacts, and potential trade-off between efficiency and equity are also carefully analysed. For example, the book explains the fact that policy prescriptions are different when the hunger is a result of lack of food compared with when it is due to limited purchasing power. The book includes ample anecdotes with policies that solved a particular problem, but created other equally serious setbacks.

The book is also targeted to those interested in development issues, but with limited knowledge in food policy. Technical terms are explained in a lucid manner. Big picture is almost always provided so that the readers are not lost unnecessarily. The authors do not want the readers to lose sight of the fact that proper implementation of the projects is essential to reach intended beneficiaries. After reading this book, one is armed with a deeper understanding of the food issues. For example, one will understand why the Millennium Development Goals that focus on hunger (number of calories consumed) and not on micronutrient deficiencies, such as iron, vitamin A and iodine are inadequate. This is a must-read book for anyone interested or committed to addressing food issues in developing countries. Although the book itself will not provide silver bullets to solve the problems it deals with, it informs us about what to look for in the quest to solving world's food problems.

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