



RURAL AND URBAN FOOD SECURITY: GROWTH WITH EQUITY

Dr.Chaganti Rami Reddy

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Sri Krishnadevaraya University, Anantapur-515 003,

Abstract

The desire to achieve some level of food security is as old as humankind itself. Until the last decade or so, the debate in most countries worldwide focused largely on the adequacy of food production to meet domestic needs, with a concomitant national policy emphasis on self-sufficiency in the supply of agricultural products. This focus, especially in the developed countries, has to be seen in the context of the Second World War and its aftermath, which had a profound effect on the minds of governments and societies. In countries with a large agricultural sector, policies to achieve food security at the national level, and perhaps even more at the household level, must include policies for agriculture and the rural economy within which it operates. This is so self-evident that household food insecurity in the urban areas sometimes tends to be overlooked. This paper has emphasized that economic growth alone (even growth with equity) can solve some of the problems of poverty, food insecurity and malnutrition.

Key words; Food security, poverty and public policies, domestic needs, agricultural products demographic variables, open economy, etc.

Introduction:

The year is 1996. The subject is food security, which is defined as the access for all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life. FAO has planned and prepared a World Food Summit for 13 to 17 November 1996 in Rome with the slogan "Food for All". The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) organized a ministerial conference on the same subject in June 1995; over the past few years, the world's attention has been focused on the myriad issues surrounding food security in its many dimensions. A plethora of papers, monographs, reports and articles have explored, described and analysed the multiple facets of food security.

Indeed, FAO in preparing for the World Food Summit has published three volumes containing 15 papers on subjects related to food security ranging from the ethics of food security to investment for food security. In addition, a policy statement and plan of action for adoption by heads of state and governments or their representatives at the Summit have been drafted, taking into account the views of governmental and non-governmental participants in the preparatory process.

Much of this work on food security has in fact been concerned mainly with food insecurity and has until relatively recently focused on the adequacy (or inadequacy) of food production to meet the nutritional needs of a growing population at the global or regional level. While production is of course important, and efforts to increase it need to continue with renewed vigour, it is only part of the picture; farmers do not grow food for altruistic reasons, but to feed themselves and their families through either production or sales, and in most developing countries the majority of the population is directly or indirectly dependent on agriculture. Furthermore, consumers (including many farmers) purchase food and in the absence of sufficient purchasing power they are unable to exert effective demand for food.

Food Security

The desire to achieve some level of food security is as old as humankind itself. Until the last decade or so, the debate in most countries worldwide focused largely on the adequacy of food production to meet domestic needs, with a concomitant national policy emphasis on self-sufficiency in the supply of agricultural products. This focus, especially in the developed countries, has to be seen in the context of the Second World War and its aftermath, which had a profound effect on the minds of governments and societies. Throughout western, Central and Eastern Europe, for example, the years of the Second World War saw real food shortages caused not only by the disruption of agricultural production, but also (and for some countries this was much more important) by supply requisitioning and disruption of international trade and internal marketing arrangements. The early post-war years were characterized by economic reconstruction and tight exchange controls to conserve scarce foreign exchange reserves and these restricted the ability to feed the population through agricultural and food imports, although the existence of "currency zones" (such as the sterling area and the rouble zone) and the Marshall Plan enlarged the trading possibilities beyond national boundaries. Food rationing and price controls for both urban and rural consumers were used to ensure an equitable allocation of the food available during the war, and these were phased out over several years after the war's end. At the same time, policy measures to encourage the expansion of agricultural production on a long-term basis rather than to meet the immediate crisis needs were introduced and the emerging welfare states cast wide safety nets to protect the vulnerable sections of the population, including the poor, the sick, the elderly, the unemployed, the mentally and physically disabled and children.

Inherent in this modern concept of food security is an understanding of food producers and consumers as economic agents. Food availability is the supply of food, which depends, *inter alia*, on relative input

and output prices as well as on the technological production possibilities. Food access is concerned with the demand for food, which is a function of several variables: the price of the food item in question; the prices of complementary and substitutable items; income; demographic variables; and tastes or preferences. According to Barraclough, to ensure food security, a food system should be characterized by:

- the capacity to produce, store and import sufficient food to meet basic needs for all population groups;
- maximum autonomy and self-determination (without implying self-sufficiency), which reduces vulnerability to international market fluctuations and political pressures;
- reliability, such that seasonal, cyclical and other variations in access to food are minimal;
- sustainability, such that the ecological system is protected and improved over time;
- equity, meaning, as a minimum, dependable access to adequate food for all social groups.

Prospects for World Food Security

On a global level, food security for all requires that the supply of food be adequate to meet the total demand for food. While this is a necessary condition for the achievement of food security, it is by no means sufficient. Although currently enough food is supplied globally, it is estimated that in 1990-92 some 839 million people in the developing countries had inadequate access to food, fundamentally because they lacked the ability to purchase or procure enough, that is, they lacked the means to exert effective demand. This figure, unacceptably high though it is, reflects a substantial degree of progress since the beginning of the 1970s; the number has declined in absolute terms from about 917 million and in relative terms from 35 percent of the population of developing countries to 21 percent, mainly as a result of progress in East Asia (including China) and parts of South Asia, such as India and Pakistan. The situation is most serious in Africa where the number of chronically undernourished people in the sub-Saharan countries more than doubled over the period according to FAO estimates

Governments and Food Security

It is difficult to apply the concept of food security at the global or the regional level where region is defined on a geographical rather than a politico-economic basis. Sub-Saharan Africa has been identified as a region where food insecurity is likely to worsen. What this actually means is that a high proportion of countries in that region are expected to have a worsening food security position. Conversely, some of the regions that are expected to improve overall, or at least not to worsen, include individual countries that might see deterioration. The highest level of aggregation at which the concept can reasonably be made operational is that of the national government (the only realistic - and even then partial - exception to this would be the EU because of its degree of politico-economic cohesion) since the achievement of food security depends on action by those who have the power and the responsibility to act. This does not preclude the necessity for action by external agents, such as donor governments,

international agencies, NGOs and multilateral and bilateral lenders, to support developing country governments in the fulfillment of their responsibilities.

Since the early 1980s, policy reforms initiated in many countries have been biased in favour of greater market orientation and a more open economy. There has been a movement away from the concept of development, including agricultural development, as planned change by public agencies. Indeed, this period has seen a serious questioning of the very role of government - what it should and should not properly do in a market economy. In this context, it is clear that government has a vital role to play if a functioning free-market economy, rather than one that is merely a free-for-all, is to emerge in such a way that the sustained and sustainable economic growth on which long-term national food security depends can occur and that its benefits are distributed equitably.

Food Security and Trade in India

India has put food security very high on the national agenda. From being a substantial net food importer in the 1970s, it was nearly self-sufficient in grain production from the early 1980s, more than self-sufficient in the 1990s and carries a high level of buffer stocks. The Food Corporation of India (FCI), which was instituted in 1965, is the main agency for the procurement, storage and transport of grains for distribution through the public distribution system and for maintaining the buffer stocks. The procurement and issue prices of food grains are fixed by the government; the issue price does not cover all the economic costs and the difference represents a government subsidy to consumers. The government also subsidizes the carrying costs of the buffer stocks, which amount to about 30 percent of the value of the stocks.

In the past few years, grain output has increased considerably from around 180 million tonnes in 1992/93 to almost 192 million tonnes in 1994/95. Stocks had reached 28.7 million tonnes by March 1995, but transport and storage problems were slowing procurement despite increased output. Nevertheless, most of the wheat coming to market in 1995 was bought by FCI and other public-sector agencies under price support operations, with private traders handling only small quantities of very high-quality grain at prices well in excess of the support prices. By the end of the summer harvest season, stocks had reached between 36 million and 37 million tonnes, but these had been reduced to 29 million tonnes by November 1995. Plans to lower the issue prices of wheat and rice at state-run retail outlets to redress the price increases of previous years had to be postponed for budgetary reasons, despite the rising costs of carrying ever-increasing stocks. Export restrictions were lifted to allow exports of 2.5 million tonnes of rice and 2 million tonnes of wheat for the year, and there was pressure from the Ministry of Agriculture to have the ceilings abolished to permit greater reliance on exports and imports to manage food grain supplies.

The most important constraints on increasing exports are inadequate storage, transport and port facilities. However, the removal of the public-sector monopoly on key aspects of infrastructure, including the

ports, is encouraging new private-sector investment, and the redevelopment of the ports is expected to be finished by 1997. If this is achieved, some experts believe that India could be exporting 3 million tonnes of wheat and 4 million tonnes of rice by 2002 (rice stocks are currently running at 16 million tonnes). This would make it a major player in the small world rice market, where its prices are competitive. In the wheat market, however, it is less price competitive.

There seems to be a strong consensus among the different political parties for continuing with the economic liberalization process while supporting agricultural development and giving high priority to food security. India therefore seems likely to engage more in international trade in grain markets in the future and will perhaps at some point decide to reduce its very large and expensive buffer stocks in favour of a greater reliance on imports. If so, India might play an even greater part in world markets once the port capacity has been modernized and expanded.

Rural and Urban Food Security: Growth with Equity

In countries with a large agricultural sector, policies to achieve food security at the national level, and perhaps even more at the household level, must include policies for agriculture and the rural economy within which it operates. This is so self-evident that household food insecurity in the urban areas sometimes tends to be overlooked. In this section, therefore, some of the relationships between the urban and the rural economies and the macroeconomic policies that affect the two sectors are examined. In particular, income, employment, taxation and public expenditure policies are of great importance in ensuring accessibility to food supplies; understanding the economic linkages between the urban and rural areas throws a different light on the effects that those policies have on households in the respective areas.

One major consequence of the economic policy bias against agriculture that has hindered its growth in many developing countries has been the extremely high incidence of rural poverty and hence food insecurity. A second consequence is a rate of urbanization that is faster than it would have been in the absence of such a policy bias. More than three-quarters of the poor in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia live in rural areas. In spite of rapid urban growth of almost 6 percent per annum in sub-Saharan Africa since 1960, which resulted in a population that is about one-third urbanized, the absolute size of the rural population continues to grow. Southeast and South Asia have slightly lower levels of urbanization than sub-Saharan Africa and annual growth rates of the urban population of less than 4 percent. Although Latin America and the Caribbean is far more highly urbanized (over 70 percent), a substantial proportion of the poor are rural. Achieving food security therefore requires policies to encourage the development of the rural economy. However, the magnitude of the numbers should not overshadow the fact that governments also need to address a serious and growing problem of food insecurity within sections of many urban populations - this is a problem that has become more serious given the exigencies of structural reform policies.³⁸ It should also be noted that because of inconsistencies in definition and data deficiencies, there is insufficient

information about the real incidence of urban versus rural poverty and food insecurity and of the effects of progressive urbanization on urban food insecurity:

An urban bias in much of government policies for food security coexists with a rural bias in much of the detailed food security research. It has long been recognized that developing country governments are more responsive to the urban poor than to the less vocal rural poor. Urban bias in food policies has been criticized by the research community and rightly, especially if transfers affecting food consumption were financed by the rural poor through the implicit and explicit taxation of agriculture.

The distinction between the urban economy and the rural economy is not one conventionally made by economists, who tend to view the system as comprising the macro economy at the most aggregate level with a set of sectors - agricultural, extractive industry, manufacturing industry and services - at the first level of disaggregation. Yet analysis approached in this way implicitly assumes a strong and complete set of linkages among the different sectors, which is manifestly not the case in many developing countries. The urban-rural distinction is perhaps a more useful subdivision for analytical and policy purposes and one that has meaning for countries at all stages of development; it is particularly relevant in the context of the least developed countries because the linkages between the urban and rural economies as a whole, especially through the labour and food markets, are often more important than those among the main economic sectors as traditionally defined. In other words, the lack of development of the non-agricultural sectors in the rural economy means that there are few vertical linkages within a sector such as manufacturing that cut through the urban-rural divide and form cross-linkages with the agricultural sector; similarly, the urban services sector may have few such vertical linkages with service provision in rural areas - the connections between the urban economy in general and the agricultural sector are more often through distribution, perhaps of imported goods.

The urban-rural distinction is also relevant to the countries in transition from centrally planned to market economies where agricultural policy reforms have had a serious impact on the rural economy. The provision of many economic and social services in the rural areas, such as rural road maintenance, nursery schools and cultural and leisure facilities, was formerly the responsibility of the heavily subsidized collective and cooperative farms and the privatization of agricultural holdings has left a vacuum in terms of rural services provision. At the same time, the sharp reductions in agricultural subsidies are leading to contraction of the industry with associated rural unemployment and urban migration, although in some of the transition economies there is strong anecdotal evidence that some areas have seen quite a substantial migration of the unskilled unemployed from industry to agriculture.

In most developing countries, agriculture is still the mainstay of the rural economy and, directly or indirectly, the main source of rural incomes. There has therefore been a tendency to stress the need for the development of agriculture per se by calling on the argument that, in economies that are predominantly agricultural,

capital scarcity limits the absorption capacity of the urban areas for labour migrating from agriculture. Thus growth of agriculture and related rural enterprises is the main vehicle by which employment and income can be increased on a widespread basis. Land-augmenting technological change is the key to higher agricultural productivity; consumer food prices fall in consequence and national income rises. The decline in food prices also has a multiplier effect on national income as urban wages need not rise as much as would be necessary without the fall in food prices and this, in turn, results in additional employment and greater output for the whole economy. Agricultural growth has other multiplier effects. Increased agricultural production generates effective demand for goods and services produced by the domestic non-agricultural economy and, as a result, relative prices (the terms of trade) shift in favour of the non-agricultural sectors, while resources, including labour and capital, are transferred from agricultural to non-agricultural uses, which stimulates growth in the non-agricultural sectors. The positive impact of agriculture-led development strategies where they are appropriate is well documented in empirical studies.

The issue is rather more complex, however. A sectoral development focus on agriculture, which is more pointed given the bias against agriculture in favour of other sectors, obscures the fact that agriculture as a sector operates predominantly in the context of the rural economy, a complex subset of the national economy that extends beyond any single sector. It also ignores the high and growing dependence of the rural poor on non-agricultural sources of income, such as craftwork, services, remittances and non-agricultural wages, which can together equal or even exceed the agricultural income share. This phenomenon is not confined to the landless rural poor, but also includes a large proportion of small-scale farmers who are net food purchasers. Tackling rural food insecurity therefore clearly requires the development of the rural economy as a whole, not just agriculture, and will contribute to tackling urban food insecurity through increased food supplies at lower prices.

The other sectors of the rural economy are related to the agricultural sector by way of the backward and forward linkages, as well as through the multiplier effects on consumption and production. Von Braun notes that "a review of the farm/non-farm linkages in rural sub-Saharan Africa suggests that agricultural growth multipliers appear to be significant though somewhat lower than in some Asian countries". This implies that policy measures for sub-Saharan Africa in particular need to be geared towards developing the linkages in the first place, rather than just to increasing those that already exist, if agricultural development is to lead to broadly based growth of the rural economy and if the agricultural sector is to be integrated into the national and international. At the same time, agricultural development itself requires the creation and continuing expansion of these linkages within the rural economy and with the national (urban) and international economies. This offers the prospect of increasing rural employment opportunities and incomes. For example, on the input supply side (the backward linkages), there will be a growing demand for capital goods, such as tools and agricultural machinery, as well as for the associated service inputs. The forward linkages include such factors as output marketing and food processing. Some of the consumption goods that will be increasingly demanded as agricultural (and indeed non-agricultural rural) incomes grow can also be produced in the rural areas.

Such a focus on the development of the rural economy, with agricultural development as its driving force, could have major benefits in the longer term for the urban economy. At the moment, the situation in the many developing countries that have not had broadly based development is rather difficult. The lack of growth in the rural economy has spurred rural-urban migration at a rate that has exceeded the capacity of the formal urban employment sector to absorb it. Food subsidies for urban consumers provided additional encouragement, especially perhaps in Latin America and the Caribbean and some other regions where the bimodal agrarian structure led to extreme rural poverty and destitution. For example, in looking at sub-Saharan Africa, Gleave argues that "present levels and rates of urbanization and the size of major cities in the subcontinent are not the result of economic development but a reflection of the lack of it.... The problems include employment (and unemployment), housing, traffic congestion, electricity supply, water supply, sewerage and waste disposal."⁴⁴ (This is in sharp contrast to newly industrialized countries (NICs) in Asia where urbanization has increased in line with employment opportunities.) The demand-reducing policies that form part of many structural adjustment programmes⁴⁵ have exacerbated this already difficult situation, especially in the urban areas; cuts in public-sector employment, reductions in food subsidies, the imposition of indirect taxes and falling real wages have a disproportionately negative effect on the urban poor with a concomitant rise in the incidence of urban food insecurity. The reduction in labour opportunities and real wages in the formal sector increases the labour supply in the informal sector and puts a downward pressure on the returns to labour. This occurs despite the rise in the price of food, which usually causes a rise in wages, because labour in the informal sector is not organized so as to articulate an effective demand for higher wages. The linkages with the rural sector primarily through labour and food markets and remittances ensure that some of these negative effects will be transmitted to the rural economy.

The long-term, broadly based growth of the economy is a precondition for improving food security. This must necessarily involve the development of the rural economy as a whole, which requires agricultural sector growth, and greatly strengthened linkages within the rural economy and between the rural and the urban economy. Growth of itself, however, while necessary, is not sufficient. Growth needs to be equitable for all of the population, rural and urban, because, even if the absolute numbers of food insecure are greater in the rural areas, there are still many people in urban areas who are malnourished and, given the linkages between the urban and rural areas, poverty and food insecurity in one will have negative effects on the other.

In the longer term, growth with equity requires that the food-insecure poor acquire more control over resources so that the benefits of growth are shared more equitably, which will of itself lead to more growth. More immediately, there are policy measures that can be implemented to improve the food security position of the poorest,⁴⁶ taking account of the need to protect the most vulnerable from the negative effects of structural adjustment programmes while allowing the long-term benefits for economywide growth from those programmes to be realized.

The poor are critically affected by taxation policies. Changes in the tax base that increase government revenues through the imposition of indirect rather than direct taxes generally have a disproportionate effect on the poor. Direct taxes tend to be progressive whereas indirect taxes are regressive if they are imposed on goods and services that are purchased by the poor (food, public transport, fuel for cooking) or if the inputs into such goods and services are taxed; indirect taxes can be designed to be progressive if they are levied on luxury goods and services. Thus, whereas reducing the disproportionate direct and indirect tax burden on the agricultural sector removes some of the anti-agricultural and anti-rural bias of earlier policies, its replacement by inappropriately designed taxes can lead to a more widespread bias against the poor.

The policies adopted for public expenditure are as important as those for taxation. Cuts in public expenditure can be made so that spending on vital services such as primary education and primary health care in both urban and rural areas is maintained. It is easier of course if the economy is growing, even though this may still mean a temporary drop in per caput expenditure. Negative growth poses more intractable difficulties, but priority can be given to those services most needed by the very poor. In practice, there is too often a bias in favour of the upper- and middle-income urban population, with expenditure on hospitals and secondary and tertiary education being accorded higher priority than the provision of free access for the very poor in both urban and rural areas to a more basic level of service that they otherwise cannot afford and that is essential for the development of their human capital.

Public expenditure choices also need to consider the provision of food subsidies, an important mechanism for transferring income to poor households where the majority of the income is devoted to food expenditures. Food subsidies have mostly benefited urban consumers and have in many cases been universal. Largely for budgetary reasons, the tendency has been to replace universal subsidies with targeted subsidies and much time and effort has gone into devising targeted schemes. That replacing universal with targeted subsidies has reduced costs is indisputable, but the success of targeted subsidies in achieving full coverage of the target groups is far less obvious. Stewart lists four main reasons for this: lack of information about the targeted schemes among the target groups; costs of acquiring entitlements to targeted schemes; qualifications for entitlement that exclude some of the poor as well as the non-poor; and social stigma. Although a narrow benefit-cost analysis of targeted interventions may well be positive, such an approach does not take into account the real costs of excluding some of those in need, which include both short-term and long-term losses in labour productivity and intergenerational effects arising from maternal malnutrition and reproductive efficiency. Another point is that, although universal subsidies may in some cases benefit the richer groups more in absolute terms (much as agricultural price supports benefit larger farmers more in absolute terms), the benefits to poorer groups in terms of income effects are greater, because of the substantially higher proportion of income spent on food. Furthermore, if the coverage of food subsidy schemes, whether universal (in the sense that all buyers of, say, imported wheat and wheat products benefit from the subsidy) or targeted, does not extend to the rural areas as well as to the urban areas, the majority of the poor are in any event not going to benefit from the subsidy. The traditional belief has been that the rural poor, as food producers, will

better receive their benefits in the form of higher agricultural prices, but, as a large proportion of the rural poor (be they semi-subsistence farmers or landless labourers) are net food purchasers in many developing countries, an increase in food prices will often tend to outweigh the income effects of higher farmgate prices for agricultural produce. Thus the provision of food subsidies and the form they take are important determinants of food security directly and of the ability, through enhanced labour productivity and income effects, to take advantage of opportunities to improve the food security position of the household.

Many countries make imports of capital goods cheap (through low tariffs and over-valued exchange rates), offer tax breaks for investment in capital equipment, and subsidize credit - all of which tend to reduce the price of capital. Subsidized energy prices often exacerbate this bias and, furthermore, have adverse environmental consequences. In contrast, social security taxes, labour regulations and high wages (especially in industries in which competition among producers is weak) all tend to raise the cost of labour in the formal sector.... Labour-market policies... are usually intended to raise welfare or reduce exploitation. But they actually work to raise the cost of labour in the formal sector and reduce labour demand. Studies from the 1970s and 1980s found that job security regulations reduced the long-term demand for labour by an estimated 18 percent in India and 25 percent in Zimbabwe. There is little poverty, in any case, in the formal sector. Yet by trying to improve the welfare of workers there, governments reduced formal sector employment, increased the supply of labour to the rural and urban informal sectors, and thus depressed labour incomes where most of the poor are found.

In most developing countries, and increasingly so under structural adjustment programmes, formal employment accounts for only a minor proportion of available labour. Recognizing the importance of the informal sector, agencies such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the World Bank are advocating policies to strengthen the informal sector by reducing or eliminating restrictions on its activities, even though this has negative features in the short to medium term:

Conclusions

This paper has emphasized that economic growth alone (even growth with equity) cannot solve all of the problems of poverty, food insecurity and malnutrition. Without equitable growth, however, it is difficult to see how there can be any solutions at all. For policies for growth with equity to be adopted there needs to be the political will for doing so, but governments everywhere are brought to power and kept in power by various coalitions of interests and where those interests are very narrowly based because of a lack of control over resources, including political access, for large sections of society, it will be difficult to take action that goes against them. Experience indicates that redistribution of resources is easier when the economy as a whole is growing. It is also the case that political support for measures that benefit the poor will be easier if the non-poor also benefit to some extent. Thus, for example, the replacement of universal food subsidies with targeted subsidies has in some instances led to a loss of political support for the programme. Governments have to make hard decisions about the realistic

choices and compromises that lie within their power; policy-advisers - even economists - can in the final analysis only advise about alternatives and possible outcomes:

Visionaries have been preaching against human selfishness for millennia without spectacular success.... Appealing to the longer-term self-interest of the powerful may occasionally be more effective than relying on their altruism. A healthy well-fed and well-educated labour force is essential for future profits and prosperity. Poverty and hunger breed crime, disease, riots, revolutions and war. Poor people make poor customers. Environmental destruction deprives future generations of their birthright. All these facts are well known. They have not been sufficient as yet, however, to produce the political determination to adopt effective strategies to eliminate poverty and hunger or protect the environment adequately even in rich countries, to say nothing of poor ones where economic and technical constraints are much tighter.⁵⁴

While it seems necessary to stress the problems that lie ahead in achieving food security for all, we should nevertheless remember that in many countries the achievements to date have already been substantial. Economics may be popularly known as the dismal science, but sound economic policies that emphasize growth with equity have played their part in these success stories and can continue to do so in the future.

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