

DRAFT, May 17 2010

Kjell Havnevik, Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala

New Policy Regimes to achieve Food Security in Africa

Introduction and background

In the refugee camps of the Saharawi people in the Algerian desert people have for more than 30 year lived on a “catastrophe” diet that has led to a high degree of child mortality and acute malnutrition that has caused stunted growth. Illnesses caused by high levels of iodine in the water and local foods are also prevalent (struma), among 22 per cent of the women and 816 per cent of the children (ZAK 2010 and Barikmo 2009). Since the natural conditions of the desert do not allow for growing of food, all the food has been provided to the Saharawian refugees by UNHCR and the World Food Programme (WFP).

About 160 000 refugees were originally fed on emergency food aid rations, but the provisions were reduced to 90 000 people in 2006. However, after local and international pressure, food rations were increased to 120 000 of the most vulnerable refugees. The precarious situation has led to an increased focus on access to food and the nutritional aspects of the food. In 2009 a coordinating organization PISI was established by the Health Ministry of the refugee camps to address nutrition, distribution of food and health issues.

This brief sketch of the food and nutrition situation in Saharawian refugee camps indicate the critical feature of food as a commodity and food security as a way of survival. Food is unlike most commodities because lack of it cannot be compensated for by other non-food commodities. Its non-availability leads to ill health and gradually to death. Access to food is therefore necessary not only for human well being, but as well for human survival. On the other hand abundance of food is a necessary condition for people to have access to sufficient food. The adequacy of food, or its nutritional value or character, is linked to the contribution of the food to enhance the health of those who consume it. The cultural acceptance of the food is also of importance for religious, ethical or other reasons do not eat certain types of food.

Above I have mentioned the four components of food security, (i) abundance of food which I linked to production and provision of food, (ii) the adequacy of food which is connected to its nutritional value, (iii) the cultural acceptance of food which related to religious/cultural perspectives on food and (iv) access to food which is connected to human entitlements, that is a person or a community's ability to access food through income, social networks, own production, trade, gifts etc.

In the world today of more than 6 billion people enough food is being produced to provide every person with sufficient food to live a healthy life. In spite of this one billion people go hungry every day, including tens of thousands of the Saharawian refugees. This means that the food produced globally is inequitably distributed between human beings. In addition food energy is lost through the transformation of cereal food to other types of food, e.g. by feeding animals and obtaining meat. This tendency is increasing with higher levels of income.

In order to understand why one billion people go hungry when sufficient food is being produced globally, we need insights into power relations at different levels. Who has the power to produce, distribute and earn incomes from food and on what terms? The concept of food security, as defined above, does not provide knowledge about power relations of food production, adequacy and distribution and access. In order to address this aspect we need to make use of another concept, food sovereignty. The content of this term will gradually emerge from my discussion and analysis below of new policy regimes to achieve food security in Africa, and the extent to which they try to understand power relations and the concept of the right to food.

New food regimes to enhance food security

Food production/abundance

Food abundance is intimately tied to the level of food production globally. As to fish, the oceans of the world are already overexploited, thus unable to provide additional food and important proteins. The struggle to acquire fish resources is reflected in the expansion of trawling as a fishing method and attempts to find new fishing grounds for e.g. the EU fishing fleet. The EU has established a fishing agreement with Marocco which allows fishing off the coast of West-Sahara, but without the consent of the Saharawian people. It is therefore in contradiction to international law. Sweden was the only EU country voting against this agreement. Fish farming and aquaculture are methods that are being increasingly employed to increase fish catches globally. The methods used are, like trawling, most often environmentally damaging thus undermining the sustainability of global fisheries. There is nothing new in policy regimes that can enhance the difficult situation in global fisheries.

Agricultural food production is affected by various processes. One is the expansion of large scale agricultural food production, e.g. of soy beans in the Brazilian cerrado. Through high input agriculture vast tracts of land has been able to generate increasing food crops. However, this development has also pushed livestock production for meat further into the tropical forests of Amazonia and with negative implications for the global climate. Until the benefits from managing the tropical forests can match the incomes from beef production the tropical forests of Brazil will continue to disappear. In spite of improvements in Brazilian laws and regulations regarding different aspects of forestry, they cannot be enforced in the transitional zone between cattle ranching and tropical forestry.

African smallholder agriculture which dominates the continent has a very low labour productivity. Expansion of smallholder agriculture to ensure food for subsistence takes place increasingly at the expense of deforestation and with negative climate effects. Since there is a relatively large gap between potential and current yields in African smallholder agriculture, the new policy regime is to provide agricultural inputs on a large scale. In a sense the attempt is to replicate the Asian Green Revolution in an African context. Both international donors and philanthropic foundation are providing massive funding for increasing inputs into African smallholder agriculture, including improved seed varieties and genetically modified organism (GMOs). A parallel objective is to direct smallholder production increasingly to the market in order to enhance what is often termed a dynamic development.

The Green Revolution in Asia was based on large increases in agricultural inputs and the active employment of agricultural research provided by the state to farmers in addition to credit, irrigation and infrastructure. The Asian agricultural revolution was promoted and organized by a developmental state that assisted in the establishment of a dynamic institutional framework for the agricultural revolution.

Africa today is different. Agricultural findings are monopolized by a few large scale companies, e.g. Monsanto, with a strategy to tie smallholders more closely to the market also on the input side. This is done by providing and contracting seeds to smallholder that cannot be used for multiplication for the next season – seeds have to be bought on the market for each new season. Thus smallholders are losing control over their agricultural activities and processes.

Some analysts and observers, however, argue that the future of agriculture even for Africa is large scale production. Such farming is taking place at an accelerating pace, but primarily not for meeting the food deficit and food insecurity of Africans, but for producing food for non-African food deficit countries and for cultivating energy feed stocks, such as sugar cane for the production of ethanol for export to industrialized countries. By promoting increased use of non-fossil fuels in industrialized and transition countries the hope is to halt climate change.

Hence, competition for land has developed between agricultural cultivation for food on the one hand and for energy on the other. Growing of energy feed stocks is taking place in large scale plantations that promotes mono-culture and that draws large amounts of water that often obstructs environmental flows in water basins and divert water from other users and use. Such large scale production is likely to be negative both in relation to quality of soils, biodiversity and ecological systems. Large scale food production in Africa is also accelerating to enhance food security in countries with limited agricultural land, such as on the Arabic peninsula and some African countries.

The adequacy of food - nutritional aspects and cultural acceptance

The adequacy of food production relates to its nutritional qualities. Nutritional security takes food security to the individual level. Although households can be sufficiently provided of food, the distribution of food within the household may be unequal. Hence analyses of nutritional security have to invade the household.

In many developing countries, women has an important role in food production and child feeding of children, but male heads of households most often have priority when it comes to household food consumption. Securing for the household variation in food production where women have a major influence is thus important for enhancing nutritional security. Women are, however, at risk because they most often have weak user rights to land, so-called usufruct rights. Expansion of food production for the market, which is a primary interest of many male head of households, may weaken household food production, including its variation, and take away user influence over household land by women. Increased market integration of smallholder production also have the tendency to strengthen mono-cropping that may undermine both the quality of soils, bio-diversity and food availability.

Unless increased market integration leads to a higher level of net household incomes that are evenly distributed within the family, nutritional security may be at risk. The same argument is relevant for countries. Increased food exports need to benefit smallholder producers if they are to be sustainable in the longer run.

An important aspect of child nutrition is also that of care. The food available for consumption by children may lose efficiency if a context exists of insecurity, tension and fear which is often the case in poor and conflict related environments. The time available for women to care is also increasingly taken by tending to family members with HIV/AIDS. Such care tends both to divert time from cultivation and from children and to increase the use of meager incomes on medicines. The spread of HIV/AIDS tends to affect people in the most productive ages thus depriving households of important agricultural knowledge and labour.

Policy regimes to enhance nutritional security primarily aim at safeguarding and supporting the position of women in the household, in agriculture and rural areas. Increased knowledge about the quality of food, the role of sanitation and hygiene among women is central for increasing the adequacy of the food. This can be attained by increasing the number of girls entering and pursuing education and reducing their share of the labour in the family and more stable influence over the land for household food production.

One important and relatively new policy area that aims to improve nutritional security is that which applies to the right to food. The right to food was defined in 1999 by The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (General comment no. 12) which states that, "the Right to food is realized when every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, have physical and economic access at all time to adequate food or means for its procurement". One of the core elements of the right to food implies, "The availability of food in a quantity and quality sufficient to satisfy the dietary needs of individuals, free from adverse substances, and acceptable within a given culture".

Another policy area to support the position of women in agriculture and food production is the streamlining of gender issues in the relevant policy areas. This policy regime is, however, not new. It has taken on different conceptualizations over time. The 1980s saw focus on the role of "women in development". However, increasingly it has been acknowledged that the policies to improve the position of women have to come through an understanding of the interactions and inter-dependences of women and men in rural households and contexts. In this process the policy conceptualization has shifted to the focus on "gender and development".

The central role of women in rural life and agriculture make it mandatory to improve their positions in order to enhance societal development in the wider sense. Several international conferences have been conducted to address the role of women and gender in developing country contexts, including in Nairobi in 1985 and later in Beijing. Although this helped increase the awareness of women and gender issues in development, it has not led to any substantial change in the power relationships between men and women, neither in rural areas or in national contexts.

Initiatives aiming for the privatization or individualization of land in e.g. Africa are supported by many women or their organizations since they may override the customary ownership systems that discriminate against women. However a dilemma often occurs when privatization leads to expansion

of land ownership by large scale entities and foreign interests. This may even mitigate, or prove to be worse than the usufruct land ownership regulations that relate to traditional land ownership systems.

Access to or entitlements to food

One important condition for enhancing food security is to improve the conditions for people to access food. The global context is one in which sufficient food is produced for everyone to live a health life, but in spite of this, more than one billion people go hungry every day. Although the food is available it cannot be accessed by those who need. This was acknowledged more clearly after the 1984 famines in Ethiopia where sufficient food was available nationally, but there was no effective demand that could promote the distribution of it so that famine was reduced or avoided.

Access to food can materialize through various types of entitlements. Ownership of land makes possible the production of food for own consumption and in addition for sale when and if necessary consumption has been satisfied. Access to food can be attained through relationships or social networks based on redistribution or reciprocity. Access to food can also come through earnings of cash incomes through employment, trade or diversification of earnings which can be used for the purchasing food. E.g. in Africa today, rural incomes from non-agricultural economic activities go beyond those of agricultural incomes. This implies that the character of rural societies and change is as well related to non-agricultural activities and incomes, including migration and remittances.

Trade, both locally, nationally and globally are important for accessing food, although the level of food traded is relatively low in comparison with the total volume of food produced. Strong reliance on trade in food provision may however increase the vulnerability of food supply, or food security, of areas or even countries. This may occur in cases where trade cannot be conducted due to various reasons of force majeure (e.g. war, volcanic ash that prevent air traffic, lack of infrastructure, natural disasters etc.). Free trade based on the traditional trade theory of comparative advantage is built on assumptions that in most cases do not hold in a real world. These assumptions include that trade has no externalities, such as unaccounted environmental degradation, that stable prices exists, that both trading partners have equally dynamic comparative advantages and that international immobility of factors of production is prevailing.

A historic perspective clearly shows that absolute advantages rather than comparative advantages have guided international trade. In this context gains have been flowing to the countries holding, or being able to create, such advantages. This is most often the stronger partners of the trade relationship. This can also explain the high level of trade protection of currently developed countries during their own development process. "Free trade" was only argued for once a situation of hegemony or strength in relation to trading partners had been attained. And not even then across the board.

Protection of food and agriculture is still in place on a large scale in industrialized or developed countries. The issue of trade protection has been sensitive through history also within industrial countries. The repeal of the corn laws in Great Britain in 1840 represented a decisive victory of the industrial capitalists over the landed aristocracy that secured imports of lower cost cereals that

helped promote the industrial revolution and the strengthening of the industrial classes at the expense of the landed ones.

Today industrial countries are acting like the landed aristocracy in Great Britain did historically. They are fighting the reduction of protection of their own agriculture which is holding back exports of agricultural and processed products from developing countries. A particular strategy has been to assign higher tariffs on processed commodities to block any type of development of processing industries in developing countries.

The industrialized countries have been able to use their power in international negotiations and institutions to retain such protection. At the same time under the so-called structural adjustment programmes that was initiated in the early 1980s (and still ongoing) developing or poor countries were forced to liberalise their economies on a broad scale in order not to lose external political support and economic assistance.

The policy regimes of the global trade negotiations (the Doha round) failed due to the lack of concern of support for reducing agricultural protection in industrial countries, or because reduction in such protection in such countries would only be conceded through major liberalizations of new areas of developing countries, such as insurance, finance, industrial sectors etc.

In terms of the right to food the emphasis is on “the accessibility of such food (that satisfy dietary needs and is free from adverse substances, my addition) in ways that are sustainable and that do not interfere with the enjoyment of other human rights”.

Large scale food and energy production also has the effect of marginalizing rural smallholders by taking their land that most often undermines their food security. In Africa most smallholder produce, for various reasons, with very low labor productivity levels.