

The Hunger files: food security

OUTLINE

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When considering food and its various roles through the lens of social, economic, and political perspectives, there is perhaps no single issue more forefront in the political agenda than that of food security. When considering that every year, more than 9 to 10 million people die of hunger and hunger-related diseases, with approximately 6 million of these being children under the age of 5. Understanding just how this situation can still occur under the auspices of a vigilant global developmental community and amid the ever-increasing social engagement of the global population is most definitely one of the key challenges of our time.

This is not a new phenomenon either; over the last 40 years or so (since records have been kept), the numbers of hungry and malnourished around the globe have fluctuated between 800 million and 1.2 billion people (SOFI, 2011). Food security then can be thought of as understanding just how and why this phenomenon exists and continues to exist to the extent that it does, as well as taking action into ways of mitigating the worst effects of food insecurity. Thus, in achieving food security, global multilateral institutions and government aim to ensure people regularly have enough food to eat—not just for today or tomorrow, but for next month and next year too.

However, in achieving this, it is only by understanding the complexity and multidimensional nature of the phenomenon that practitioners of global multilateral hegemony can hope to shape policy in tackling such issues. The difficulty, however, is that food security is increasingly difficult to separate from an ever-growing bundle of societal aspirations including interalia undernutrition, poverty, sustainability, free trade, national self-sufficiency, and so on.

Any solutions, therefore, involve fully comprehending that what is indeed included, implied, understood, or excluded within the food security catchall. Yet despite the global reach of the phenomenon and this deceptively simple definition, food security still engenders widespread misconception and misunderstanding (SOFI, 2011). One frequently perpetuated misconception is that food insecurity exists solely within the confines of developing countries (Gibson, 2016). Once again, however, the reality is much different—on the contrary in fact as it can be seen that food insecurity exists in many developed economies too, although granted largely to a lesser extent.

11.1 Food security: what is it?

When considering food and its various roles through the lens of social, economic, and political perspectives, there is perhaps no single issue more forefront in the political agenda than that of food security. Every year, more than 10 million people die of hunger and hunger-related diseases, with 6 million of these being children under the age of 5. Understanding just how this situation can still occur under the auspices of a vigilant global developmental community and amid the ever-increasing social engagement of the population is most definitely one of the key challenges of our time. The following figure (Fig. 11.1) gives visual insight into the phenomenon while also providing background knowledge as to cause and effect.

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By the Food and Agriculture Organizations reckoning food security is the product of food access, food availability, stability of supplies, and biological utilization. The following elaborates.

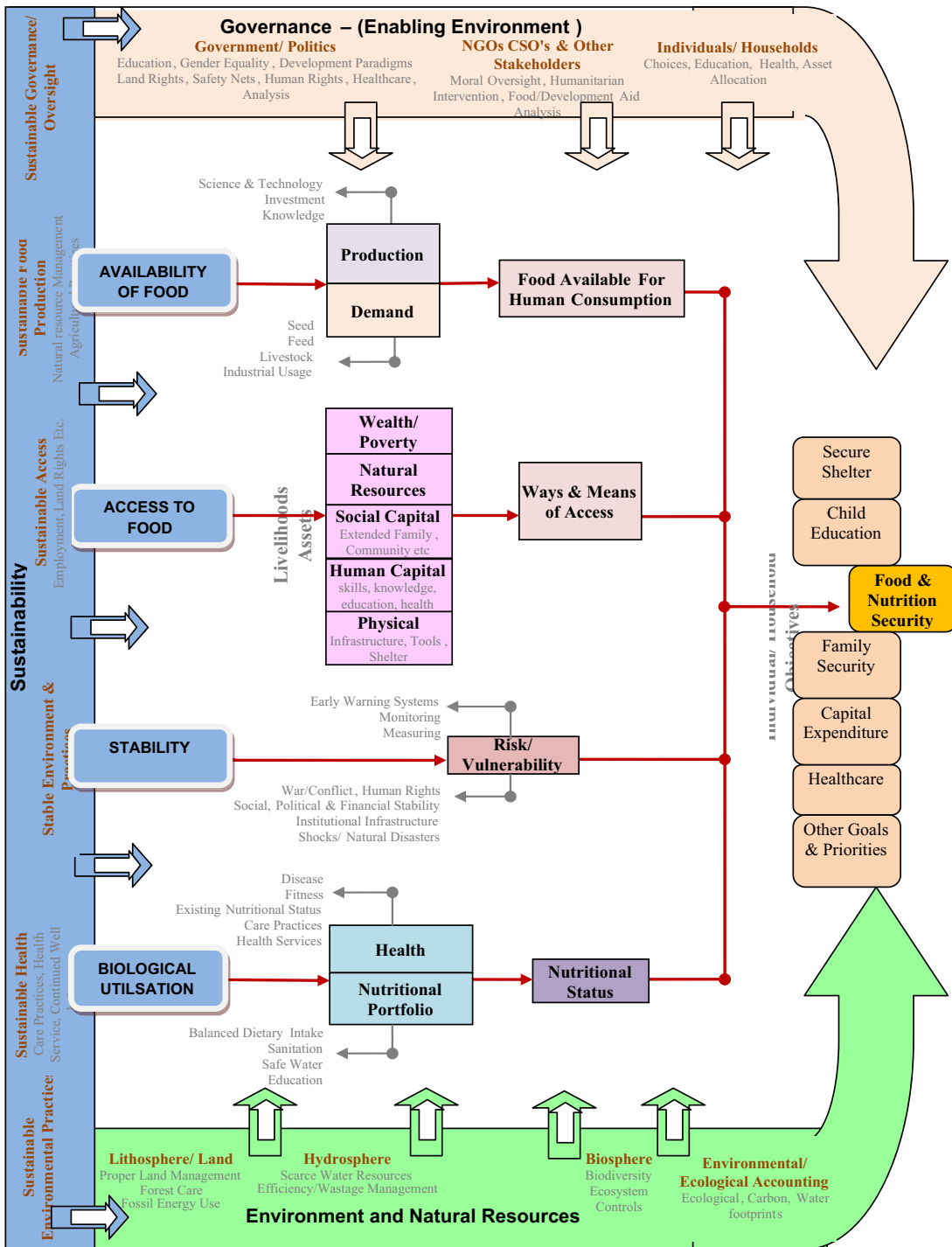


FIGURE 11.1 Conceptual framework of food security. Source: From Gibson, *The use of Conceptual Frameworks in Understanding Food Security*. (© Mark Gibson).

11.1.1 Access

The first dimension entails ensuring people have adequate access, both physical and economic to sufficient and safe food through growing it; purchasing it; being gifted it; bartering or trading for it, etc. (Sen, 1981; SOFI, 2011). This can be thought of as a package of entitlements that allows individuals to acquire and maintain sufficient foods for an adequate and nutritional diet. This can be obtained directly as mentioned through own-grown produce, sufficient incomes, barter, or exchange or indirectly through social arrangements at the community or national levels such as family, welfare systems, traditional rights, access to common resources, and of course emergency food aid (SOFI, 2011; EuropeAid, 2012).

11.1.2 Availability

When it comes to availability, food is provided through two streams—domestic production and/or imports. In food security thought and consideration needs to be given to the physical availability of food at farms and in local markets. In turn this is predicated on well-functioning market infrastructures with adequate road and rail networks as well as ensuring adequate storage and processing technologies (SOFI, 2011).

11.1.3 Stability

There is an understanding that food security can be lost as well as gained and as such understanding and managing risk is gaining much credibility as a tool in the fight against hunger. Risk management involves in-depth understanding of issues of stability and vulnerability. This might include understanding of the wider economy in general, of livelihoods in particular, of incomes, or even of food supplies and how they are affected by such things as shocks like floods, droughts, or pests, etc.

11.1.4 Biological utilization

Lastly, the concept of biological utilization is simply the ability of a person to properly absorb the food they eat. In turn this ability is closely related to a person's health status which itself is also predicated not only on food but also on important nonfood inputs. As such it can be seen that optimum biological utilization necessitates the need for proper health and child care; clean water and sanitation services; adequate knowledge of nutritional and physiological needs; and the proper application of this knowledge.

The UN's definition has had many incarnations over the years; however, the most often quoted is that which was defined in the report *The State of Food Insecurity 2001*, in which it suggested

Food security [is] a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (SOFI, 2001).

The United States on the other hand employs several loosely aligned definitions depending on need and the institutional body in question. Of these bodies, the USDA usually focuses on national hunger issues while USAID mainly operates with an international remit.

In the first, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) utilizes just one definition and it defines food security as

Access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life. Food security includes at a minimum: (1) the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, and (2) an assured ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways (e.g., without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing, or other coping strategies) ([USDA/ERS, 2013](#)).

The second agency, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), uses multiple definitions dependent on purpose. USAID's current general classification though is based on the USAID Policy Determination #19 from 1992, which states that food security exists:

When all people at all times have both physical and economic access to sufficient food to meet their dietary needs in order to lead a healthy and productive life. ([USAID, 1992](#)).

The United States also utilizes the Agricultural Trade Development and Assistance Act or more commonly the Public Law 480 (PL 480) program. In this program they offer a more flexible definition allowing for a broader range of possible interventions. Again, based on Policy Determination #19, food security is seen as

Access by all people at all times to sufficient food and nutrition for a healthy and productive life. ([USAID, 2007](#)).

Furthermore, on top of these definitions, the USDA Economic Research Service (ERS) also defines the food insecure as those consuming less than 2100 kcal per day ([USDA/ERS, 2013](#)).

There are of course many other definitions from many other institutional bodies, governments, and individuals but suffice to say there are many competing definitions of food security. Looking at the above definitions, perhaps the first thing of note here is that collectively they represent the more convergent of those on offer.

Yet even in spite of certain striking similarities in overall underlying philosophies, in detail there are also many key differences. This is where notions of food security begin to take on a complexity of its own and it throws up numerous difficult questions. For instance, there is little ambiguity in both the FAO and US PL480 when they include "all people at all times" and "safe" foods, yet what of "sufficient, nutritious" (FAO and USAID) and "... nutritionally adequate" (USDA) foods? What are and who decides the nutritional requirements of humankind? Is there a one-size-fits-all or are there different nutritional needs for different people? Furthermore, even when this can be agreed upon, who sets or determines the standards? For that matter too, what is the difference—if one exists—between sufficient and adequate foods?

It does not stop there either, what of the FAO's dimensions of physical, social, and economic access? And, does the availability of food in sufficient quantity take into consideration the quality of the food—and if so, again by what standards? Also, what of the market

mechanism itself, is it to be governed by free trade or through government manipulation of agricultural subsidies, quota's, and import tariffs, etc.? Similarly, who sets food safety standard policies? Are there sufficient market infrastructures? Are they well maintained?

In fact, the questions are ad infinitum and while for some, such differences are merely a matter of semantics, for others—policy-makers, statisticians, and the like—especially if policy is to be predicated on such concepts, such nuances are important and need to be clarified to the nth degree. Such ideas are also further complicated by the realities of perspective. That is, food security affects the individual, the household, and at national or regional levels, and the concepts are very different within each foci.

Food security is a political and social behemoth and affects policy at the most fundamental level; it affects agricultural decisions, subsidies, trade, employment, population growth, dietary habits, health care, and of course governance among numerous other considerations. All in all, the concept of affordable and equitable access to food for all is the goal of food security, yet it is a goal replete with complexity and difficulty both at the conceptual and practical levels.

11.2 Pandora's box

The above descriptions, although quite explicit, still only scratch the surface of the concept of food security. Yet even in this incarnation, hints as to the depth, the breadth, and the true extent of the multidimensionality of food security issues start to emerge. And so, it is with such a complex phenomenon many have attempted to define food security with mixed success. Indeed, it is worth noting that even back in 1992 a study by Maxwell and Frankenberger had already by that time identified close to 200 separate definitions. However, while many of these captured some or all of the essence of the issues at hand, definitions from two bodies in particular are among those most widely quoted; these are the United Nations and various bodies of the United States.

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