

PolicyPennings by Daryll E. Ray & Harwood D. Schaffer

Food accessibility

Last week we posed and began to answer the following question: what in our view would be a comprehensive and reasonably defensible agricultural policy? We identified four elements: environmental sustainability, human physical sustainability, economic sustainability, and political sustainability. In last week's column we focused on the issue of environmental sustainability. This week we take a look at human physical sustainability through the lens of "the right to food." The next two columns, in order, will deal with economic sustainability and political sustainability.

For much of US post-colonial agricultural history, export markets were seen as a way for farmers to rid themselves price-depressing surplus production, whether it be tobacco, cotton, wheat, or corn. But beginning with the export boom of the 1970s and the Universal Declaration on the Eradication of Hunger and Malnutrition issued by the World Food Conference in 1974, that view of the role of exports began to change. Farmers began to wear belt buckles that declared "The American Farmer Feeds the World." And the idea of feeding the world became intertwined with US agricultural policy—however the need to get rid of surplus production was always there.

Though the right to food and the right to be free from hunger had been a part of international declarations beginning with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948, the goal of the 1974 World Food Conference to eradicate hunger and malnutrition within 10 years was not achieved. By the mid-1980s the number of hungry and malnourished remained very close to the level it was 10 years earlier. In the meantime a follow-up to the UDHR, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/cescr.htm>), was adopted in 1966 though it was not ratified by the required number of nations until 1976. The ICESCR recognizes "the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food..." (later documents make it clear that the masculine pronouns, notwithstanding, the right to food includes female-headed households as well).

When in 1996 the leaders of the world gathered at the World Food Summit and sought, once again, to tackle the seemingly intractable problem of reducing the number of hungry in the world, they tempered their goal so that instead of eliminating hunger in 10 years, they sought to halve the number of hungry by 2015 (in 20 years)—at present the number of hungry in the world is higher than it was in 1996 and it seems certain that the goal will once again not be met in the

next year-and-a-half.

One of the actions of the World Food Summit was to request "a better definition of the rights relating to food" found in the ICESCR. This request was assigned to the Committee on Economic, Cultural, and Social Rights and was addressed during its 20th session in 1999. The result was a document called Substantive Issues Arising in the Implementation of the ICESCR: General Comment 12, The Right to Adequate Food (<http://www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/%28Symbol%29/3d02758c707031d58025677f003b73b9?Opendocument>).

General Comment 12 included a number of concepts that are crucial to understanding the Right to Food and what we have identified as an element of reasonably defensible agricultural policy: human physical sustainability—making sure that all humans have access to the food they need for full human physical, mental, and social development. Key among the concepts contained in General Comment 12 are 1) availability, 2) accessibility, 3) adequacy, 4) security, and 5) sustainability. While these concepts overlap, it is valuable to look at them one at a time.

The concept of the **availability** of food involves issues of production and distribution. The availability of food means that there is sufficient food—physical availability at the household, community, state and/or international levels to provide food for everyone. For the majority of the hungry in the world, self-production or production within their community is the primary means of ensuring the physical availability of food for them and their families. For others in the world availability involves the distribution of food and food products to humanitarian or retail outlets within their community.

"The right to adequate food is realized when every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, has physical and *economic access* (emphasis added) at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement" (General Comment 12). For those producing their own food, **accessibility** includes an adequate resource base and the appropriate tools and resources to engage in food production.

Accessibility also includes the physical ability to provide the labor needed to farm. For those not engaged in their own food production, accessibility means the ability to earn enough to participate in the retail market for food. Accessibility can also be made available through a form of social security provided by family members for those too old or weak to earn a living or produce their own food. For some accessibility involves obtaining food from aid agencies.

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Famine can arise in the midst of a surfeit of food as was true in Bengal in 1943, Ethiopia in 1974, and India in 2001. “Fundamentally, the roots of the problem of hunger and malnutrition are not lack of food but lack of *access* (emphasis in the original) to available food, inter alia because of poverty, by large segments of the world’s population” (General Comment 12). Hunger is a problem of markets—food and/or land—and the lack of market access.

Adequacy involves issues of quantity, quality, and cultural acceptability. Food needs to be available and accessible in a sufficient quantity to alleviate hunger. The quality of the food must be able to meet the appropriate nutritional requirements for full physical and mental development of each individual. Caloric sufficiency alone may alleviate hunger but still leave the individual susceptible to malnutrition. In addition the food must be free from contamination by either physical, chemical, or biological contaminants that would adversely affect those eating it. The food made available by either market or non-market sources must be “acceptable within a given culture” (General Comment 12).

General Comment 12 says **food security** implies “food being accessible for both present and future generations.” One component of food security involves the holding of adequate reserves, at the household, community, state, and international levels to ensure food availability, given the vagaries of weather and other production-related problems. Adequate reserves, properly managed, reduce the need for food embargoes as was seen during the sudden increase in food prices in 2008.

Sustainability is measured in terms of long-term availability and accessibility. A humanitarian food relief program may meet immediate needs but unless it involves changing conditions so that individuals, families, and communities are able either to produce their food or earn enough to ensure economic access to food over the long-term, it is not sustainable. In addition, sustainable agricultural production practices do not deplete the soil or other natural resources, particularly water and oil.

Aspects of these five key concepts identified in General Comment 12 can be found throughout US agricultural policy. One only has to look at programs like SNAP (Food Stamps), Farmers Markets, EQIP and the Conservation Reserve, and the Food Safety and Inspection Service to see elements of the Right to Food. Even programs like Social Security, Supplemental Security Income, and Temporary Aid to Needy Families are crucial to the right to food by providing people with financial resources that they can use to purchase food.

While agricultural and non-agricultural programs like these help mitigate (not eliminate) hunger in the US, such programs are often beyond the financial reach of countries where hunger is endemic.

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