Evolving Concepts of Food Security

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The concept of “food security” (FS) has evolved widely over the years. Earlier concepts focused on **physical availability** of food, regardless of whether people had access or not. The 1974 World Food Summit defined food security as: “availability at all times of adequate world food supplies of basic foodstuffs to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption and to offset fluctuations in production and prices”.

In 1983, FAO expanded its FS concept to include **economic access** by vulnerable people to available supplies: “... ensuring that all people at all times have both physical and economic access to the basic food that they need”.

In 1986, the World Bank report “Poverty and Hunger” further elaborated the FS concept to include the **adequacy** of food: “... access of all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life”. The Report also made a distinction between **chronic food insecurity**, brought about by structural poverty and low incomes, and **transitory food insecurity**, which is caused by natural disasters, economic collapse or conflict.

In the mid-1980s, there was a shift in focus towards **rights** and **entitlements**, influenced by Amartya Sen’s 1981 seminal study “Poverty and Famines” that showed how “famines thrive even without a general decline in food availability”. Steering clear of the concept of food security that focuses on food supply, Amartya Sen’s work instead placed emphasis on **consumption** and the **entitlement**, which focuses on ownership and exchange. Entitlement is defined as “the set of alternative commodity bundles that a person can command in a society using the totality of rights and opportunities that he or she faces”.

Amartya Sen’s work provided the underlying conceptual framework for the Human Development Index (HDI), which was launched in 1990. The 1994 UNDP Human Development Report later promoted the broader concept of **human security**, to include the aspect of food security as one of its components.

By the mid-1990s, there was a concern to link access to sufficient food with concerns for **food safety** and **nutritional balance** needed for an “active, healthy life”. In an era of growing trade liberalization, there was also a concern that people’s dietary needs had to be linked to **food preferences**, socially or culturally determined. The 1996 World Food Summit thus adopted this definition: “Food security, at the individual, household, national, regional and
global levels [is achieved] when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) criticized the 1996 World Food Summit Declaration for placing too much reliance on external markets, trade and food aid for ensuring food security at the national level. Instead, CSOs advocated for the principles of food self-sufficiency and food self-reliance, or the need for countries, nations and peoples to produce and ensure their own food, to the extent possible.

With the inclusion of agriculture into the GATT Uruguay Round in 1995, there was increasing concern for protection of the rights of small farmers and producers. In a 1995 Asian CSO Workshop convened by ANGOC, 101 CSOs issued the “Bangkok Declaration” that called for the working principle of reducing food kilometers, or “reduction of the distance between where food is produced, and where the same food is consumed”. This principle emphasized the rights of small producers to land and resources, the need to develop local markets, and the need to reduce environmental effects and CO2 emissions associated with transporting food over wide distances.

At the international level, CSOs expressed concern over the growing intrusion of global capital into the lives of small farmers, producers and consumers. CSOs called for food sovereignty, defined as “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.”

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