

The Global Food Crisis and the Challenge of Food Security

Lesley Masters

The issue of food security has risen dramatically on the international agenda culminating in the Food Crisis Summit, June 2008. This policy brief proceeds from the premise that in addressing the rising price of food against the background of climate change and bioenergy, the summit has adopted a parochial view limiting discussion on a range of challenges facing food security. Without an inclusive and comprehensive debate on the often competing challenges to food security underlying tensions may not be addressed, leaving the food crisis unresolved.

Introduction

Following the steep rise in the food price and the resulting protests across countries in the developing world, the issue of food security has risen dramatically on the international agenda culminating in the High-Level Conference on World Food Security or the Food Crisis Summit in Rome, June 2008. The challenge facing policy decision-makers emanates from the multidimensional character of food security and its linkage to a number of issues on the international agenda such as climate change, trade and development and questions surrounding international governance. The sheer range of reasons provided by stakeholders for the current food crisis offers a glimpse of the complexity in attaining food security. These include poor harvests and low food stocks, the impacts of flooding and drought (climate change), the link between agriculture and biofuels, rising demand from changing

consumption patterns in countries such as India and China (rapid economic and population growth), failure to invest in agriculture, rising oil prices and a shortfall in political leadership. Nevertheless, discussions at the Food Crisis Summit were shaped by the narrow focus given to the impact of climate change and bioenergy. Indeed, with several challenges to food security omitted from the summit agenda, efforts to curb the food crisis have effectively been constrained.

Background: Food Security at the Summit

Despite the media attention given to the current international food crisis, food security is not a new or recent addition to the international agenda. In 1974 the World Food Conference was convened in order to address the growing food crisis within the wider context of development and international

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The 2008 Food Crisis Summit, held under the auspices of the FAO, gave particular focus to the challenges of climate change and bioenergy, two areas that are inextricably linked and have raised considerable debate

economic cooperation. The Universal Declaration on the Eradication of Hunger and Malnutrition adopted at the conference, proclaimed the right of every man, woman and child “to be free from hunger and malnutrition in order to develop fully and maintain their physical and mental faculties.”² Indeed, Henry Kissinger went on to declare that within ten years no man, woman or child would go to bed hungry.³ Nevertheless through a combination of failures, particularly in policy making and funding, there has been a shortfall in the implementation of the Universal Declaration. The 1996 World Food Summit “was called in response to the continued existence of widespread undernutrition and growing concern about the capacity of agriculture to meet future food needs.”⁴ At the 1996 summit the Rome Declaration on World Food Security “reaffirmed the right of everyone to have access to safe nutritious food, consistent with the right to adequate food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger.”⁵ Pledges were made to commit to the eradication of poverty and the immediate reduction of the number of “undernourished people to half their present level no later than 2015.”⁶ The Rome Declaration and the World Food Summit Plan of Action were to “lay the foundations for diverse paths to a common objective – food security, at the individual, household, national, regional and global levels.”⁷ The Rome Declaration committed parties to supporting and implementing the Plan of Action which set out seven commitments including the creation of an enabling environment for the pursuit of food security, access to sufficient and nutritionally adequate food, participatory and sustainable food production, trade policies conducive to fostering food security, providing transitory and emergency food aid, investment and development in agriculture and the monitoring of the implementation of the Plan of Action.⁸ Despite these international commitments the number of those hungry has continued to grow worldwide. This led to a follow-up conference, The World Food Summit: Five Years Later (2002), aimed at assessing the progress made towards the goals set out in 1996. Once again, states reaffirmed their commitment to the Rome Declaration and Action Plan for a reduction in the number of those hungry and an emphasis on increasing agricultural production.

In June 2008, representatives from 181 countries, with 43 represented at the level of Head of State or Government, met in Rome to discuss the global food crisis following growing unrest, protest and violence in Egypt, Morocco, Yemen, Mexico, Guinea, Mauritania, Indonesia and Haiti. Although the effects of climate change had been highlighted in the 1996 Plan of Action, the Food Crisis Summit

focused specifically on the effects of climate change and bioenergy (an issue previously not addressed) on food security. In addition to reaffirming a commitment to achieving the goals identified in the Rome Declaration, the Plan of Action, as well as the commitment to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), The Declaration of the High-Level Conference on World Food Security: The Challenges of Climate Change and Bioenergy (2008) stresses the urgency of coordinated and immediate action in addressing the rising price of food and its negative effects, particularly in the developing world. Achieving these commitments requires urgent assistance through investments (both private and public) as well as expanding agricultural production, agribusiness and rural development.⁹ While the 1996 Plan of Action identified seven commitments, the 2008 declaration comprises a number of immediate, short-term, medium and long-term measures including: food aid, immediate support for agricultural production and trade, investing and developing food and agricultural science and technology, tackling the challenges of climate change and addressing the opportunities and challenges presented by biofuels.¹⁰ In conclusion, the 2008 declaration notes that all means should be used to:

- alleviate suffering caused by the food crisis
- stimulate food production and increase investment in agriculture
- address obstacles to food access and to use the planet’s resources sustainably.¹¹

Addressing food security is not merely about food production, or the quantity and availability, but includes the stability of production, access to food as well as its distribution and utilisation. According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), food security is “when all people at all times have physical or economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”¹² Food security is thus a multidimensional issue and while the 2008 summit set out the growing concerns related to climate change and bioenergy, these elements should not be elevated, or divorced from, the challenges emanating from international and local politics, economics and trade as well as issues such as and the impact of disease, particularly HIV/AIDS.

Climate Change and the Food versus Fuel Debate

The 2008 Food Crisis Summit, held under the auspices of the FAO, gave particular focus to the

challenges of climate change and bioenergy, two areas that are inextricably linked and have raised considerable debate. In terms of climate change, the increased frequency of flooding, extreme droughts and rising sea levels have already had “immediate impacts on food production, food distribution infrastructure, incidence of food emergencies, livelihood assets and opportunities and human health, in both rural and urban areas.”¹³ These in turn, are affecting social and economic development within society. Climate change does not, however, impact equally on all areas. Heavy rain and flooding in Western and Central Africa has affected over 800 000 people, with Ghana, Togo, Burkina Faso and Mali the hardest hit, while Mauritania struggles to cope with the effects of drought on food production.¹⁴ Those areas reliant on precipitation, or ‘rainfed agriculture’, are particularly susceptible to climate change. This will have a significant effect on sub-Saharan Africa, which according to the FAO, is dependent on rainfall for 96 per cent of land under cultivation.¹⁵ This coupled with the effects of climate change on the growth and spread of pests and diseases for humans, animals and plants, along with challenges to water security, will shape the ability of governments to contend with further shocks (political or economic) to food security.

Paradoxically, the focus on climate change and the related effort to curb greenhouse gas emissions has seen a move towards biofuels. However, the controversy surrounding the issue of food production and biofuels ultimately saw the 2008 declaration water down any link between biofuel and rising food prices; rather it was indicated that both the challenges and opportunities should be considered along with the need for further research. According to a report from the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), the rise in bioethanol and biodiesel production is “driven by government targets for biofuel substitution in energy budgets for transport, driven in turn by concerns about high oil prices, prospects for rural development, export opportunities and means to mitigate climate change.”¹⁶ Since January 2008 oil prices have risen from around US\$80 a barrel to over US\$130 six months later. In an effort to reduce dependency on a few oil producing countries, governments are increasingly turning to the possibilities offered by biofuels. Developed countries have seen biofuels as a means to substitute energy budgets with the European Union (EU) setting the target of “replacing 10 per cent of transport fuel with biofuel by 2020.”¹⁷ The United States (US), which is already one of the world largest producers of ethanol, plans to build additional refineries to boost production. According to estimates, 25 per

cent of US maize is currently used in the maize-to-ethanol process, effectively reducing the amount of maize available for export internationally.¹⁸ The US has nevertheless downplayed the impact of biofuels on food production. At the 2008 Food Crisis Summit, Ed Schafer, the US Secretary for Agriculture, noted that the production of biofuels only contributed approximately 2-3 per cent to the overall price rises, a figure contested by other groups who put the figure closer to 30 per cent.¹⁹ Both the US and Brazil have been avid defenders of biofuel production on the international stage. Brazil’s Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva noted that it was “up to Brazil, a centre of excellence in ethanol production, to prove that it’s fully possible to make ethanol output compatible with the production of food.”²⁰

The food versus fuel debate raises the question of growing inequality as “the poor have to compete for food on which to live with the rich who wish to burn it to run their cars.”²¹ Although the Food Crisis Summit indicated the importance of sustainable development, along with the potential for increased conflict in terms of land access, there is little debate on the pressure that crop production for biofuel feedstock will have on food production, particularly in terms of the growing competition for resources including land and water. Those that advocate for biofuel production highlight the potential for income generation and development opportunities in rural areas, the creation of better terms of trade and the prospect of enhancing energy security.²² Caution needs to be taken in approaching the food versus fuel debate as each side tends to oversimplify their positions. As Cotula, Dyer and Vermeulen point out, biofuel has been used as a ‘catch-all’ concept “for a set of very different crops and cropping systems, end-products, policy goals (for example, commercial production versus energy self-sufficiency), business models (different combinations of ownership and benefit-sharing among large-scale and small-scale operations) and local contexts.”²³ Differences also exist in the impact that biofuel cultivation will have on a particular country in light of the size and role played by the agricultural sector.²⁴ Additionally, while climate change served as a stimulus for further research in biofuels, it will also have a constraining impact on total production as weather systems affect agricultural output.

The Politics and Economics of Food Security

A central criticism of the 2008 Food Crisis Summit is that more energy was given to politicking than

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to the politics of food security. Indeed, the presence of Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe and Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad placed a shadow over the conference. Critics of Mugabe's presence at the summit pointed out that "Zimbabwe is one of the few countries whose food crisis is not due to climate change or global prices, but due to the disastrous policies pursued by Mugabe."²⁵ Mugabe in turn used the summit to justify his land and agricultural policies in light of western pressure.²⁶ Although the politics of food security is a challenge often downplayed in international discussions, political leaders have played a role in contributing to famine, particularly in Africa.²⁷ In these circumstances food security may be threatened by "an act of omission (failure to act); an act of commission, where a state, or other forces attack the means to produce or procure food; and an act of provision, where actors may promote the differential supply of food."²⁸

Despite their significance in combating food insecurity, representatives from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were excluded from discussions at the Food Crisis Summit. Aid agencies at the front line of providing food aid need to take particular account of the politics of food. Armed militia and even government officials have taken advantage of the provision of food, diverting it towards funding ammunition or buying political loyalty. The challenge for aid agencies is both in the acknowledgment and understanding of food aid as a political weapon rather than simply in terms of humanitarian intervention. In this context the control and management of food aid distribution becomes paramount in ensuring successful delivery to its intended recipients. The negative face of food aid is not only evident within receiving countries; it is also evident in donor countries. In the 1980s 20 per cent of aid went to agriculture in comparison to the 3 per cent in 2006. Duncan Green of Oxfam patently points out that "[i]t was about fashion really ... [i]f you wanted high increases in growth, you didn't go into agriculture. But the thing they missed is that a percentage growth in agriculture is much more effective in dealing with poverty than a percentage growth in the oil industry."²⁹ While the 2008 declaration calls on donors to increase their assistance to developing countries, there needs to be further debate concerning the form of food aid. For instance the US has come under fire for 'dumping' its agricultural surplus on the developing world. As John Liebhart indicates, the US primary focus in food aid programmes is in the supply of food, whereas countries like Canada and member states of the EU "provide much of their donations in the form

of cash vouchers, which the World Food Program (WFP) – the largest recipient of US food aid – prefers because they provide flexibility to purchase supplies where it makes most sense. Buying locally or regionally reduces transport time – and costs – and, in theory, assists local food markets and producers by providing them a market."³⁰

Questions regarding the control of the world food system have raised the issue of 'food sovereignty'. This means that people have the right to "healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agricultural systems."³¹ The concept developed in response to discussions that merely focused on the availability of food but did not address the ownership in terms of its origins, production, or the conditions in which it is grown.³² In other words, the focus was on food aid rather than in assisting countries in producing their own food. Food sovereignty has not been effectively addressed by the Food Crisis Summit. Although the 2008 declaration calls for support in providing farmers with seeds, fertilizers, animal feeds and a number of other inputs, there is a shortfall in discussion relating to the importance of localising food systems, or allowing people to define their own production and consumption patterns.³³ Indeed, there has been an overall tendency to focus on food availability and production as opposed to questions of food access, with only limited reference to promoting a 'people-centred policy framework'.³⁴

The food crisis and the growing civil unrest has seen a number of countries, including Brazil, Vietnam, India and Egypt, impose restrictions on food exports. Both the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon and president of the World Bank Robert Zoellick have criticised these moves for exacerbating the food crisis. The export bans have effectively distorted international markets pushing up the price of food and contributing to inflation.³⁵ Trade barriers for agricultural products have long been a source of contention between the developed and developing worlds. Indeed, the 2008 Food Crisis Summit was nearly derailed following the criticism levelled at countries imposing export bans. Certainly, the Venezuela delegation maintained that developing countries needed elements of protection from the free market.³⁶ This is because of the constraints that developing countries continue to face on the international trade arena which play a significant part in shaping food security, limiting the diversity of agricultural commodities exported, technological capacity as well as impacting on the negotiating capacity within international fora. Although the Food Crisis Summit

called for international assistance through investment in science and technology for improved agricultural production as part of the medium and long term measures to reduce food insecurity, the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), under the auspices of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), effectively limits this transfer. Access to technology is often priced out of the reach of developing countries while the development of cheaper low cost local equivalents is restricted through this regulatory framework. Protectionism in international agricultural trade also extends to non-tariff barriers (NTB) which present a significant obstacle for developing world access to agricultural markets through both technical and sanitary regulations.³⁷

The link between agricultural trade and food security receives brief mention in the 2008 declaration. In contrast, the Twenty-Fifth Regional Conference for Africa (ARC) held a few days later in Nairobi, Kenya, produced a more comprehensive report on trade, food security and poverty alleviation within the continent, highlighting the role of Regional Trading Arrangements (RTAs) in developing negotiating power as well as reducing dependency on food imports.³⁸ Nevertheless, while African leaders support greater intra-Africa trade in rhetoric, a number of political hurdles remain with regards to integration including agreements on the terms of further integration, with countries focusing on the narrow process of intra-regional tariff reductions, as well as a shortfall in legal and regulatory frameworks and a capacity to implement policy decisions. In light of the relatively small size of agriculturally based countries, regional market integration is also highlighted in the World Bank's *World Development Report 2008: Agriculture for Development* as a means of improving international competitiveness.

In addition to the potential offered through greater regional integration, the World Bank report identifies a number of challenges facing sub-Saharan Africa including climate change, the ongoing conflicts within the region as well as the impact of an aging population in the rural areas and the effect of HIV/AIDS, in contributing to growing food insecurity.³⁹ Although HIV/AIDS received no specific mention in the 1996 Rome Declaration, the Declaration of the World Food Summit: Five Years Later highlighted it as a distinct concern separate from other diseases. Here the parties reaffirmed a commitment to fight against worldwide conditions that pose severe health threats, and especially the spread of HIV/AIDS, which can have a uniquely devastating impact on all sectors and levels of society and consequently on food security.⁴⁰ In

other words, HIV/AIDS not only affects the labour available for agricultural production, it also affects household incomes due to the financial demands of the illness.⁴¹ The Food Crisis Summit discussed the effects of climate change on the spread of diseases affecting plants and animals but excluded the impact of human illness, particularly HIV/AIDS, on food security. Governments have typically treated HIV/AIDS as a health crisis; however, its impact on the state cuts across multiple sectors affecting social and economic development. HIV/AIDS does not affect all sectors equally. A study compiled for the Department for International Development (DFID) on HIV/AIDS and Food Security in Africa, notes that the impact of the illness affects agricultural areas disproportionately "because the structure of the agricultural sector, especially the smallholder subsector, is such that it is less able to absorb the impacts of the human resource losses associated with the pandemic."⁴²

Conclusion

Since the initial 1974 World Food Conference there have been several high-level meetings concerning food security, however the number of people facing hunger globally has continued to rise. The 2008 Food Crisis Summit, convened following the sharp rise in food prices, has fallen short in addressing a number of underlying causes and challenges contributing to global food insecurity. While the summit highlighted the link between food security and climate change, the debate linking the production of biofuel to the rising price of food was effectively stifled. The role of governments or armed groups in diverting food aid was largely ignored at the summit while NGOs remained on the periphery of discussions. Additionally, the 2008 declaration provided a single (token) point concerning the importance of agricultural trade liberalisation. Indeed, the African Regional Conference following the Food Crisis Summit was more successful in terms of the elements discussed and their impact on food security. This failure of the 2008 summit to consider food crisis as a multidimensional, multilevel issue, will affect state and broader international efforts in attaining food security negatively.

Recommendations

Despite a visible engagement by the world's leaders at the Food Crisis Summit, substantive action is needed in addressing food security:

Although the politics of food security is a challenge often downplayed in international discussions, political leaders have played a role in contributing to famine, particularly in Africa

Armed militia and even government officials have taken advantage of the provision of food, diverting it towards funding ammunition or buying political loyalty. The challenge for aid agencies is both in the acknowledgment and understanding of food aid as a political weapon rather than simply in terms of humanitarian intervention

- There needs to be a renewed focus on policy making, ensuring that food security policy is designed within a holistic framework
- Attention needs to be given to improving the flow of finance and investment in both the provision of emergency food aid and in the development of the agricultural sector. In terms of aid, the FAO needs a considerable financial injection to its current budget which is currently limiting the organisation's capacity. Within states the importance of food security needs to be reflected in budgetary reforms aimed at supporting agricultural and rural development. International negotiations on agricultural trade reform are ongoing but need to be pursued with greater urgency
- In an effort to improve negotiations at the global level, discussions leading to cohesive regional proposals need to be encouraged
- Finally, there needs to be renewed focus on implementation. A failure of the Food Crisis Summit has been the lack of concrete proposals and quantifiable financial commitments. As in the case of the negotiations concerning climate change, in order to ensure action beyond the food summit and achieve the measures set out in the 2008 Food Summit's final declaration, efforts in the provision of food aid and support of food production should be measurable, reportable and verifiable.

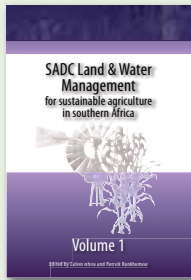
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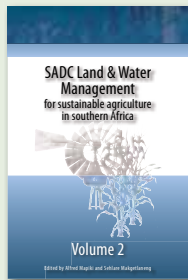
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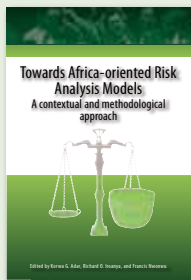
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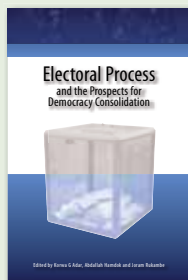
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