



Improving Nutrition through the Food System: Contemporary issues

By Per Pinstrup-Andersen, H.E. Babcock Professor of Food & Nutrition, Cornell University, USA

Large fluctuations in food production and dramatic food price volatility lead to increases in transitory food insecurity and malnutrition, particularly among the poorest rural and urban populations, many of whom are already suffering from chronic food insecurity and high rates of child morbidity and mortality. The demand for food and biofuel will continue to put pressures on food markets. Rapidly increasing demand for foods of animal origin leads to increasing demand for feed as well as more obesity and chronic diseases while at the same time increasing diet diversity and reducing micronutrient deficiencies. Improved risk management instruments are needed along with the discontinuation of subsidies and mandates for biofuel production that competes with food production for resources, investments in productivity-increasing research and technology, rural infrastructure and domestic markets and access to credit and social safety nets. Fiscal and trade policies may be needed to adjust relative prices of various foods, if the expected diet transition does not correspond to society's wishes.

Failure to pursue sustainable management of natural resources and policies to mitigate and adapt to climate change is contributing to high levels of rural malnutrition because it undermines the production foundation for smallholder families, many of whom are at risk of malnutrition. A full costing approach is warranted, in which the costs associated with unsustainable use of natural resources and negative contributions to climate change are fully added to production costs. International commitments to increased investments in agricultural development and improved food security culminated with commitments by G8 and other countries at a meeting in L'Aquila, Italy in the amount of \$ 20 billion. However, the follow-up to the L'Aquila meeting by the countries that made the commitments has been extremely disappointing.

Prioritizing expanded global and national food production instead of improved food security and nutrition may bypass opportunities to improve nutrition. Food production is a means to an end and not an end in itself. Merely expanding food supplies may be of very limited benefit to these population groups unless their access to food is enhanced. Failure to explicitly incorporate gender-specific labor demand and power structures into the design and implementation of agricultural policies and projects overlooks potential nutrition benefits.

To enhance the nutrition effect, food systems activities should be designed and implemented with the target groups and the relevant pathways in mind. Low-income households with pregnant and lactating women and children below the age of 2 years would be a key target group. An integrated policy and investment approach for the food system, natural resource management, climate change and human health and nutrition is essential to achieve sustainable food security and good nutrition for all.