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The State Of Food Security: Recent Trends in Syria

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Introduction

Most recent estimation done by the UNDP cooperating with the Syrian Government illustrated that in 2003-2004 almost 2.02 million individuals in Syria (11.4 per cent of the population) could not obtain their basic food and non-food needs. And most of the Syrian's poor (61% of the poor) live in rural areas and depend on agriculture for survival (UNDP, 2005). In fact, the Syrian economy depends mostly on agriculture out of which 70% is rainfed and does not earn enough outputs and sources of livings. Weather risks besides the long drought periods, land fragmentation and soil fertility deterioration have been the main obstacles to developing agriculture. Therefore, the food security issue in Syria has many relationships between the low productivity of agriculture and the misuse of land and water resources, and the other factors lead that to low productivity and to low return, which may lead to exiting agriculture seeking other income sources. The rise in population growth rates, the increase in the number of new comers to the labour market, and inability of the economy to provide them with job opportunities, in addition to the impact of international economic changes on the Syrian economy in recent years, led to a rise in unemployment from 6.8% in 1995 to 9.5% of the total workers in 2000 (State Planning Commission & UNDP, June 2003) and up to 10.8% in 2004 (CBS, 2005).

Food security

Food security is defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) as physical and social economic access for all people to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Food security requires that:

- Sufficient quantities of food of appropriate quality be available-a production issue;
- Individuals and households have access to appropriate foods-a poverty issue; and
- Nourishment is taken under good conditions, including regular meals, safe food, clean water and adequate sanitation-a public health issue.

The objective of food security, as defined by (FAO) is to assure to all human beings the physical and economic access to the basic food they needs. This has to be achieved at three levels simultaneously: individual, household, and national/regional levels. According to this internationally agreed definition, food security has three dimensions: availability, stability, and access. It implies that there is the need not only to make adequate supplies of food available, but also to maximize the stability of these supplies and to secure access to them by those who need them.

Food insecurity

Food insecurity exists when people are undernourished as a result of the physical unavailability of food, their lack of social or economic access to adequate food. Food-insecure people are those individuals whose food intake falls below their

minimum calorie (energy) requirements, as well as those who exhibit physical symptoms caused by energy and nutrient deficiencies resulting from an inadequate or unbalanced diet or from the body's inability to use food effectively because of infection or disease. Food insecurity is a complex phenomenon, attributable to a range of factors that vary in importance across regions, countries and social groups, as well as over time. These factors can be grouped in four clusters: the socio-economic and political environment; the performance of the food economy; care practices; health and sanitation.

The so far literature review have assessed food security in Syria in terms of variables at macro economy level, e.g. income distribution and food supply, variables related to the household and food consumption, and in terms of individual status, food intake and anthropometric measurements. So, to answer the main question "Is there a food security issue in Syria", the assessment has been made in terms of the three dimensions as mentioned above:

1. Food availability

Self-sufficiency in agricultural production has been realized in the last decades and enabled the country to meet the fast growing demand for food ratios improved for a wide range of food commodities. There were even large surpluses in some commodities, which started being exported such as wheat, vegetables, and fruit (FAO, Syrian Agriculture at the Crossroads, 2003). In addition, average per capita availability of basic food commodities (cereals, fruits, vegetables and poultry meat) increased by high percentages in the last five to six years

2. Food stability

After the mid 1980's, trade liberalization policies have led to considerable increases in agricultural trade. And export earnings grew at a fast rate to finance imports needed to ensure the stability in food supplies. The most important imported food commodities in the period 2001-2003 are sugar, rice and dairy products, while on the export side the most important food products are represented by cotton, sheep, vegetables, and olive oil.

3. Food accessibility

Evidences confirm literature argument that the consumption of total calories and protein of animal origin and total protein intake increased together with the level of per capita income and reflect the income effect. Monthly salaries and wages have been increased, in recent years, in the public and private sectors. The increase has particularly targeted the low categories of the salaries aiming at decreasing the gap between the highest and the lowest categories as well as at achieving social equality. This was reflected in the lives of over 63% of the work force (as they work on wage base) and their consumption patterns as well. Nevertheless, this increase was not reflected in spending on families' durable and luxury goods and the rate of per capita consumption of animal protein has slightly increased.

Under-nourishment

According to the Syrian Report of the National Millennium Development Goals, mortality rates dropped, particularly among children. Infant mortality rates dropped from 34.6 per thousand in 1993 to about 18.1 per thousand in 2001. The

under-five-aged group had a mortality rate drop from 41.1 per thousand in 1993 to 20 per thousand in 2002. Consequently, life expectancy at birth rose from 63 years in the early 1990s to 70 in 2001.

In the field of child nutritious status, further work is needed to ascertain the extent and depth of under-nutrition in rural areas at the household level as related to natural resource endowments. Monitoring child nutrition status as a way to target and assess the long term impact of technological policy and institutional interventions is highly recommended. It was shown in table 7 that thinness among children dropped from 2.1% to 0.8% in the same period. The rate rises, however, among children aged 10 to 12 months, which is the weaning stage. Thinness rate is higher in urban areas than rural ones (4.1 and 3.6 respectively) in 2000. It is also higher among males than females (4.6% and 3.6% respectively) in the same year. Therefore, increasing awareness-raising campaigns on the use of balanced and sanitary food, reducing thinness rates and malnutrition among children is an essential work together with efforts to eradicate diseases which lead to underweight children, like diarrhea and respiratory infections. Continuing awareness campaigns, which target mothers, focusing on the importance and benefits of breast feeding for the health of mother and child and the necessity of vaccinating all children against diseases.

In other words, evidences of food secure families were given by indicators shown by most of the studies, however, Syria still has challenges to achieve food security in many spots of the rural areas where many families not having enough food accession and availability. Challenges to achieve food security in Syria can be met by conducting comprehensive studies and specialized surveys which focus on all aspects of poverty in Syria. Such surveys require technical and financial support. Continuing to work on improving the living standards of limited income families, and distributing national income in a manner that achieves social equality. At the same time, continuing efforts in the area of development of rural areas and the Badia, and expanding the network of infrastructure facilities and services there.

Proposals for future work

Food security analysis in Syria has not included all indicators so far, and it lacks comprehensive and specialized surveys that focus on all aspects of the issue. However, Future studies on food security and poverty issues in the country as a whole or in some selected areas of targeted communities (especially areas of the arid and semi-arid zones of Syria) can be based on previous work. Perhaps the most basic characteristic of the poor is where they live. The data resulted from the most updated research conducted by the UNDP shows that 11 per cent of the urban population and 18 per cent of the rural population in the North-Eastern region of Syria are poor. This constitutes 58 per cent of the poor (UNDP, 2005). Clearly, any policy to reduce poverty in Syria must focus on this region. At the governorate level, poverty alleviation programs should target the poor in Aleppo, Al Raqqua, and Sweida governorates through directing social services and public investment to urban slums and squatter settlements because, in some definitions, such areas are associated with certain vulnerable groups of the population, such as recent immigrants, internally displaced people and marginally employed persons. Such areas may be perceived as the space of social exclusion in urban areas in some

metropolitan towns. In the light of these facts, physical solutions (i.e., upgrading of the quality of housing and infrastructure networking) are not sufficient to address the depth of poverty in these areas. New strategies of socioeconomic integration need to concentrate on sustainable livelihoods (UNDP, 2005).