Food insecurity: A “painful reality” in several ACP countries

Six years after the Rome World Food Summit, the issue of food insecurity is no less urgent. Around 790 million people in the developing world do not have enough to eat, and more than 22 million people in southern and eastern Africa are currently at risk of malnutrition or starvation because of famine.

A three-day symposium took place in the ACP Secretariat in Brussels, organised by the Coalition of African Organisations for Food Security and Sustainable Development (COASAD) and under the patronage of the ACP Group. The main topic of the symposium was the African Diaspora in the West and food security in Africa. The meeting brought together experts from North and South, NGO representatives and political figures from Africa and Europe interested in food security issues.

Vasdev Hassamal, ACP assistant Secretary-General in his opening address.

“Food insecurity has become a more painful reality than before in several ACP regions”, said Vasdev Hassamal, ACP assistant Secretary-General in his opening address. While there are recurrent causes, there “are also new ones, some of them paradoxically being the fruits of what might be perceived as development or modernisation”. He cited one cause as the “disappearance of entire agricultural zones in poor countries unable to resist dumping by companies largely subsidised by rich countries”.

Participants cited other contributory factors; food aid had negative effects on local agriculture; the very poor had difficulty accessing food stocks and rich countries subsidised their agricultural industries. Other problems included drought, poverty, the drift to the towns and cities, archaic agricultural techniques, armed conflicts, deforestation, difficulties in getting agricultural produce to the market and poor health in rural communities. The symposium also touched on issues of agrarian reform and of genetically modified organisms.

Contributions from those working in the field provided further insight. Mrs Mint Moctar Nech from the Mauritania 2000 association described the situation in her country: “51 per cent of urban households are poor; 60 per cent of pregnant women are anaemic and, despite the boom in fishing in the early 1980s, 90 per cent of fisheries’ production is exported”.

That was not all. According to America’s Famine Early Warning System Information Network (FEWS NET), Mauritania is facing a cereal deficit of 205,000 tonnes, the equivalent of five months’ cereal consumption. On 1 September this year the country declared a major food emergency, with one million people victims of food insecurity and 60,000 directly at risk from serious food shortages.

That was not all. According to America’s Famine Early Warning System Information Network (FEWS NET), Mauritania is facing a cereal deficit of 205,000 tonnes, the equivalent of five months’ cereal consumption. On 1 September this year the country declared a major food emergency, with one million people victims of food insecurity and 60,000 directly at risk from serious food shortages.

Mrs Djakabe from Guinea-Conakry gave the following diagnosis: “Although 88 per cent of the working population in my country is involved in agriculture on 6.2 million hectares of cultivable land, what strikes one is the lack of credit structures for rural communities, land-related legislation in which Koranic law exists uneasily with customary law and positive law, lack of access to new technologies, the poor quality of public services and conflicts between stock breeders and arable farmers”.

Madagascar’s ambassador to the EU, Mr Jean Beriziky, recalled the testimony of his compatriot Denise Fisher (from COASAD-Madagascar) on the issue of brush fires, asking those present how Malagasy peasant farmers could be mobilised to stop the island’s ancestral agricultural tradition of brush fires, which are “a cause of food insecurity”.

©2002 WFP/Wagdi Dhimn
Tackling food shortage

Aurelien Aridegla from Benin spoke about the Community-based Food Security Project (PILSA), financed for five years by the World Bank and Denmark, in the regions of his country with poor food availability. He also referred to the rapid warning system set up by the National Food Security Office (ONASA) in Chad and the collaborative approach in progress in Benin based on cereal banks, infrastructures, the production of a food security map and the sinking of wells.

Belgian representatives described their involvement in a campaign for setting up cereal banks near Zinder after periods of plenty. The symposium heard how, with the backing of the Niger authorities, this was supported by the sale of produce at low prices, not by donations. In parallel, Belgium bought millet surpluses in Nigeria and sent them on to Niger, an example of South-South cooperation. In Burundi, Belgium focused on aid for agricultural recovery.

Mrs Mocar Nech described the experience of her NGO in promoting the consumption of fish in rural areas far from the coasts and where sea produce was an unfamiliar ingredient in traditional diets. As a response to breaking the cold chain during preservation of the fish, Mauritania 2000 relied on the local processing of produce, such as drying, salting and fermenting. She told the Courier that for eight years they had been developing cooperatives for drying fish and other activities for generating income for women. “Food for work” experiments in Mauritania, Cape Verde and Niger were also described, but the general preference was for “cash for work”.

Boosting household income

The contribution by Philippe Lebailly from the Faculty of Agronomy at Gembloux in Belgium departed from the general theme of alarmist reports: “If agriculture is to be prosperous it must be protected… one has to go beyond the fairly simplistic split between cash-crop agriculture and agriculture based on food production. Food insecurity arises at the level of the household’s overall income”. In his opinion, it is households’ ability to obtain income that will put an end to food insecurity, either through the marketing of the produce of the land or cottage industries, or through other forms of labour.

The Diaspora contribution

Continuing the seminar’s main theme, Hegel Goutier, head of Press and Communication at the ACP Secretariat, referred to “the relative security of the Diaspora living in Europe compared with those in their country of origin who live with insecurity”. What action could the Diaspora take to reduce food insecurity? Firstly, migrants should lobby institutions in the countries where they live and circulate information in their host country.

The Diaspora could also make a more direct contribution. Jean-Pierre Madjirangüé, Permanent Secretary of the Africa-Europe Civil Society Forum, put forward the example of a citizen from the Central African Republic living in Lisbon, who had set up a community pharmacy in his village. Using the money from the medicines sold, the local people bought cereals during a period of plenty to sell at low prices. He also provided figures: “Ugandans abroad send home $400 million, an amount greater than their country’s coffee exports”.

People from Haiti’s Kayes region living in France provided another illustration. Grouped in dynamic associations, they pooled material resources and funds to improve the daily lot of their compatriots who had stayed at home, financing the construction of schools, dispensaries, village water and irrigation systems and water supplies.

Towards food sovereignty

Despite the dynamism of certain sectors of the Diaspora, the fight against food insecurity is still one in which no contribution should be ignored. Since Rome, several hundred NGOs and NGO groupings have been created, working together or separately. The EU budget earmarked for food security is approximately €500 million, of which 50 per cent is distributed via governments, 25 per cent via the NGOs and the remainder via international programmes such as the World Food Programme.

All must assume their responsibilities. According to the agro-economist Pascal Bergeret, representing GRETs (technological research and exchanges group), “there is a downstream role for private investment in the alliance against hunger: transportation, processing, and the marketing of produce”. He felt that robust food processing systems could be set up, provided they were not run by the multinationals.

He told the Courier: “Prices for agricultural produce must increase if peasant farmers are to have the resources they need to live, countries in the South must protect their agricultural traditions by customs barriers, and the practice must stop of dumping produce from the North, whereby the rich countries offload their agricultural surpluses on the poor countries”. He believes it is essential to break the vicious circle born of colonisation, “for example, in Senegal, imported rice in return for exported groundnuts”. This has led to a deterioration in the terms of trade and confirmed the impoverishment of peasant-farmer communities.

Mr Bergeret also outlined the three main thrusts of the work of the NGOs and international solidarity organisations (ISOs) in Europe, which are campaigning against food insecurity. Firstly, reform of the Common Agricultural Policy so that the CAP has a less destabilising effect on markets in the South. Secondly, the right to nutrition with the possibility in the long term of legal remedy. Finally, access to genetic resources and issues relating to patents on living tissue.

It would appear that the objectives set in Rome are far from being achieved. Countries where famine is rife have to make food security their central concern. But, says Reginald Moreels, some countries use “famine as a political weapon”, and balk at installing infrastructures to assist the agricultural world, blocking access to resources by small-scale peasant farmers in the South, who make up 75 per cent of those without enough to eat.

In his pessimistic assessment, “The State of Food Security – 2001”, Dr Jacques Diouf, Director General of the FAO, takes the view that this aim – halving the number of undernourished people in the world by 2015 at the latest – looks like taking 60 years to achieve at the rate things are going. Hence the need for all those fighting food insecurity to redouble their efforts and to collaborate. For their part, decision-makers must take into account the recommendations of meetings and symposia organised to address the issue.

Bibliography

1. Part of the CILSS structure – the Permanent Inter-States Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel
2. Part of the French NGO platform within the Forum for Food Sovereignty

Achieving food security in Southern Africa – New Challenge, New opportunities; Edited by Lawrence Haddad – International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI 1997)

FAO 2000 and 2001 reports on food insecurity