

## Is it time to reconceptualise global food insecurity?

*LSE alumna Sylvia Szabo argues that food insecurity is a global issue, not one just facing developing countries.*

From time to time, headlines reveal new scandals about food contamination through the use of potentially dangerous substances. Last year, **McDonald's** withdrew its apple slices due to a listeria risk. As I write this article, the **Guardian** is reporting that the veterinary pain killer phenylbutazone was found in beef sold by UK's ASDA chain. We are consuming more and more food with acronyms of substances, many of which remain unknown to the public at large. After eating sandwiches from a local supermarket over a couple of weeks, I was horrified to read through the list of ingredients, which included preservatives, thickeners and antioxidants, but had practically no nutritional value.



Simultaneously, obesity has become a major public health issue. It is proven to lead to a number of long-term health problems, including diabetes, respiratory diseases, heart disease and cancer. As of 2009, around 17 per cent of people living in OECD countries were reported to be obese (Sassi & Devaux, 2012). In the US, which tops the list, the obesity level is almost 34 per cent. In high-income countries, more than half of all adults have a raised level of cholesterol, which is more than double the rate in low-income nations. While the global hunger statistics are horrifying, few people realise that chronic diseases are the number one cause of mortality, representing 63 per cent of all deaths worldwide (WHO, 2011).

When we think of food insecurity, the first image that comes to mind is that of starving children, mainly in Africa. Yet, the UN's definition of food security is very clear. According to this definition, food security exists when "all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (FAO et al., 2012). Thus, while food may be widely available, it is likely not to fulfil the two other criteria – of being safe and nutritious.

Charles Kenny, formerly of the World Bank, provided evidence that globally a number of indicators measuring the quality of life has been converging (Kenny, 2005). These include mortality rates, life expectancy and literacy. Advances in human development as well as technological progress provide an optimistic outlook in terms of the potential for innovation and betterment of living conditions for all. In addition, neo-Malthusians will gladly note recent fertility declines, most

importantly in the developing countries. Logically, as the population stabilises so will the demand for food.

Still, the underlying problem remains. Even, if hunger was to be completely eradicated, it would not mean that the planet would become food secure. Already today, developing countries, including those in Africa, are experiencing an increased consumption of processed foods. Obesity and chronic diseases are gradually becoming a new challenge in African societies, although many do not yet realise the gravity of the problem.

Is it therefore time to reconsider the real meaning of food security or food insecurity? This would certainly involve a major change in thinking; not only for development professionals, but also politicians and other stakeholders. With the current communication and statistical tools available, it would be only fair to reconsider what food security actually implies. The stigma of food insecurity seems to be focused only on the developing world, but it has become a global problem and should be conceptualised as such.

## REFERENCES

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