



Food security and nutrition in the post-2015 agenda: From MDG 1 to SDG 2 - some new policy challenges and opportunities

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Introduction

Millennium Development Goal No. 1 (MDG1), agreed by the international community in 1990, stated that both the proportion of people in extreme poverty and the proportion who suffer from hunger should be halved between 1990 and 2015 (MDG targets 1.A and 1.C, respectively). The emerging global agenda for sustainable development features instead a stand-alone goal that goes beyond chronic hunger and brings in the very important concept of nutrition. Moreover, the second proposed Sustainable Development Goal (SDG2) combines food security and nutrition with sustainable and climate-resilient agriculture, and calls for a special focus on small-scale food producers (notably women farmers), recognising their major role in food systems globally. This is a novel approach compared to the MDG agenda.

Working towards poverty eradication through inclusive growth strategies, social protection policies, and initiatives specifically targeting the extreme poor and vulnerable, will continue to have a major impact on ending hunger and malnutrition. In addition, implementing an SDG that combines hunger, nutrition, and sustainable and inclusive agriculture presents new challenges and opportunities from a policy perspective. In particular, it requires building knowledge and finding policy solutions to three major questions:

- How to better link agricultural development – and more specifically, inclusive and smallholder-based agricultural development (given the focus of SDG2 target 3 on small-scale food producers) – to improved nutrition?
- How to link universal access to food (as per SDG2 target 1) to the reduction of rural-urban gaps and the development of the economic potential of rural areas, in a context of rapid urbanisation?
- How to increase agricultural productivity in sustainable ways, maintaining biodiversity and improving resilience and climate adaptation?

Although these questions are far from new in the literature (for instance, see Conway, 1998), SDG2 provides a much-needed opportunity to push both the research and the policy agendas around them. While of universal concern, they are especially important for developing countries where agriculture is a major employer but also faces major challenges in terms of productivity, environmental stressors, and climate change, and where hunger and other forms of malnutrition coexist, particularly in the context of urbanisation. In line with SDG2 target 3, they are crucial where small-scale producers are the backbone of the agriculture sector and the main food suppliers – as in the majority of countries in Africa and Asia in particular.

First challenge/opportunity: working on the agriculture-nutrition link

The clustering of targets related to nutrition and to sustainable and resilient agriculture under SDG2 should encourage governments and development partners to look closely at what linkages may be built between agriculture development and nutrition strategies, both short- and long-term. Agricultural development of course serves many other economic, social and environmental objectives besides nutrition. Similarly, improved nutrition requires action on several fronts – healthcare, water and sanitation, education, women's empowerment, etc. While SDG2 does not question this, it does suggest that, from a sustainable development perspective, implementation arrangements for the goal may benefit from integrated approaches that leverage the contribution of sustainable agriculture and food systems to better access to food and to better nutrition (and vice versa).

While recognising a paucity of evidence about the impact of agriculture-based initiatives on nutrition, the literature shows several pathways through which agriculture can be "nutrition sensitive." Meeker and Haddad (2013) sum these up as follows: agriculture as a source of food for households operating in the sector; agriculture as a source of income that can be used to purchase food; the effect of agricultural supply and demand on food prices; and the effects of participation in the agriculture sector on women's ability to make decisions about food, health and care in the household, the time they have to attend to household nutrition, and their nutritional status. Additionally, production and post-harvest choices and patterns can affect the diversity, nutritional content, quality and safety of food, which in turn affects nutrition. Some of the literature specifically focuses on how smallholder agriculture can contribute to nutrition, reaching similar conclusions (e.g. Wiggins and Keats, 2013).

Around virtually all these pathways, there is a broad research agenda that requires greater focus, resources, and international collaboration. There is particular need to consolidate evidence that can guide not only local projects but also policy design and implementation adaptable to different contexts. Relevant policy approaches can span several areas of action, from bio-fortification policies and programmes, to policies that help preserve crop, livestock, and dietary diversity, to policies that promote nutrition considerations along the food supply chain, and so forth. Food safety is also a major area where both research and policy innovation are needed. Research that may support improved policy choices in all these areas is underway – internationally, one example is the CGIAR Research Program on Agriculture for Nutrition and Health (www.a4nh.cgiar.org). Collaboration between international organisations and governments (for instance within the African Union) to better integrate nutrition into agriculture strategies is also underway. The post-2015 agenda needs to encourage a scaling up and acceleration of all these efforts, particularly in countries where significant challenges affect both agriculture and access to food and adequate nutrition for a large share of the population, including those who make a living as farmers, artisanal fishers or pastoralists.

Second challenge/opportunity: leveraging rural-urban dynamics for food security and nutrition

As urban centres and the urban population grow across all regions, how to achieve sustainable urbanisation has become an important concern for policymakers. Much debate on sustainable urbanisation in the post-2015 agenda has concerned cities *per se* – including urban planning, infrastructure, and services. However, urbanisation affects both urban and rural areas, and its pace, scale, and patterns can have diverse – both positive and negative - impacts on entire landscapes, societies and economies, extending well beyond the borders of any given city. Recognising this is critical for the implementation of SDG2.

In particular, addressing the SDG2 target on access to food for all requires confronting the challenge of feeding adequate diets to ever more populous cities, while recognising that most of the poor and

hungry live in rural areas. This requires boosting the productive and economic potential of rural areas, while also addressing the diverse social dynamics that may affect them through urbanisation, including rural ageing, the "feminisation" of agriculture, and the economic marginalisation of small-scale agricultural producers that may result from market failures and other factors. Rural-urban interdependence is then, in general, a major factor to reckon with to achieve sustainable urbanisation and sustainable development. Rural-urban interdependence around food supply and access is a key element of this interdependence that requires attention to achieve SDG2 (IFAD 2014). Reckoning with this reality means, in a nutshell, improving the efficiency, sustainability and inclusiveness of food supply chains spanning rural and urban areas. This in turn requires bringing both a food security and nutrition perspective and a rural-urban perspective to new investments in transportation infrastructure, energy grids, and services – including financial services – that may be spurred by the SDGs. It requires investment in the capacity of rural producers – notably small-scale food producers, women and men alike – to securely access the assets and services they need to be competitive market players, while acknowledging that urbanisation may open up alternative livelihood opportunities for many of them outside agriculture. It requires an enabling policy and institutional environment for inclusive and sustainable business models in food supply chains.

The challenges here too span policy and research, given the still limited understanding available in most contexts of how urbanisation patterns are reshaping food demand and supply, how supply chains are evolving in response to changing demand for food, and what the social, economic and environmental implications are in rural areas and for small-scale food producers in particular. Policy-oriented research on institutional, financing and governance models for inclusive food supply chains is underway in many areas, but there remains much ground to cover, and a greater sense of urgency and of practical policy orientation can help accelerate these efforts. Going forward, the implementation and monitoring of the post-2015 agenda can also provide opportunities to consolidate and share the knowledge base and the experience of different countries in this domain. Internationally, one initial milestone for raising the profile of this policy agenda may be the Third United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development in 2016.

Third challenge/opportunity: sustainability, resilience, and agricultural productivity growth

It is now generally accepted that, if a new "green revolution" is needed to boost productivity in the agricultural sector, it must be one in which productivity growth is pursued not only through improved seeds or breeds but through more efficient use of inputs, more sustainable management of natural resources and better agricultural practices.¹ The need to make farming systems more resilient, particularly to climate-related shocks and stressors is increasingly accepted not only in the scientific literature but also in the policy domain, and it has been emphasised by many groups of countries in the debate on the SDGs last year, both in New York and elsewhere – for instance at the 2014 UN Conference on Small Islands Developing States. The need to reduce the aggregate environmental footprint of agriculture (recognising large variations across contexts) is also clearly accepted in the literature, if more politically controversial than the resilience and adaptation agenda.

In practice, moving from accepted wisdom to change in policy and practice is challenging. Moreover, while much research exists about agricultural varieties that combine higher yields with better use of water, nutrients, and external inputs and/or with greater tolerance of climate-related stress, there is need for more investment, international collaboration and knowledge-sharing (Beddington et al. 2012). The research agenda must focus more on crops and breeds that are especially important for,

¹ This awareness is clearly reflected in recent debates around agriculture and the SDGs, but also in other contexts, for instance the recent elaboration of a Food Security and Nutrition Framework for the G20, or the earlier elaboration of the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme. See, for example, Foresight (2011).

and likely to be adopted in, smallholder systems, and among women farmers in particular. Combining nutritional considerations with considerations of yield, efficient use of inputs, and resilience, adds complexity to the research agenda, and managing possible trade-offs is often a political matter. Existing research and development practice show, however, great potential for wins through more efficient and sustainable agricultural practices yielding, over time, higher productivity (Pretty et al., 2006, 2011) and also nutrition benefits (e.g. via local diet diversification). From a policy perspective, there is need to help set the right priorities and mobilise adequate resources for research, ensuring that small-scale food producers are centrally involved. Enabling conditions must allow all stakeholders – including small-scale producers – to apply the agenda's results. Much of the policy agenda related to introducing efficient, sustainable and inclusive food supply chains and promoting the investment capacity of small-scale food producers can contribute, so long as linkages between the agendas of sustainability, nutrition, and inclusive supply chains are explicitly addressed.

Conclusions

There is much reason for excitement in the proposed formulation of an SDG that invites holistic approaches to food security, nutrition, and sustainable agriculture – with small-scale food producers as central actors. Among other things, the goal challenges researchers and policymakers to work together on new integrated agendas particularly around three "nexuses": agriculture and nutrition, rural-urban food supply chains; and agricultural productivity, sustainability and resilience. Whether and how these challenges will be addressed in an integrated manner and with adequate resources will have a major impact on sustainable development, particularly in countries where agriculture is a major economic sector, urbanisation is proceeding rapidly, environmental stressors and climatic hazards are significant, and food insecurity is widespread.

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