

# Policy Brief

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## Overview

World hunger is prevalent yet receives relatively less attention compared to poverty. The MDGs have taken a step to address this with the resolution of halving the number of starving people in the world by 2015. A substantial and sustainable reduction in hunger will also greatly improve the chances of meeting the MDGs related to poverty reduction, education, child mortality, maternal health, and disease. Hunger though is not a straightforward problem of producing enough to feed the world's population; it has many cross-cutting dimensions. This study addresses a combination of economic, social, and political perspectives, drawing upon academic research of the economic factors and the experiences of international organizations and civil society.

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## Can We Eradicate Hunger?

**T**HE FIRST MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOAL (MDG) is to halve poverty and hunger by 2015. Hunger and malnutrition are major causes of the deprivation and suffering targeted by all of the other MDGs. Without rapid progress in reducing hunger, achieving the other MDGs related to poverty reduction, education, child mortality, maternal health, and disease will be impossible. Nearly 30 per cent of the world's population is currently suffering from one or more forms of malnutrition. Approximately 840 million people are undernourished or chronically food insecure, and as many as 2.8 million children and 300,000 women die every year because of malnutrition in developing countries. According to FAO, if each of the developing regions continues to reduce hunger at the current pace, only South America and the Caribbean will reach the MDG target of cutting the proportion of hungry people by half. None will reach the more ambitious World Food Summit goal of halving the number of hungry people.

Despite the scale of human suffering brought about by malnutrition, the fight against world hunger receives less attention than the fight against poverty from bilateral and multilateral donors and lending agencies. A by-product of the lack of attention to food security is that the issue is relatively understudied compared to poverty. The UNU-WIDER research project 'Hunger and Food Security', addressed some of these gaps in the literature. It was undertaken in collaboration with the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), and with research contributions from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). The project resulted in two books entitled *Food Security: Indicators, Measurement, and the Impact of Trade Openness* and, *Food Insecurity, Vulnerability and Human Rights Failure*, both edited by Basudeb Guha-Khasnobis, Shabd S. Acharya and Benjamin Davis, and henceforth referred to as *Food Security* and *Food Insecurity*, respectively.

While lack of sustained economic growth is an important determinant of hunger, the persistence of hunger also feeds back to limit economic growth. Many years of empirical evidence point to the negative impact of hunger and malnutrition on labour productivity, health, and education, which ultimately leads to lower levels of overall economic growth. Hunger is thus as much a cause as an effect of poverty. Good nutrition is an investment in human capital that raises output as well as the returns on investments in education and health care. Taken together, these findings provide powerful evidence that public spending in reducing hunger is an investment

### About the Author



*Basudeb Guha-Khasnobis is a Senior Research Fellow and director of the UNU-WIDER project **Hunger and Food Security**. He has previously directed the research projects: *The Impact of the WTO Negotiations on Low Income Countries*; *Unlocking Human Potential: Linking Informal and Formal Sectors*; and *Financial Sector Development for Growth and Poverty Reduction*.*

with high returns and should constitute a top priority for developing countries.

### National Food Security

National food security is determined by the combination of national policies relating to food production, the extent of food trade, the degree of linkages with other countries, and trade policies of other countries—especially relating to the support provided to their food producers. It calls for careful monitoring of such related developments as developing countries increasingly link their economies to the world market. The South Pacific island countries (*Food Insecurity*, Chapter 2), for example, are net importers of cereals, and their import dependence increased during 1991–2002. The reason for the increase is either an absolute decline in the production of staple food or, a lower rate of growth of production relative to the population. National food security in these countries is dependent on subsistence farming and the tapping of ocean resources. The demand for imported food is met through export earnings from primary products. In this context, the volatility in prices in the world market can be a threat to the food security of island countries. Fiji, for example, exports sugar to protected European markets,

of the WTO's agricultural negotiations on the agricultural and food security policy of South African Development Community (SADC) countries. They document how changes in food security policy since the Uruguay Round, including trade liberalization, and the subsequent food crisis of 2001–03 have impacted the negotiating strategy of these countries. Further, the authors provide an assessment of the potential impact of the proposed tariff and subsidy reduction modalities on government policymaking. They conclude that the proposed modalities in the current round are unlikely to restrict SADC policies to enhance and assure food availability, access, and security. Moreover, the low levels of domestic support and high bound tariffs ensure that agreed reductions would still leave SADC countries with sufficient policy space to pursue food security and agricultural development policy.

### Household Food Security

Our research on India and Vietnam presents inter-temporal comparisons of the state of under nutrition. Besides China, both these countries have outperformed others in their development cohort in terms of overall growth rates. But while the nutritional status of the

## the WTO Agreement on Agriculture affects food security

but the phasing out of protection in 2007, and the subsequent state of the markets, is a matter of serious concern for Fiji in financing its food imports. Uncertainties such as this reiterate the need for efforts to improve domestic productivity through public investment in infrastructure, irrigation, agricultural research, and technology transfer.

Andrew Charman and James Hodge (*Food Security*, Chapter 11) however, focus on the more positive implications

population shows an improvement over time in Vietnam, it shows a worsening in India, particularly for the rural poor. It implies that the challenges of reforms and globalization—in protecting the well-being of the poor—may be different for large (India, China) and small (Vietnam) countries in important ways. However, a well-targeted public distribution system (PDS) is very likely to work for both sets of countries.

The role of the PDS in improving food security was examined in a comparative set up (*Food Insecurity*, Chapter 5) between India and China. PDS is a useful policy instrument, particularly when there is a food shortage or just barely enough. It can also be a cost-effective measure to counteract poverty. A buffer stock controlled by the government is essential to ensure and improve a country's food security, regardless of whether or not a physical PDS is maintained. India can draw on China's policy of managing its buffer stock with more flexibility. Likewise, China may draw on the Indian policy of managing its buffer stock with transparency. With an improvement in average incomes, PDS should be reformed by making it more flexible and targeted. In particular, India should consider reducing the size of its PDS operations, and targeting it to only the poor and those affected by

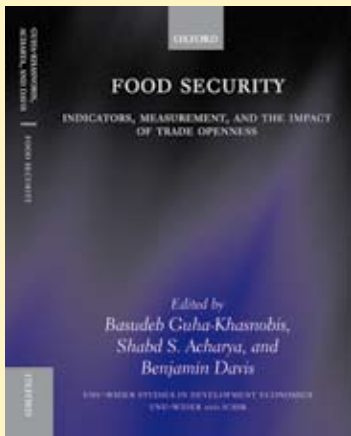
### **Intra-household Food Security: The Role of Women**

The status of women in a society has telling effects on both the intra-household distribution of food, as well as its total availability. Basudeb Guha-Khasnobis and Gautam Hazarika (*Food Security*, Chapter 5) find that in Pakistan for example, the relative standing of a mother compared to her husband—measured by differential educational attainment—as well as her access to cash income, is positively associated with the improved nutritional status of her children. Further, the mother's relative standing is also associated with less spending on adult goods (alcohol, tobacco). Taken together, these results suggest that policy initiatives that seek to improve child nutritional status should focus in part on improving the relative bargaining power of women in households, through access to education.

## Government programmes must identify the truly needy

natural calamities—the truly vulnerable groups. This is particularly important as most governments are under pressure to trim their budgets and cannot afford to expend resources on poverty or hunger alleviation programmes that do not reach the truly needy. Nilabja Ghosh and Basudeb Guha-Khasnobis (*Food Security*, Chapter 8) review the experience of India in targeted food-security strategies. They trace the evolution of the 'public works programme' and found some mismatches. However, there also pockets of 'success', mainly in the state of Orissa in eastern India, which give rise to optimism.

Although the relationship of gender, food security, and rural livelihoods has been acknowledged in the literature on HIV/AIDS impacts, relatively few studies provide empirical evidence among vulnerable households. The findings of a study are thus presented (*Food Insecurity*, Chapter 6) from Namibia, Uganda, and Zambia using a sustainable livelihood framework to investigate gender aspects of HIV/AIDS effects. HIV infected households face labour shortage and a reduced cultivated area. Their asset holdings are also lower. There was also a reduction in meals eaten per day. All these were more pronounced in female-headed households than others. This suggests an acute need for mainstreaming HIV/AIDS concerns through the national



*Food Security: Indicators, Measurement, and the Impact of Trade Openness*

Edited by Basudeb Guha-Khasnobis, Shabd S. Acharya, and Benjamin Davis

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statistical systems, instead of limiting interest in HIV/AIDS statistics to the health sector.

A case study of India (*Food Insecurity*, Chapter 13) illustrates how judicial systems and courts can

## The status of women matters for food security

### The Right to Food

While availability and access present themselves as fairly straightforward researchable issues in hunger, there is an important dimension of human right, which transcends the frontiers of economics and takes us into the realm of political economy. Is the right to food a basic human and social right? Is this right recognized in national constitutions? Are there differences in the extent to which such rights are recognized under different political regimes (democracy versus non-democracy, for example)? The international development community needs to provide firm answers and urge individual countries to comply.

According to some existing international commitments, while only states are accountable for its compliance, all members of society (individuals, families, local communities, NGOs, civil society organizations, as well as the private business sector) have responsibilities in the realization of the right to food. The state should promote an enabling environment for the implementation of these responsibilities. A major step in speeding up the process of implementing the right to food has been the formulation of voluntary guidelines by an inter-governmental working group on the right to food constituted by the FAO Council and subsequently circulated to all countries, both developing and developed. However, the guidelines are legally non-binding.

be used for ensuring the right to food. The genesis of the right to food litigation in India lies in the widespread protests by citizens' organizations, in the wake of severe consecutive droughts, asking for the scaling-up of drought relief operations, followed by a public interest petition filed in the supreme court by one such citizens' organization, the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), in 2001. Several legal experts were either a part of PUCL or supported the move. While the court became active, the citizens' organizations continued to pursue the matter and put pressure on the government. The measures impacting the right to food included putting in place a National Employment Guarantee Act, scaling-up of midday meals in schools, a scheme for supplying food to destitute families, the supply of food grains at affordable prices to poor families, supplementary nutrition programmes for infants and mothers, and effective implementation of these and a PDS of food grains. While the citizens' organizations continued to provide feedback to the court, the court issued a series of judicial directions to the government. Apart from these schemes, the litigation covered several associated issues, particularly pertaining to governance. The study has clearly illustrated the kind of directions that could be obtained from the court for making the right to food a reality. It also illustrates the need for a vibrant civil society group, without which the court alone may not be effectively empowered.

The UNU-WIDER study highlights the need to look at the problem of hunger from a combination of economic, social, and political perspectives. These dimensions are intertwined, making it necessary for a variety of actors to pull together as a unit to fight against hunger. It implies that academic research on the economic dimensions of hunger across regions, the experiences of international organizations in their forays into the social and political dimensions of the problem, and key messages emanating from the work of civil society organizations at the grassroots levels, have plenty to draw upon from one another. The result, hopefully, will be a concerted and coordinated action by the international community as a whole in eradicating hunger.

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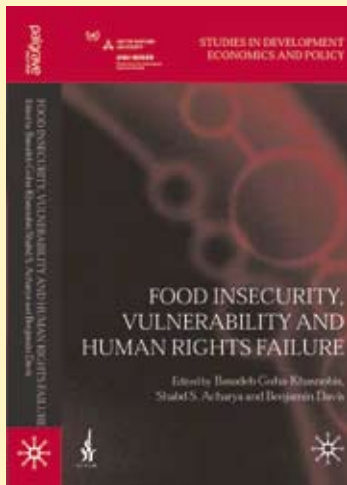
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*Food Insecurity, Vulnerability and Human Rights Failure*

Edited by Basudeb Guha-Khasnobis, Shabd S. Acharya and Benjamin Davis

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October 2007

Studies in Development  
Economics and Policy  
Palgrave Macmillan

**Selected Endorsements**

***Food Security***

This wide ranging and forward looking set of studies is a must read for policy makers, analysts and students of food security. Containing contributions from leading thinkers and doers in multilateral and developing country organizations, the volume critically examines the relevance and accuracy of available and proposed tools to measure food security, and explores their application in several dynamic contexts. Important new insights are contributed towards a better understanding of the complex pathways through which trade liberalization and farm support programs impact on the nutritional status of the poor in developing countries. Highly recommended.

—Peter Matlon, Managing Director, The Rockefeller Foundation, Nairobi, Kenya

This is a valuable contribution to the literature on Food Security for many reasons ...the editors should be commended for including case studies undertaken by researchers from developing countries directly affected by food (in)security. The much too important local perspective is captured in this volume.

—Gobind Nankani, President, Global Development Network, New Delhi, India

***Food Insecurity***

When the history of our times is written, unarguably one of its greatest crimes would be that despite unprecedented plenty, millions of our children still have to sleep hungry. The essays in this volume suggest with rigour and compassion that it does not have to be this way.

—Harsh Mander, Special Commissioner to the Supreme Court of India in the Writ Petition (Civil) No. 196 filed before the Supreme Court on 2001, by the People's Union for Civil Liberty (PUCL), Rajasthan known as the 'right to food' case

This notable book was not written for readers who are looking for quick and simple solutions of the problem of hunger, but for those who seek to understand the multi-faceted character of food insecurity and who wish to learn from practical experiences. The value of the book lies in the understanding of food insecurity as outcome of a complex set of physical, economic, social and political factors and in the special attention to critical determinants, such as vulnerability, gender inequality, and human rights violations, to special issues such as the role of HIV/AIDS or micro-nutrient deficiency, and to experiences with safety net policies as necessary components of comprehensive food security programmes.

—Hartwig de Haen, Former Assistant Director-General, FAO and retired Professor, Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development, University of Göttingen

This book is a very important and timely analysis of interactions between food insecurity, vulnerability and the right to food. Given the continued failure to meet global hunger reduction targets set by the international community it is vitally important to have rigorous analysis of what does and doesn't work. This book, through its wide-ranging coverage of different country and regional experiences, and through its focus on the multi-faceted elements of the hunger problem, provides that analysis. It will be of great importance and utility to policy makers as well as to academics working in the area. I strongly recommend it.

—Nick Chisholm, Senior Lecturer in International Development and Food Policy, University College Cork, Ireland

Any single approach to understanding food security oversimplifies. This collection of analyses from various perspectives and contexts helps us to recognize the richness of the food security concept. ... We may be tempted to take one way of understanding the causes, character and remedies for food insecurity as the correct one, but this volume teaches us that openness to multiple approaches can enrich our appreciation of the meaning of food security.

—George Kent, Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Hawai'i

The volume on Food Insecurity provides a valuable addition to WIDER's rich body of work on the issues of poverty and distributive justice. The essays in this volume should be essential reading for policymakers who remain committed to ending hunger within a more just society.

—Rehman Sobhan, Chairman, Centre for Policy Dialogue, Dhaka

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The World Institute for Development Economics Research (WIDER) was established by the United Nations University (UNU) as its first research and training centre and started work in Helsinki, Finland in 1985. The Institute undertakes applied research and policy analysis on structural changes affecting the developing and transitional economies, provides a forum for the advocacy of policies leading to robust, equitable, and environmentally sustainable growth, and promotes capacity strengthening and training in the field of economic and social policy making. Work is carried out by staff researchers and visiting scholars in Helsinki and through networks of collaborating scholars and institutions around the world.

## INSIDE: Policy Brief *“Can We Eradicate Hunger?”*

A substantial and sustainable reduction in hunger will greatly improve the chances of meeting the MDGs related to poverty reduction, education, child mortality, maternal health, and disease.

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