



August, 2009

Food Security – Frequently Asked Questions

What is food security?

Food security is the existence of the necessary conditions for human beings to have *physical and economic access, in socially acceptable ways*, to food that is safe, nutritious and in keeping with their cultural preferences, so as to meet their dietary needs and live productive and health lives. Those conditions are:

The physical availability of food in sufficient quantities and of sufficient quality produced in and imported into the country (including food aid)

Access of all people to food because they have the economic and other resources needed to acquire sufficient nutritious and safe food.

The use of food through adequate diet, clean water, sanitation and health care to reach a state of nutritional well-being where all physiological needs are met (the importance of non-food inputs)

Stable access to foods at all times, without the risk of running out of food as a result of unexpected political, economic or climatic crises or cyclical events (seasonal food insecurity). It includes both availability and access.

Other interpretations of the concept of food security are available on the IICA Web Page: <http://www.iica.int/Esp/conocimiento/actualidad/Documents/Food%20security%20IICA%20Eng.pdf>

Can a country be food secure if all the food required by its inhabitants is not produced in its territories?

Not necessarily. Most of the countries of the Americas and in other regions of the world combine domestic production with imports to ensure the availability of food for their inhabitants. Economic theory and a number of studies show that attempts on the part of a country or region to produce all the food required by their inhabitants (food self-sufficiency) carry a high economic cost, usually end up hurting consumers and generally do not succeed. IICA understands that it is a decision to be made by each country, but cautions that such a decision should be given careful consideration.

What is “food sovereignty”?

Food sovereignty is the right, defended by some States, to formulate and implement policies and instruments aimed at guaranteeing and protecting their own model for agricultural production, distribution and food consumption.

IICA believes that the free trade of food contributes to food security, but also recognizes as legitimate the efforts of some countries and regions to ensure their production and food reserves.

How are food security and food safety related?

There is a direct relationship. It is not enough to have enough food. Food must also be nutritious, of sufficient quality, in keeping with the customs and cultural preferences of the different social groups, and safe (not harmful to health).

The terms food security and food safety are sometimes confused. However, though closely related, they are very different concepts.

Does biofuel production threaten food security?

Biofuels can be grown on land that is not always suitable for food production. Food production, however, could be hurt if the crops used for biofuel production were to replace food crops, which would lead to *domestic* shortages of food.

IICA believes that food security must be a priority for the countries, and that the decision to produce biofuels must be made taking into consideration not only its impact on food safety, but also on environmental sustainability and the conservation of the natural resources of each country. Therefore, it is advisable to continue efforts aimed at improving crop yields and, in this way, avoid the conversion of forests and jungles into farmland.

How have higher and volatile food prices affected food security in the Americas?

The contraction of the food supply worldwide and the rise in prices that occurred in 2007 and early 2008, as well as the volatility of prices that ensued, have impacted the inhabitants of many countries of hemisphere, especially the poorest of Latin America and the Caribbean and net food importing countries. Both phenomena threatened to wipe out the progress made by the countries in reducing poverty. It is estimated that the number of people in Latin America and the Caribbean who suffer from hunger has increased by more than 50 million in the last two years. Of course, the impact has not been the same in all countries. Producers and exporters of cereals and oilseeds, located mostly in the North and in the South of the Hemisphere, have benefitted from higher prices.