

17 February 2015

Food security perspective

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The term 'Food Security' is often bandied about loosely by politicians, bureaucrats, farmers, businessmen, consumers, and even scientists, without many having a proper understanding of the underlying meaning thereof and the contributing factors thereto. While the concept of food security was only really formally described from the 1970's onwards, following major global crises and famines, it has stood at the heart of agricultural and food policy in many countries over centuries.

It was again a crisis that precipitated a review by governments of the 'food security' concept. It was specifically the global food crisis of 2007/08, coupled to the financial meltdown that made governments especially aware of the need for their respective countries to be much more food secure. As such Food Security became a very high priority agenda item at many high-level multilateral forums, such as the G8, G20, OECD, etc. South Africa followed suit and developed its own contentious 'National Policy on Food and Nutrition Security'.

There are many definitions to Food Security in the international literature, but the one that is generally adopted universally is the one that was originally adopted at the Food and Agricultural Organisation's (FAO) World Food Summit in 1996, and then amended slightly at times thereafter. It now reads as follows: ***"Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life"***.

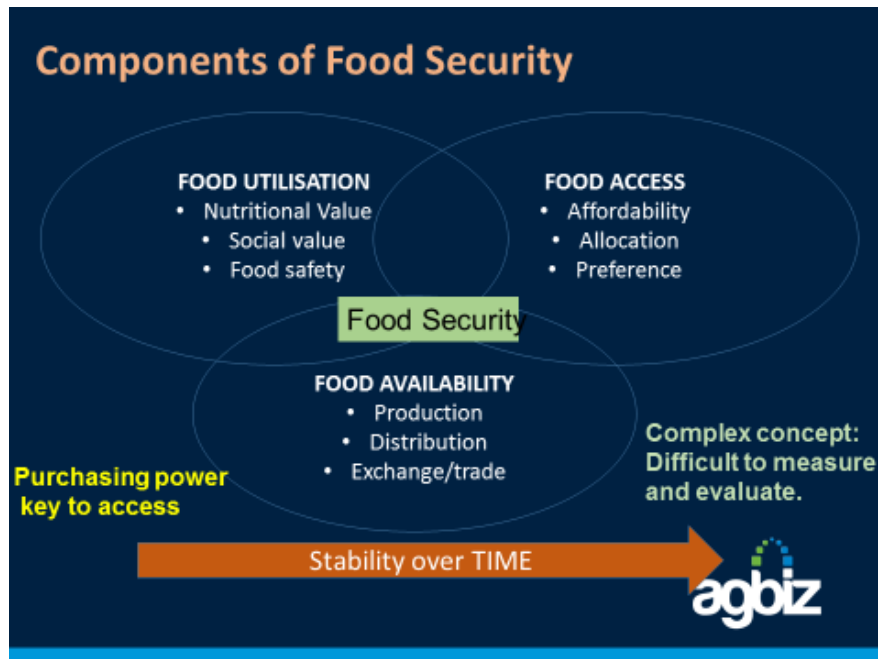
The term "Household Food Security" is often also used, but household food security is just the application of this concept to the family level, with individuals within households as the focus of concern. In South Africa this term has relevance as the annual STATSSA General Household Survey (2013) indicates that although household access to food has improved since 2002, it has remained static since 2011. The Household Food Insecurity Access Scale, which is aimed at determining households' access to food, showed that the percentage of South African households with inadequate or severely inadequate access to food decreased from 23,9% in 2010 to 23,1% in 2013. Between 2002 and 2013, the percentage of households that experienced hunger decreased from 29,3% to 13,4% while the percentage of individuals who experienced hunger decreased from 23,8% to 11,4%.

There are four major concepts that are fundamental to the above food security definition, viz.:

- **Availability**, including the elements of production, distribution and trade;
- **Access**, including the elements of affordability, allocation and preference;

- **Utilization**, including the elements of nutrition, food safety and social value; and
- **Stability** over time.

These four major concepts can be diagrammatically represented as follows:



Food security is a complex concept with many further sub-elements and as such is difficult to measure. Many of the criteria are also qualitative, rather than quantitative, and thus further exacerbating accurate measurement.

However, the Economist, a well-known London-based financial magazine, has on many occasions highlighted the issue of global food security as a major concern. Through its Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), and together with DuPont sponsorship, launched the Global Food Security Index (GFSI). GFSI considers the three core pillars of food security across 109 countries on a quarterly basis. The index is a dynamic quantitative and qualitative benchmarking model, constructed from 28 unique indicators, that provides an objective framework for evaluating food security across a wide range of countries worldwide. By creating a standardised metric around food security, the EIU seeks to empower users to explore the issues surrounding food security—including the rankings and results—and draw conclusions for policy, business operations and future research.

While food security research is the focus of many organisations worldwide, the index is distinct for two reasons. First, the study looks beyond hunger to the underlying factors affecting food insecurity. Second, the study employs an adjustment factor for global food price fluctuations to examine the risks countries face in the important area of food affordability throughout the course of the year.

In its very recent 2014 Global Food Security Overview, the EIU found that overall global food security improved in the last year, but declined marginally in South Africa. Following a small dip in the 2013 index, which was partially driven by drought in key growing regions and falling national incomes in some developed countries, the average country score rose by more than one point, to 56.1 in the 2014 GFSI. Additionally, the range of scores narrowed by half a point as the lowest-scored countries improved more than the top performers. As the FAO reported in a separate analysis, the number of people suffering from chronic hunger dropped from 868m to 842m over the past year.

It is strongly recommended and advised that persons that have an interest in this subject peruse the following interactive website: <http://foodsecurityindex.eiu.com/>.

South Africa correctly has Food Security as one of the key outcomes (Outcome 7) of the Medium Term Strategic Framework (2014-2019). How we improve food security however remains an issue of discourse and conjecture, given that a competitive, enabling and conducive investment environment is key to agricultural and agribusiness investment, growth, job creation and overall prosperity for everyone.

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