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FOOD SECURITY AND FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

Tackling food insecurity at its roots

A growing number of people worldwide lack secured access to food. The rural poor in developing countries – mostly smallholder and subsistence producers, pastoralists, fishermen, gatherers, but also farm labourers and landless – are most vulnerable to food insecurity.

Our positions: We advocate the strengthening of local food production by smallholders that is based on sustainable use of mainly local resources to which the farmers have secured access, including land and genetic resources. We consider local food markets a key mechanism to enhanced access to food, seeing export oriented production of food crops as an option to increase farmer's incomes, provided it does not compete with local food security. We disapprove all types of land expropriation and consider the external purchase or long-term leasing of agricultural land only legitimate if this is based on informed consent, adequate compensation and clear local benefits. We consider agro-fuel production out of local resources a development option in some rural contexts, but denounce agro-fuel production out of staple food crops. Speculation with food for the sole purpose of profit maximisation is unethical and detrimental to the food security of the poor. Furthermore, food aid should avoid jeopardizing local food production and markets and work through existing local rather than parallel networks. Finally, we advocate for a less energy intensive, less wasteful and more regional food economy that is based on fair terms of trade.

INTRODUCTION

The concepts of food security and food sovereignty are very much interlinked. Food security as defined by the FAO is a mainly technical term and operates within the existing logic of today's world food and market system. It emphasizes production, purchasing power, economic growth and functioning international food markets as key factors to overcome food insecurity. The concept of food sovereignty, on the other hand, is a rights-based, political concept that challenges the existing mechanisms of industrialized food production and liberalized trade by demanding changes in the system as such, for example more locally produced and distributed food, the consequent application of agro-ecological principles in agriculture, and the establishment of fair terms of trade. It emphasises the root causes of food insecurity in agriculture, markets and politics.

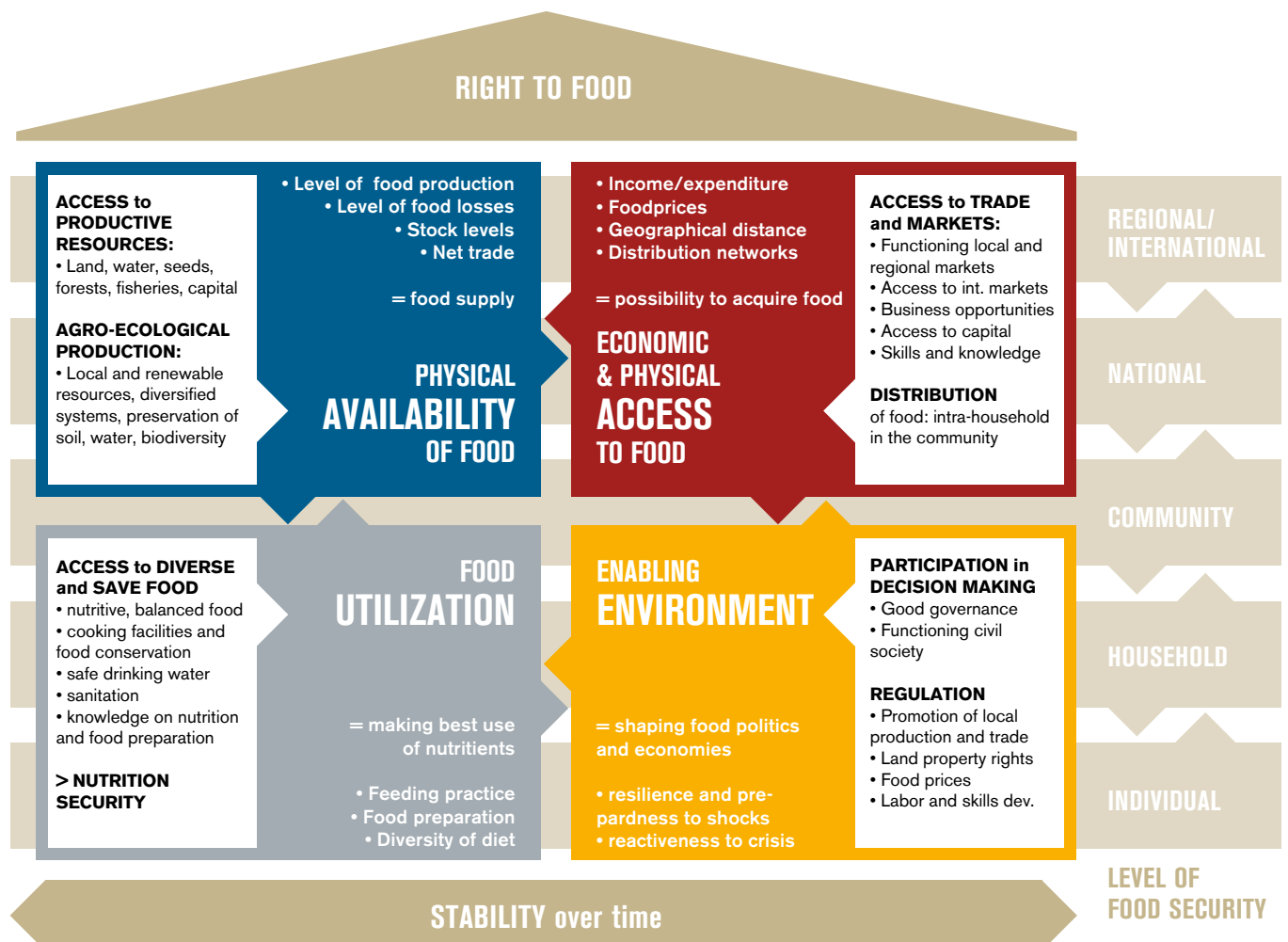
HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation adheres to the following Comprehensive Food Security Framework that integrates the food sovereignty and food security concept, with the main objective to understand and tackle the root causes of food insecurity in a holistic way and achieve positive systemic changes in the mechanisms of food production, food processing and food distribution.

COMPREHENSIVE FOOD SECURITY

FRAMEWORK

The human right to food forms the normative roof of all our project implementation and development policy work related to food security. Food security rests upon four pillars: (coloured boxes): 1. the physical availability of food, 2. the economic and physical access to food, 3. food utilization, and 4. an enabling socio-political environment which fosters the resilience of food systems against shocks and crisis.

To ensure food security in the long run, a number of pre-requisites need to be in place: Men and women need secured access to productive resources land, water, forests, biodiversity and capital; the possibility to preserve local natural resources and using agro-ecological principles in diversified production system. Further, a functioning system of distribution and trade in mainly local and regional markets and accessible to all is needed. The food has to be diverse and nutritionally balanced and distributed fairly among family members. Another precondition is the access of households to safe drinking water and sanitation, as only this allows them to fully benefit from nutrients and consume food safely. Finally, the par-





Vegetable farmer on riverbed in Nepali lowlands
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participation of men and women in political decision making processes, an active civil society, and sound regulatory frameworks on agriculture, land rights, food markets and food prices are needed as a basis to regulate food politics and ensure food security in the long run.

The claims of food sovereignty form an integral part of our food security framework. We understand food sovereignty as a right of self-determination of individuals, households, communities or countries to decide upon the origin and the type of food they consume, and the way it is produced, supplied and purchased.

We recognise women as key stakeholders for all interventions addressing food security, given their important function in food production, postharvest management, distribution and utilization. Women often lack secure tenure over their land, access to inputs, equipment, basic education regarding agricultural activities, access to credit and extension services. In most cultures, women play a key role in conserving and preparing food but often cultural norms lead to an intra-household discrimination in allocation and consumption of food.

OUR POSITIONS

Food production

In view of its detrimental impact on soil, water and ecosystems and the increasing economic risks for smallholders, intensive, high external input agriculture is not a valid option for smallholders. 70% of today's food is produced by smallholders, thus local food production based on small scale agriculture is the backbone of food security locally and internationally. As a precondition to fulfil this important function, smallholders and in particular women need secured access to land, water, seeds, forest and fishing grounds, as well as capital and infrastructure. We promote diversified agro-ecosystems based on low-external input sustainable agriculture (LEISA) or organic agriculture since these farming systems preserve natural resources and minimize economic risks for the families.

We advocate for the right of self-determination of people and countries to define the origin and type of food resources, the way it is produced, supplied and purchased. Regulatory frameworks to foster local food production and markets are considered legitimate, as long as they are not detrimental to the food security of other countries or regions. Further, we consider genetic resources as a common good and disapprove patents on genetic resources or monopolies on agricultural inputs such as seeds.

The organic and fair trade value chain projects of HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation are good examples of how income generation goes hand in hand with the promotion of diversified, ecologically sound farming systems and local food production.



Wheat harvest in the Bolivian Altiplano
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Food trade and markets

Food insecurity is often a consequence of missing access to food due to low purchasing power and inefficient distribution systems, rather than a problem of insufficient production. Markets play a crucial role to ensure access to food, both in local contexts and at the international level. For densely populated countries or regions with low agricultural production potentials it is vital to count on food supplies from other regions. However, high dependency on external food supplies poses a risk to food security in these countries, as they are more exposed to shortages, price hikes and food policies of foreign countries. This shows how crucial well functioning local food markets and local food production are.

We put an emphasis on the promotion of local markets as they are a key to efficient local distribution of food and income generation. Compared to international food markets, local markets reduce transport and energy use, contribute to lower post-harvest losses and trigger local economic growth. Further, we support export oriented production of cash crops as a strategy to generate income and to improve access to a diversified food basket, provided cash crop production is part of a diversified farming system and does not compete with the production of crops for local consumption. We further disapprove unfair terms of trade which discriminate against developing countries, in particular in food markets.

In developing countries, food losses during harvesting, processing and storing are high, up to 30% in some regions, thus contributing significantly to food insecurity of families. We promote improved post-harvest management practices as an economic and ecological way to save food and increase food security.

HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation implements several post-harvest management projects in Sub-Saharan Africa (Benin, Mozambique, Tanzania). They foster improved drying and storage facilities of grains (maize, sorghum, beans) among smallholders, sensitization of food supply chain actors and politicians, and systematic dissemination of know-how through innovative rural advisory services.



Women harvesting organic Basmati rice in Ramnagar, India
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Land rights and land grabbing

Secure access to land is a fundamental precondition for farmers to ensure food security. However, land titles in developing countries are often unclear due to conflicting legal frameworks. There is an increasing trend of companies and foreign governments purchasing or leasing cheap agricultural land in developing countries. We are concerned about the risks of such investments, especially for the disadvantaged, poor population in rural areas. There are frequent reports about smallholders being expelled from their land with no or unfair compensation. Often, the acquired land is used for production of feedstock for agro-fuel for the international markets, with little gains for food or energy security at the local level.

We advocate for equal rights of farmers, sedentary and nomadic pastoralists, in particular poor families, indigenous and marginalized groups, to have secured access to land, based on formally recognized property rights, land use rights and land titles. We denounce all types of land expropriation of farmers, pastoralists and other land users as it is a fundamental threat to their livelihoods, food security and food sovereignty. We consider any purchase or long-term leasing of agricultural land through foreign governments and national or international companies illegitimate, unless it is based on a free and informed consent from land owners, appropriate compensation and the creation of benefits for the local population, particularly income generation and production of food crops for local markets.

For many years, HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation has been active in advocacy work to promote agrarian reforms in developing countries, facilitate the introduction of formally recognized land use rights and land titles, and advocate the interests of families that are threatened by being expelled from their land, for example in the Philippines, in Laos and in Benin.

Agro-fuel production

Agro-fuels are widely promoted as a green, carbon-neutral technology that can be a reliable alternative to fossil fuels. However, most agro-fuels, especially if based on biomass from industrial agriculture, are far from carbon-neutral as they depend on mineral fertilizer input, mechanization and energy-intensive processing cycles. Also, the high profitability of agro-fuel creates perverse incentives to extend new agricultural land through deforestation. Agro-fuel production directly competes with the production of food, thus increasing the pressure on land and water. Furthermore, the soaring demand for agro-fuels is contributing to a rise in global food import costs. It is a fact that the agro-fuel boom contributed significantly to the world food crisis of 2007/2008.

In general, we consider the generation of agro-fuel out of local resources as a development opportunity for rural communities which allow them to produce energy autonomously. We support the production and marketing of agro-fuels of the 2nd generation as long as they do not compete with food production or lead to deforestation and are carbon neutral. We disapprove any agro-fuel production and marketing out of food crops such as wheat, corn or sugar cane since their production directly competes with resources for food production (land, water), their marketing leads to a rise in staple prices and their net energy content value added is minimal or even negative. We denounce any foreign agricultural investments in land in developing countries that are aimed at export oriented agro-fuel production.



Cocoa agroforestry system in Honduras
© Fundación Helvetas Honduras



Improved maize silo "Tether" in Mozambique
© Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation

Food speculation

Over the last decade, raw materials including food crops have increasingly become subject to speculation in international trade markets as a consequence of the deregulation of commodity futures trading, i.e. investments in agricultural raw materials and foodstuffs, in the late 90ties. Whereas before 2000, producers and processors had dominated commodity futures up to 80% by hedging specific delivery quantities in order to secure prices, today 80% of the markets are controlled by financial speculators who do investments in food commodities looking for high and fast profits (arbitrage). As a consequence, agricultural commodity prices now develop in parallel with other commodity prices, following the typical herding behaviour that characterizes financial markets. This means that the prices for products such as wheat, rice and maize are increasingly detached from the real demand and supply. While many governments and financial institutions continue to deny the link between food speculation and sharp price fluctuations, the UNCTAD does acknowledge that speculation has played a considerable role in the 2007/8 global food crisis.

We acknowledge the importance of hedging in food markets, but disapprove arbitrage (i.e. the mere speculation with food) because the manner and extent to which it is practiced today, arbitrage has a detrimental effect on the food security of the poor and disadvantaged people and can cause massive, unprecedented global and regional hikes in prices of staple foods. Further, speculating with agricultural raw materials and essential foodstuffs with the sole aim to maximise private profits is unethical and has no wider economic use.

Food aid

The principle goal of HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation with regard to food security is to overcome transitory or chronic food insecurity by fostering resilient food production and trade systems in the long run. However, we also provide humanitarian aid in acute emergency situations in countries where we are present with own projects, for example in the form of food aid. An important principle of such interventions is that the provision of food aid should not jeopardize local food production and local food markets. Even during a food crisis, we orient the emergency support – as far as the situation allows – towards the strengthening of structures that enhance the resilience of the population against future food crisis. Any emergency intervention should work through and with local networks and initiatives, rather than creating parallel structures. Whenever possible, staples for food aid should be purchased from local or regional markets. By doing so, the impact of bulk purchase and distribution of food on local markets and prices needs to be analyzed very carefully.

A number of developing countries depend on permanent food aid, partly as a consequence of market distortions through export subsidies from industrialized countries. This is highly problematic and we strongly advocate for changes in international trade regimes that prohibit such discrimination. Furthermore, we disapprove policies that push the export of subsidized staple crops to developing countries.

The intervention of HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation during the severe floods in the Lao province of Khammouae is an excellent example of how food aid is provided through the close collaboration with local private sector actors and based on national staple production: Rice producers collaborated with the local rice millers to procure 25 tons of rice for the victims of the floods, which was distributed by the programme.

Food waste

Almost 20% of food products purchased by Swiss households end up in their waste bin, contributing to half of the food waste produced in Switzerland. Overall, one third of produced food in Switzerland – or 2 Mio tons of food every year – end up in waste disposals, wastewater treatment plants, compost or in the feeding dish of animals. This is a problem both from a moral and an ecological point of view, especially if we consider that a growing share of the food purchased in our stores comes from developing countries.

The food economy in industrialized countries is highly intensive in terms of energy, land and water use due to an increasing share of meat in people's diets, highly globalized food markets which function regardless of seasonality, a trend towards convenience food and the above mentioned wasting of food, among others. It is a food economy that is not sustainable, that wastes valuable resources of countries in the South where they are badly needed by the local population and which exacerbates their food insecurity.

We believe consumers in wealthy countries are responsible for and are in the position to influence food production and trade through their own consumption patterns. We advocate for a less energy intensive, less wasteful, more seasonal and more regional food economy, and we promote ecologically and socially sound production, trade and consumption of food.

The exhibition «We eat the world», developed by HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation and shown in several Swiss towns, presents the topic of food production and consumption in a globalized world. It is a culinary world tour, explaining food production, food trade, food business, food abundance, food insecurity and hunger in different countries. The exhibition aims to sensitize a mainly young public by linking the topic directly to our everyday experience of choosing, buying, preparing conserving, consuming and wasting food.

Link to full version of Position Paper on Food Security and Food Sovereignty: http://www.helvetas.org/topics/working_areas/rural_economy/

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