

CHANGING INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES  
TOWARDS WOMEN AND FOOD - AN APPRAISAL

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The title of this paper could be interpreted in two ways : first, it could refer to the changes that are already taking place at the global and national levels in policies addressing the question of food availability and food security, and second, it could be asking what needs to be done in order to change existing approaches to the above problems. Both interpretations are relevant to the arguments developed in summary form in this paper. It is my contention that, although significant changes have occurred in the policy climate - in part because of the devastating impact of the Ethiopian famine - certain crucial aspects of the long term problems of food availability not only in sub-Saharan Africa but in other parts of the Third World as well, are not yet sufficiently acknowledged at the highest policy levels. In a word, the neglected aspects have to do with women's critical position in societies as food producers, providers and managers. Neglecting women's work in this case is not only detrimental to women ; it also makes it impossible to develop the integrated approaches to the interlinked problems of food - fuel - water that are increasingly being recognized as essential to the success of policy.

For reasons of brevity I shall not elaborate here on the policy differences and debates among different international development agencies, aid and research institutions and country governments over the course of the three United Nations development decades. Rather I will focus on broad trends in actual policy and their effects. The paper argues that excessive emphasis on aggregate food production and the grain trade at the global/national level to the detriment of land and

resource availability for regional and local food self-sufficiency have made it difficult to even perceive the underlying fragility of the ecological, institutional and social bases of food - fuel - water availability and access in the Third World. Concomitant with this policy framework is the near total neglect of local food producers at least during much of the 1960's, and of the links between the availability of food, rural energy sources and of water, or of women as the human element in those links. Unless this neglect is redressed, and it would appear that the available policy options on this score are fairly limited, crises such as those in the Sahel earlier and in Ethiopia currently will tend to recur and with greater frequency.

## 1. POLICY APPROACHES

During the major part of the first and second UN development decades, two distinguishable strands in food policy could be identified. One strand stressed that efficient use of global economic resources required an expansion of *global* agricultural production and trade based on comparative cost advantages in that production. Given that some of the major countries of the North, e.g. the US, Canada, Australia, were already large commercial grain producers, while many Third World countries have specialized historically in the production of export crops such as coffee, sugar, cocoa, tea, fruit, etc, production and trade should logically continue along these lines, according to the proponents of this approach. Thus world grain production would continue to be dominated by countries of the North while Third World farmers would be encouraged to expand production of export crops in line with their apparent (historically established) comparative cost advantage, Food aid drawn from the surplus grain stocks of the North would supplement grain availability in the Third World in periods of drought, floods or other serious disruptions in agricultural production.

The second policy approach shifted the emphasis from global to *national* food production. This took effect mainly in those Third World countries which were already significant producers of wheat, rice and corn. A 'green revolution' was heralded in the 1960's based on dissemination of packages of high yielding seeds, fertilizers, pesticides and water. The new technology was developed through a globally linked network of research institutes. It was to receive governmental backing in

the form of credit, marketing and price supports, and was to be expanded consistent with an approach of 'building on the best'. That is, attention would be focussed on those regions and farmers within a country who were most capable of helping themselves as individual producers ; this was seen as most likely to obtain the maximum return to governmental resources.

Both approaches outlined above gave almost single-minded emphasis to expanding agricultural production and trade, and to providing the incentives for so doing. The difference between them was that one strand argued for expanding global food production and international trade, while the other stressed national food production and internal trade within a country. This difference has been a significant one for questions of national self reliance in food. Those Third World countries that took the former route (many countries in Africa and Latin America belong to this category) and expanded export or non-food production for the internal market have increasingly found themselves uncomfortably dependent on world trade and aid. Since the prices of agricultural commodities tend to be quite volatile in world markets, reliance on trade has often meant increased reliance on food aid when the prices of a country's exports drop sharply. The irony here is that favorable climatic conditions leading to a large world supply of an export commodity and a resulting fall in its price can create the conditions for food aid by putting pressure on the balance of payments. Thus food aid may become necessary both under adverse and beneficial agro-aclimatic conditions.

Secondly, the structure of the international grain market which is controlled by a few 'merchants of grain' means that even the *purchase of* foodgrain in times of national scarcity may not be possible. The large grain traders have lobbied effectively against setting up a multilaterally controlled global foodgrain buffer stock, since this would reduce their ability to profit from the supply and price volatility of world grain markets (MORGAN - 1980). Thus, for example, during the severe 1972-73 drought in India, the absence of a multilateral stockpile may have contributed to as many as a million deaths, since India could not afford to match the prices offered by China and the USSR for US grain.

Thindly, excessive reliance on food imports in a situation where a country faces serious balance of payments deficits and an external debt burden makes national food availability vulnerable to these pressures as well.

Countries that have followed the 'green revolution' route and expanded national grain production have been able to avoid some of the problems outlined above. Thus, for example, by the early 1980's, Indian grain production and national buffer stock had become sizable enough that drought years could be tided over more easily than had been possible earlier. However, even in such countries, the adverse distributional effects of a policy of 'building on the best' have meant that increases in total national food production have not always been translated into food *access* among poorer regions, occupational classes or income groups. Thus, while the national capacity for avoiding famines has undoubtedly improved in India, long term undernutrition among the above groups has not been eradicated. Nor can it be claimed that the removal of undernutrition is only a matter of time once overall production has increased.

An important distributional effect of the 'green revolution' policy is the relative and absolute channeling of resources away from the crops (e.g. millets, pulses) which are the staple diet among poorer regions and groups. Stagnant production means stagnant real income in poorer regions, which means that structural undernutrition may have worsened even as the national capacity to deal with the effects of drought may have improved. For example, in the poor states of Orissa, Bihar and Karnataka in India, grain production stagnated during the decade of the 1970's, even as national grain production was increasing.

This leads us to the wider question of food policies in the presence of large inequalities in land holding. The distributional effects in this case can work in a manner similar to that outlined in the previous paragraph. For example, in Brazil which claims to be the fourth largest grain producer in the world, it is the poor who appear to have borne the main burden of the last six years of drought in the North-eastern part of the country. The presence of extreme inequalities in landholding and politico-economic power in the region have meant that most drought relief measures and resources have been appropriated by the large land-owners alone (WIJKMAN and TIMBERLAKE - 1984, pp. 47-48).

The Sahel famine of 1968-73 brought some of these problems into sharp focus. Partly as a result, there has been growing recognition during the past decade in the policy-making community that droughts are not purely 'natural' disasters to which short term relief measures are an adequate response. A significant number of them appear, rather, to result from longer term structural factors thrown up by the patterns of

development and land use within a region. Some of these patterns have been touched on in the preceding discussion. To summarize : excessive channeling of developmental resources towards export crops, or towards more prosperous agricultural regions and farmers, the tilting of price and input subsidy policies against the staple subsistence grains consumed by the poor have resulted in stagnation of production and yields, excessive dependence on food imports and aid (which are subject to both the volatility of foreign terms of trade and pressures on the balance of payments as well as political manipulation), and growing semi-proletarianization, impoverishment and undernutrition. The last is true, as we have argued, even in countries whose grain output has increased if distributional effects have not been taken into account.

Resulting from this recognition, the Club du Sahel and the Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Region (CILSS) agreed that food self-sufficiency should be the main goal of national and regional development (1). Similarly, there are now under way some research efforts supported by the UN and even bilateral aid agencies to explore the impact of cash cropping on subsistence food production. These efforts would do well to take account of the reasons for the continuing crisis in the Sahel.

Critical among those reasons is the lack of *integrated* policies towards farming, timber use and irrigation/power generation. The crises of food, water, and rural energy are linked together through environmental and demographic processes, themselves the result of short-sighted policies and existing power structures. While drought is the single most important cause of food failure, drought itself is not caused exclusively by a shortage of rainfall. At least three types of drought can be identified : precipitation drought, runoff drought and aquifer drought (WIJKMAN and TIMBERLAKE - 1984, p. 35). Thus even in years of normal or good rainfall, drought due to poor runoffs or low aquifer levels may have devastating impact.

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(1) According to Wijkman and Timberlake, despite such a policy resolution, less than 40 % of the \$7.5 billion given as aid between 1975-80 went to the rural areas. This was in part because peasants lacked political muscle, and in part because the technology for growing sorghum and millet on arid lands is still not very advanced.

These latter types of drought often result from deforestation and soil erosion caused by unplanned and unbalanced tree cutting for industrial uses (e.g. pulp and paper mills, furniture factories etc), tree cutting for urban and rural domestic energy needs under conditions of shortage, damming and diversion of perennial rivers or streams for hydroelectric purposes and overgrazing or unsound agricultural practices. Two major agroclimatic features characterizing large parts in the tropics exacerbate these problems, viz., the thinness and poor quality of topsoils, and the severity of seasonal rainstorms. The latter tend to wash away and compact even the existing soils in the absence of adequate vegetation and tree cover. Severe droughts now appear to have become endemic in sub-Saharan Africa. In 1984, according to the FAO, severe food shortages prevailed in Ethiopia, Sudan, the Sahel, and the southern African countries of Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, and Zambia (1).

The underlying processes are to be found in operation outside Africa as well. That at present their effects are most noticeable in Africa is due to the particular fragility of the sub-Saharan eco-agricultural system. For example, Kerala in southern India - a state known traditionally for its garden lands and ample perennial water supplies drawn from small streams and ponds that are replenished by seasonal rainfall - has begun experiencing severe water shortages in years of inadequate rain. It is now being recognized that the effects of poor rainfall are considerably worsened by the rapid and alarming denudation of forests in the high ranges for industrial uses. Such denudation is also known to be occurring in the once lushly wooded slopes of the Himalayan foothills, and in the Andean countries (Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela), along with significant dangers of desertification in Chile, Argentina, Mexico and Peru.

Not all of the problem can be attributed to excessive industrial use of forests. The privatization of previously waste and common lands reduces the availability of woody biomass (twigs, small branches, deadfall and crop residue) which have traditionally been the dominant form

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(1) In Mozambique, at least part of the problem of disruptions of agriculture and civil supplies distribution is caused by the South Africa backing of the rebels.

of domestic energy especially among poor households in Africa. The effect has been severe pressure on rural energy availability which is worsened by rapid rates of population increase (CECELSKI - 1984, pp. 7-8). In addition the poor and landless also tend to loose access to forest produce as food and as sources of income.

The related effect of the above pressures on rural energy and water is growing soil erosion and declines in food production and productivity. The three crises - food, fuel, and water - are therefore interlinked and not independent. They require therefore integrated and longer term solutions. The need for such solutions is now beginning to receive systematic acknowledgement. For example, the Swedish Red Cross and Earthscan (a Lonson based international environment and development information service) have collaborated with funding from SIDA to produce a report on which I have drawn in this paper (WIJKMAN and TIMBERLAKE - 1984). Their main argument is that so-called 'natural disasters' are structurally made by humans to an increasing extent. While this is a depressing thought when one considers the scale of long term human misery involved, it also provides the hope that policy solutions and options do exist and can be identified.

The report has concluded that "most disaster problems in the Third World are unsolved development problems" (p. 122), and hence require long term development solutions. The report also sharply criticizes the practices and motivations of agencies engaged in disaster relief from an insider's perspective. One of its main criticisms is that - like the the proverbial bull in a China shop - relief agencies often disrupt existing social mechanisms for coping with disasters, foster external dependence rather than self-reliance, and treat the poor (who are usually those mainly affected by disasters) as helpless victims. The report argues strongly therefore for the need to work out long term solutions in conjunction with local people, drawing on both their experience and stated needs, with policy and program support from higher levels of decision-making.

If there is a fault to be found in an otherwise thoughtful and perceptive document, it is that it does not take the final and critical step implicit in its own argument. Namely, if food - water - fuel crisis are interlinked, and if local people are to be the backbone of development efforts aimed at their resolution, then women (especially from poor and landless groupes) must be explicitly recognized as the key

human elements in those linkages, and active agents in any resolutions. What has been called a generalized reproduction crisis (WISNER - 1984) in the provision of 'basic needs' has poor women at its center, as the principal providers of those same needs.

## 2. REPRODUCTION CRISIS AND WOMEN

The importance of women to the solution of the generalized reproduction crisis is multi-dimensional. *First*, there is now a large literature to show that in many parts of both Africa and Asia, women are important, often the main, producers of food crops (MUNTEMBA - 1982 ; KRUKS and WISNER - 1984 ; YOUNG - 1977 ; STOLER - 1977 ; HENN - 1983). *Second*, even where women may not actually cultivate crops, they are almost universally the main traditional food processors and cooks. *Third*, in addition to being food providers, women are usually also responsible for water and fuel collection, even though the labor of children is often quite important to the latter (CECELSKI - 1984). Pressures on rural fuel - water availability mean that women spend increasing amounts of time in their collection. Evidence from national level sample surveys also now exists to show that it is indeed poorer women who are found in disproportionate numbers performing such tasks (SEN - 1984). *Fourth*, the reproduction crisis is reflected in women having to make trade-offs in the use of resources - their labor time, the cash income or land over which they have some control - among different basic needs. Where women have little earning power or effective control over cash income or land use (and this may be due both to traditional gender hierarchies and subordination and biased state policies towards land reform), their own labour time and that of their children (especially daughters) is the only resource over which they have any control. Thus women's work hours get considerably lengthened as the only mechanism for attempting to cope with the crisis. *Fifth*, the nutritional and health impact of these pressures operate through switches to less nutritious but less labor and fuel intensive foods, e.g. from yams to cassava (BUKH - 1979), from millets to manioc (VEMURY - 1978), from whole grains to purchased processed foods. This particularly affects the nutritional status of growing children (CARLONI - 1981). *Sixth*, as is now well known, women as managers of intra-household food distribution will usually eat after men and sometimes after children, thereby consuming



smaller and less nutritious amounts. Also girl children are often discriminated against in favor of boys in food distribution. In conjunction with increased work burdens, this leads to both an absolute and relative decline in women's nutritional and morbidity status (AGARWAL - 1981). It is clear from this discussion that women as the main workers in basic needs provision are central to an understanding of the linkages in the reproduction crisis.

If the above is true, then women must also be key potential actors in any resolution of the crisis. Indeed, with or without international or governmental recognition, women have already been organizing themselves. In India, for example, there is a spreading movement of women organizing against forest contractors to prevent deforestation (SRINIVASAN - 1982). Traditional kin and community based systems of mutual aid and self-help, e.g. 'harambee' in Kenya, are vitalized for collective solutions to fuel and water problems. The existing women's groups tend to be local and participatory, as well as highly flexible in their ability to switch from one project to another as needed (WISNER - 1984).

However these groups often face a number of barriers to their effective functioning. *First*, poor men do not always have identical interests to women because of the existing sexual division of labor and resources. For example, men may be more interested in cash crops than in food crops if they control money income, or may be willing to sell forest rights to timber contractors, or may be indifferent to labor-reducing technological improvements in cooking or fuel/water use. Men may also fear the growth of women's power through collective organization and decision making. That the activation of women's organization is key to the potential betterment of *all* the poor is a crucial argument in raising the consciousness of poor and landless men.

A *second* obstacle arises from the hierarchical nature of many traditional women's organizations themselves. Their upper class biases often militate against their ability to organize effectively for the basic needs of poor women. It is increasingly becoming clear that, for effective action, such organizations will have to be supplanted by or transformed into genuine organizations of poor women. Furthermore, such organizations may have to be wide enough to include both women and men if they are to be effective in tackling local power structures and bureaucratic inertia.

A *third* obstacle stems from state policies towards development in general and towards women in particular. As was discussed earlier, state policies towards development often militate against the fulfilment of the basic needs of the poor. State policies towards women, notably in land reform, have often reduced women's access to land and hence their control over income from land and their ability to produce food.

Governments and international agencies also continue to blithely ignore the mounting evidence that women, as the main providers of basic needs are crucial to both an understanding and a resolution of the crisis of rural reproduction in the Third World. It is more than time to reverse this indifference.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper originates that although significant changes have occurred in the political climate, certain crucial aspects of the long term problems in food availability are not yet sufficiently acknowledged at the highest policy-making levels. The neglected aspects have to do with women's critical position in societies as food producers, providers and managers. Neglecting women's work makes it impossible to develop integrated approaches to the interlinked problems of food-fuel-water.

## RÉSUMÉ

Pour l'auteur de cette communication, même si des changements sensibles sont intervenus dans le climat politique, certains aspects-clés des problèmes à long terme en matière de disponibilités alimentaires restent encore méconnus aux échelons supérieurs du pouvoir. Les aspects négligés concernent la position critique des femmes dans la société en tant que productrices, fournisseurs et gestionnaires des aliments. Sous-estimer le travail des femmes rend très malaisé l'élaboration de mesures intégrées pour résoudre l'interrelation des problèmes alimentation-énergie-eau.