



## Food Security

### First part: definitions

#### 1. What is food security?

The concept of **food security** has evolved significantly over time. Initially, it was based on the reliable availability of food. Today, it takes into account the fact that food is an element of a complex economic, social, and environmental context. This context, and the relative power dynamics among various interest groups that shape it, is an essential factor to be considered when analysing the food security situation and its possible future evolution.

During the World Food Summit of 1996, the definition of food security distinguished four main dimensions: availability, access, stability, and utilisation.<sup>1</sup> More recently, two additional dimensions were added to better clarify the profound meaning of this definition: sustainability and agency. **Diagram 1** below illustrates the relationship between this definition and the dimensions of food security.

**Diagram 1 – The dimensions of food security**



Source: [HLPE, 2020](#).

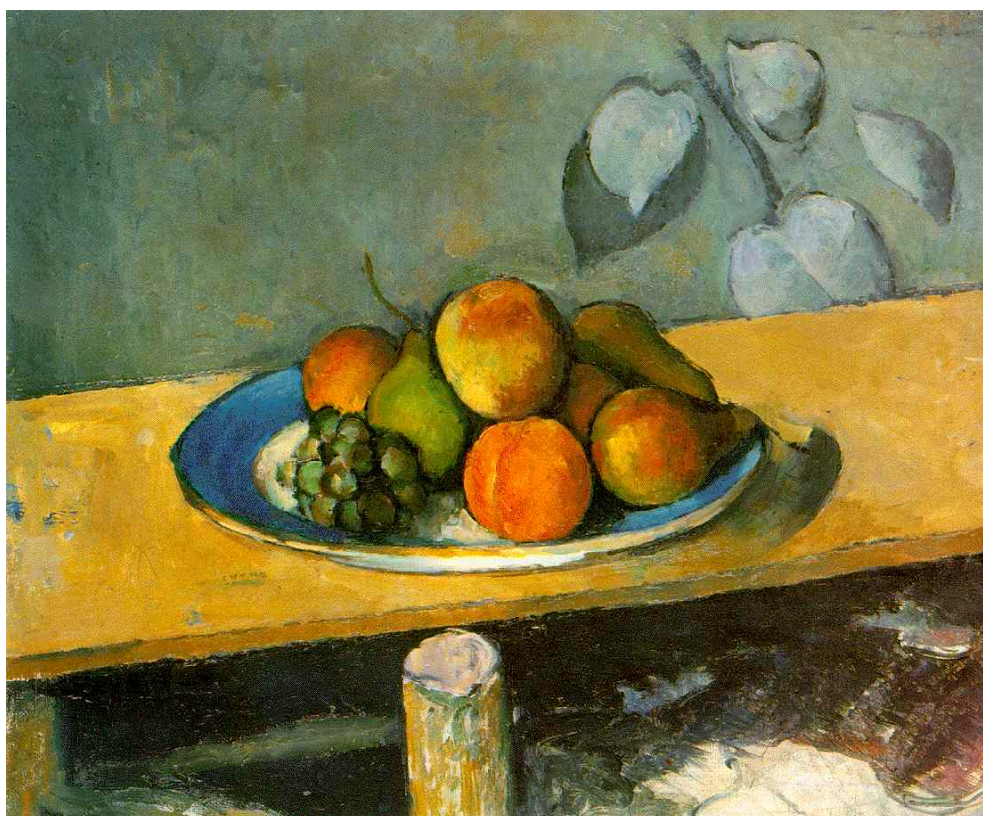
<sup>1</sup> Food security, at the individual, household, national, regional and global levels... exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. (FAO, [Rome Declaration on World Food Security and World Food Summit Plan of Action](#). World Food Summit 13–17, November 1996, Rome).

What is the exact meaning of the six dimensions of security?

- **Availability:** it is the availability in sufficient quantities of food of appropriate nature and quality (free from undesirable substances and culturally acceptable) across all parts of the national territory and regardless of the source of this food (local production, imports, or food assistance);
- **Access:** it is the access of any individuals (including the vulnerable) to resources that enable them to acquire the necessary food for a nourishing and healthy diet without compromising their other fundamental needs. These resources encompass both monetary resources and the necessary access rights to produce food;
- **Stability:** it is stable access to food, meaning that the population's access to food cannot be threatened by any economic, health, climatic, or political shock, or by seasonal events;
- **Utilisation:** it involves the appropriate use of food (proper cooking and preparation of diverse food items) for adequate nutrient and energy intake in a context where the consumption of this food is safe for health (hygiene, clean drinking water, sanitary or medical infrastructures).
- **Agency:** Individuals and population groups have the ability to act independently and decide, according to their preferences, what food they produce and consume, and how it is produced, processed, and distributed. They can also engage in policy processes that shape food systems through effective democratic governance methods.
- **Sustainability:** The practices implemented in food systems (production, marketing, processing, distribution, consumption, governance, etc.) preserve the necessary elements (natural resources, climate, economic, social, cultural, and political conditions) for meeting the food needs of the entire current population without compromising those of future generations [\[read\]](#).

For an individual, a group, or a country to be in a food-secure situation, all of these conditions must be satisfied simultaneously.

The **state of food insecurity** must be assessed with tools that help to rigorously and objectively analyse the food situation (statistics, studies of nutritional status using anthropometric measurements, surveys of the population, etc.). This critical analysis should serve as the basis for decision-making regarding measures to be taken to ensure food security. In this work, it is important to distinguish between chronic undernourishment and occasional food insecurity [\[read\]](#).



The concept of **nutrition security** complements that of food security. It encompasses additional specific objectives such as the availability of health services and the population's knowledge of the necessary practices for good health, which is essential for the full development of their potential. Nutrition security is achieved when the main deficiencies in minerals and vitamins (often associated and mutually worsening) are eliminated.

Food security can be defined **at different levels**: individual, family, community, regional, national, as well as for different groups of countries. It is clear that food security at one level does not necessarily lead to food security at others. For example, a country facing food insecurity will almost always have population groups whose food needs are met. Conversely, it is also likely that in countries that appear to be food secure at the national level, there may be population groups and individuals experiencing food insecurity. Even within a household in a situation of food security, it is possible that some members may not be able to meet their food needs.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Food requirements and consumption

**Food requirements** represent the quantity of energy and nutrients required by an individual to enable him/her to develop and lead a normal, healthy life. These needs are generally expressed on a daily basis and vary according to the category of individuals (age, weight, physiological state – growth, pregnancy, illness, or breastfeeding) and level of activity.

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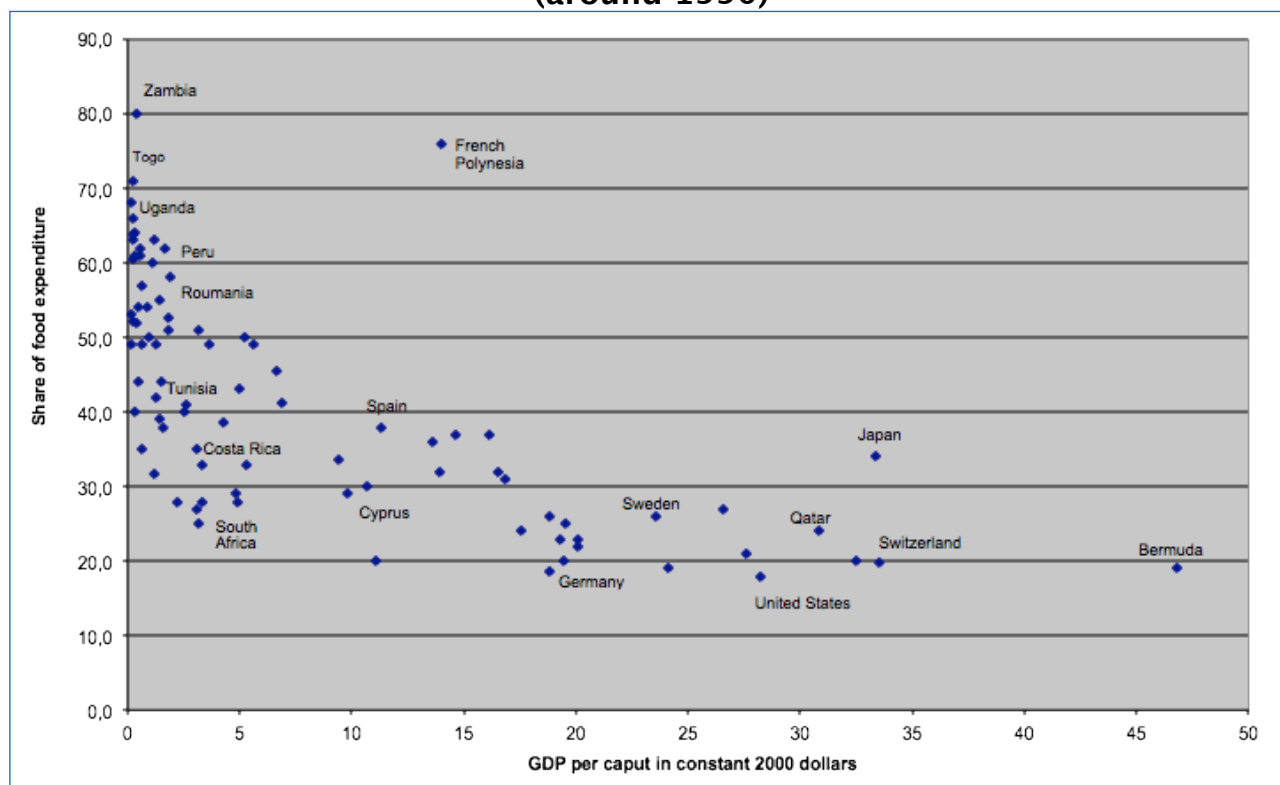
<sup>2</sup> Thomson A. and M. Metz, [Implications of Economic Policy for Food Security. A Training Manual](#), Training materials for agricultural planning no. 40, FAO, 2000.

**Food consumption** corresponds to the quantity of food consumed by a given individual. The volume consumed and the composition of food generally vary according to the income of the individual (and of the household of which he/she is a member), the population group to which he/she belongs (rural, urban), and sociocultural factors.

As individual income increases and exceeds a certain level, the consumption of products such as cereals, roots, and tubers tends to decrease while the proportion of meat, fish, fruits, and vegetables eaten tends to increase. In China, for example, the traditional diet mainly consisted of cereals, vegetables, and a small amount of meat. However, the consumption of meat and fish has surged with the rise in household income, urbanisation, and the development of a market economy.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, in wealthier or more educated population groups, the focus on health drives the adoption of a more balanced diet, rich in fruits and vegetables and containing only a moderate amount of meat.

While food needs are determined by physiological factors, consumption depends on economic, social, and cultural factors. It is this consumption (sometimes also referred to as **food demand**) that can be influenced by public policies.

**Diagram 2 – Importance of food expenditures based on GDP per capita (around 1990)**



Sources: FAO, World Bank.

<sup>3</sup> J. Huang et H. Bouis, Structural changes in demand for food in Asia. IFPRI's, Food, Agriculture, and the Environment 2020 Paper Series 11, International Food, Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), 1996 (en anglais).

Generally, the proportion of the total budget allocated to food decreases as income increases. In a poor country and among the most disadvantaged groups, food can account for up to 80% of the total household budget, while in the wealthiest groups, this proportion can drop below 10%. **Diagram 2** illustrates this fact by showing the share of food expenses in household budgets according to the level of gross domestic product (GDP) per capita of selected countries around 1990 (the year with the most available data).

### 3. Poverty, inequality and food security

Given the importance of income in determining food consumption, poverty is one of the main causes of food insecurity.

#### a. Dimensions of poverty

Poverty is often defined by a poverty threshold, set at a certain income level, below which a person can be considered poor [\[read\]](#). In contrast to this rather schematic definition, Nobel laureate Amartya Sen defines poverty as the lack of a sufficient level of fundamental rights, including the rights of access to essential goods.

The rights of access to essential goods can be found in the following forms:

- Right on what is produced;
- Rights on goods and services acquired through exchange on markets (including through the sale of one's own labour);
- Extended rights (based on social relationships, gifts/exchanges, and public goods) that can be exchanged by an individual.

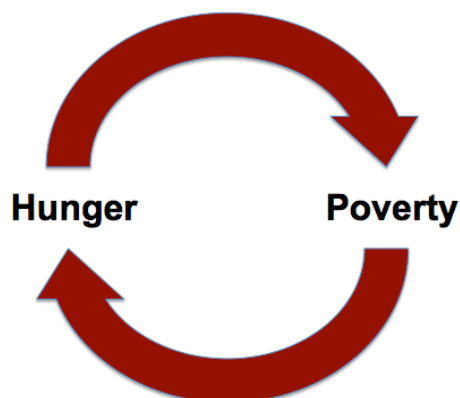
According to Sen, poverty is primarily a complex and multidimensional concept strongly contextualised. It is related to the low (or inequality in) individuals' capacity for choice (which reflects the agency dimension of food security). Income is therefore just one dimension, alongside the social, institutional, and even cultural dimensions.<sup>4</sup>

The multidimensional concept of development, based on the fact that it cannot be limited just to growth of monetary income, has been the subject for the periodic publication, since 1990, by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) of the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) [\[read\]](#) which integrates dimensions such as health, education, housing, employment, environment, and security in its calculation [\[read\]](#).

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<sup>4</sup> A. Sen, *Poverty and Famines: an Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, Clarendon Press/Oxford University Press, 1981.

## b. Poverty and food insecurity: a vicious circle



Poverty inevitably leads to food insecurity. For poor households, the available resources are not sufficient to meet basic needs such as food, housing, education, and healthcare.

Conversely, poverty itself is a consequence of undernutrition caused by chronic food insecurity.

Numerous studies have shown that chronic undernutrition is a factor in perpetuating a situation of poverty. Undernourished individuals experience a diminished **physical and intellectual development**, as well as **reduced capacity for work**. They are also more likely to fall ill, making them unable to work at all.

Undernourishment is also a **vector of poverty inheritance**, as women weakened by an insufficient diet during pregnancy give birth to **small and fragile children** who will suffer from physical or even intellectual disabilities from the first day of their lives.

Similarly, an undernourished child performs less well at school, first because of reduced attention – due to hunger – but also, in a large number of cases, as a result of a deficient intellectual development. Nutrition provided during the first 1,000 days of a child’s life is of crucial importance from this perspective [[read](#)].

Finally, poverty is often **the enemy of risk**: a poor person will hesitate to engage in risky economic activities, which are frequently the most profitable, for fear of losing what little he/she has.

## c. Inequality and food insecurity

In June 2023, the United Nations Committee on World Food Security’s [High Level Panel of Experts \(HLPE\)](#) published a report on inequalities in the field of food security and nutrition [[read](#)]. The report identified three main drivers affecting food security:

- (i) inequalities in resources used for food production,
- (ii) inequalities in food supply chains, and
- (iii) inequalities in the food environments and consumer behaviour.

These inequalities affecting the food security of individuals and groups often reflect power dynamics existing in our societies, leading to economic and social exclusion of large population groups. The inclusive measures generally proposed as solutions are actually just stopgaps, at best reducing food insecurity but not eradicating it, while the eradication of hunger is one of the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) expected to be achieved by 2030! [[read](#)]

#### 4. Food security, food self-sufficiency, food sovereignty and food safety

Food security is often mistaken with ‘food self-sufficiency’, ‘food sovereignty’ and ‘food safety’. It appears, therefore, useful to make the distinction here.

##### a. Food self-sufficiency

Food self-sufficiency at the national level is the ability to meet all the food needs of a population through **domestic production** alone.

Food self-sufficiency in practice proves dangerous for a country, especially as it makes it vulnerable to any climatic or other unpredictable event that may affect its harvests, and consequently, the physical availability of food. It is often seen as an essential element in the pursuit of economic and political sovereignty based on a form of autarky. This was an approach favoured by the USSR, for example, during the Cold War period when it was in conflict with the United States of America and its allies.<sup>5</sup>

With globalisation and the diversification of food consumption patterns, this strategy was generally criticised, but it is once again attracting a strong renewed interest, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic [\[read\]](#) and with the comeback in favour of protectionist policies.

Food security is distinct from self-sufficiency as follows:

- (i) Its sole objective is to satisfy, under the best possible production conditions, all the food needs of the population, while food self-sufficiency places the pursuit of independence on an at least as important level. This tends to give the latter a more political significance.
- (ii) It is a broader concept than self-sufficiency, as it includes the possibility of leveraging a country’s import capabilities rather than relying solely on national production.
- (iii) Unlike self-sufficiency, food security relies heavily on international trade: a country sells what it produces efficiently and buys what it does not produce well (based on the concept of comparative advantage used to claim that every country can benefit from international trade). Food security can thus be achieved by a country that is not self-sufficient in food but has the necessary funds from non-food exports to purchase food from the global market. In some cases, food security can therefore strongly depend on the terms of exchange between exported goods and food, as well as on global food market conditions. This market dependence has been keenly felt since the 2007–2008 food crisis and the increase in food prices that is often presented as a result of the implementation of protectionist policies by countries who do not trust the global market [\[read\]](#).

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<sup>5</sup> Let’s note, however, that, in bad years, the USSR sometimes had to import US cereals.

## b. Food sovereignty

Food sovereignty is a concept developed and introduced for the first time by '[La Via Campesina](#)' during the World Food Summit organised by the FAO in Rome in 1996. Food sovereignty has a much more protest and political content than food security. It emphasises certain aspects of the Right to Food and gives crucial importance to the agency dimension of food security.

*It is presented as 'the RIGHT of peoples, communities, and countries to define their own agricultural, labour, fishing, food and land policies which are ecologically, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances. It includes the true right to food and to produce food, which means that all people have the right to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food and to food-producing resources and the ability to sustain themselves and their societies.'*

NGO/CSO Forum for Food Sovereignty, Official Declaration, June 8–13, 2002.

Food sovereignty encompasses:

- Prioritising **local agricultural production** in order to feed people, access of peasants and the landless to land, water, seeds, and credit. Hence the need for land reforms, for combating GMOs (Genetically Modified Organisms), for free access to seeds, and for safeguarding water as a public good to be sustainably distributed.
- The **right of farmers** and, peasants to produce food and the right of consumers to be able to decide what they consume, and how and by whom it is produced.
- The **right of countries** to protect themselves from dumping of artificially underpriced agricultural and food imports.
- **Agricultural prices** that are linked to production costs: they can be achieved if the countries or groups of states are entitled to impose taxes on exaggeratedly cheap imports, if they commit themselves in favour of a sustainable farm production systems, and if they control production for the internal market so as to avoid possible structural surpluses.
- The **participation** of the population in agricultural policy choices.
- The recognition of the **rights of women farmers**, who play a major role in agricultural production and in relation to food in general [[read](#)].

### Origin of the concept of food sovereignty

Created and promoted by the international movement La Via Campesina in 1996, this concept has since been adopted by various peasant organisations and NGOs. However, the rights underlying the idea of food sovereignty are still far from being fully and formally recognised by international law or international institutions.





## Meaning and scope

Food sovereignty is **inherently political** in nature, as it is understood by its proponents to be the **right** of a country to implement food and agricultural policies that are most adapted to the needs of its population.

According to its proponents, the goal is to promote a family agriculture primarily aimed at supplying local, regional, and national markets, which additionally has greater economic, social, and environmental efficiency compared to industrial agriculture and its large-scale plantations.

While this concept is sometimes mentioned in certain official speeches, it remains closely linked to the alter-globalisation movement.

### **c. Food safety**

It is also important to note that there is often confusion between ‘food security’ and ‘food safety’. Food safety pertains to ensuring that food does not pose any health risks to consumers that could result from contamination by harmful substances or organisms [[read](#)].

[Materne Maetz](#)  
(December 2024)

also read:

- [Food security – Second part: 50 years of food insecurity.](#)
- [Food security – Third part: dimensions of food security and their drivers.](#)

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To know more :

- HLPE, [Reducing inequalities for food security and nutrition](#). A report by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security, Rome, 2023.

- UNDP, [25 Countries Halved Multidimensional Poverty Within 15 Years, but 1.1 Billion Remain Poor](#), Press release, 2023.
- HLPE, [Food security and nutrition: building a global narrative towards 2030](#). A report by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security, Rome, 2020.
- FAO, [Voluntary Guidelines to support the progressive realization of the right to adequate food in the context of national food security](#), 2004.
- La Via Campesina, [Food sovereignty](#), 2003.
- La Via Campesina, [Declaration NGO Forum FAO Summit Rome+5](#), NGO/CSO Forum for Food Sovereignty, Official Declaration, June 8-13, 2002.
- Thomson A. and M. Metz, [Implications of Economic Policy for Food Security. A Training Manual](#), Training materials for agricultural planning no. 40, FAO, 2000.
- FAO, [Rome Declaration on World Food Security and World Food Summit Plan of Action](#). World Food Summit, 13-17 November 1996, Rome, 1996.
- Huang J. et H. Bouis, Structural changes in demand for food in Asia. IFPRI's, Food, Agriculture, and the Environment 2020 Paper Series 11, International Food, Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), 1996.
- Sen A., Poverty and Famines: an Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation, Clarendon Press/Oxford University Press, 1981.

#### Websites :

- FAOSTAT, [Food and agriculture data](#).
- [High Level Panel of Experts \(HLPE\)](#) of the Committee on World Food Security (United Nations).
- [La Via Campesina](#).
- La Via Campesina, [Food sovereignty explained](#).
- OPHI, [How a National MPI measures poverty](#), Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative.
- UNICEF, [Early Moments Matter - The first 1,000 days can shape a child's future. We have one chance to get it right](#).
- United Nations, [Sustainable Development Goals](#).
- World Bank, [Poverty](#).

#### Earlier articles on [hungerexplained.org](http://hungerexplained.org) related to the topic:

- [Measuring reality is quite complex – Two illustrations](#), 2024.
- [Inequality in food systems. Is it realistic to believe that food systems could become more equal in an unequal society?](#) 2023.
- [Food security and sustainability: should we add a sustainability dimension to food security?](#) 2020.
- [Europe: Could the COVID-19 crisis contribute to a “reshoring” of production?](#) 2020.
- [Food Security – definitions and drivers](#), 2013.
- [Food crises: A consequence of disastrous economic policies](#), 2012.
- [Food quality and safety](#), 2012.

