

Strength in unity?

Poverty reduction strategies and the right to food

A lot is expected of poverty reduction strategies, and high hopes have been placed in the Voluntary Guidelines on the right to food. One question frequently raised is whether it is possible to integrate the right to food into the established instrument of poverty reduction strategies. The present article discusses to what extent the two approaches can mesh to make a significant contribution to hunger reduction.

Photo: DW/HH



The last three decades have seen a number of notable advances in the fight against hunger. Whereas in 1970 a third of the world's population was classified as suffering from malnutrition, this figure fell to 20 percent over the following two decades, with a further reduction – to 17 percent – occurring during the 1990s. Thus despite a minimal slowdown in population growth, the number of people suffering from malnutrition in developing countries fell from nearly a billion to just over 800 million at present. However, the rate of reduction has slowed considerably over the last ten years and this gives cause for concern. If China is excluded from the statistics, the number of people suffering from hunger actually rose by 40 million over the last decade.

Poverty and hunger

The most significant cause of hunger is poverty – the mere availability of food is no guarantee that people will have enough to eat. A second essential factor is access to food, be it self-produced, bought in or received as a gift. A precondition for

The Voluntary Guidelines offer a unique opportunity to mainstream the human right to food within national legal systems.

access to food is that people either have access to productive resources, such as land, a job that provides the necessary purchasing power, or receive remittances from relatives or transfer payments from the government or external actors.

Thirdly, food that is available and accessible must be used in a way that contributes to the physical and mental development of the person. This is not the case, for example, when certain foods fail to fulfil social requirements for cultural or religious reasons (e.g. beef and pork for people with Hindu or Islamic beliefs), or when there is no guarantee that it will be fairly distributed between men, women, children and elderly people.

Frequently, it is observed that parents do not know which combination of foods will best serve their children's physiological development. Access to resources, purchasing power, education and health care

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are all highly significant – though frequently underestimated – indicators of poverty that determine a person's nutritional situation.

For this reason the UN General Assembly's Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals that emerged from it address hunger and poverty together. The goal of halving the number of people suffering from hunger and of those living in absolute poverty is given top priority. However, it currently looks as if these objectives – which are not even particularly ambitious in comparison to previous United Nations projects – will not be met within the designated time limit of the year 2015.

Linking two paradigms

Depending upon the standpoint adopted (cf. the other articles in this issue), interpretations are highly diverse regarding the obligations of national governments in both the North and the South in relation to the right to food. This is especially true when it comes to recognizing and implementing that right, with all the consequences entailed for development policy, foreign policy and economic policy. In the worst case, this right – part of the catalogue of economic, social and cultural human rights (ESC rights) – at least provides ethical and moral leverage to those who are not in government, enabling them to mobilize public support for their cause and to underpin the legitimate claims they present to their own government.

The poverty reduction strategies and programs initiated by the World Bank offer an interesting starting point. They were developed in many countries as part of the enhanced debt relief initiative, providing a means of achieving the so-called «completion point» which brings comprehensive debt relief for the country concerned. In order to qualify, however, the country has to produce a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy paper (PRSP) which, in addition to analyzing the situation as it currently exists, describes measures aimed at reducing poverty at the national level with the involvement of civil society.

These national poverty reduction strategies – one of the mandatory requirements of the World Bank within the framework of developing countries' debt relief negotiations – have been heavily influenced by bi-lateral and multi-lateral donors. In most cases, this resulted in governments receiving advice from development experts of international organizations while producing their interim or final reports on the PRSPs, in some instances

even being tied to fulfilling precise quantitative targets, setting out the proportion of state expenditure to be spent on poverty-related areas such as health and education.

Although it is well known that 70 percent of poor and hungry people live in rural areas of developing countries, this crucial aspect has been largely ignored in the formulation of poverty reduction strategies: National governments prefer to ignore it and donors do not exert sufficient influence to give greater weight to measures aimed at supporting farmers, whether it be by promoting the processing and marketing of local agricultural produce or by facilitating access to non-agricultural sources of income. This is not especially surprising given that in bi-lateral and multi-lateral development cooperation, as elsewhere, the proportion of resources allocated to food security, agriculture and rural areas has been falling continuously. The Voluntary Guidelines on the right to food, elaborated by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) at the World Food Summit (1996) and at other conferences, were finally adopted in 2004. They open up new opportunities to reverse this negative trend.

Mainstreaming the Voluntary Guidelines in PRSPs

The Voluntary Guidelines could potentially prompt a shift in emphasis when formulating poverty reduction strategies. With regard to realizing the right to food, the essential obligations of the state are to respect, to protect and to guarantee this right. Translated into the package of measures entailed by poverty reduction strategies, this means the following:

Respect: If the sources of people's livelihoods are taken away or diminished in the course of economic development (when constructing dams or roads, for example) some form of compensation must be provided to previous resource users. This includes state intervention to cushion any ecological impacts.

Protect: The state has the responsibility to prevent any third party from violating the right to food. When illegal logging in Guinea accelerates the process of soil erosion, or prospecting for crude oil in Nigeria contaminates Ogoni farm land, or gold mining in Brazil damages the ecological resources of rainforest dwellers, it is clear that this right is not being adequately protected.

Guarantee: The right to food must be guaranteed especially for the people for

Example: «Policies against Hunger» workshop

In Germany the topic of poverty and hunger is now addressed at the annually held international conference «Policies against Hunger». The conference organizers – the Federal Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Consumer Protection and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, in close cooperation with FAO and private funding organizations – have succeeded in facilitating an exchange of information and views between politicians and civil society. It would be desirable if more non-governmental actors were to use this forum in order to mobilize greater public support for inclusion of the right to food in development cooperation.

whom it has not yet become a reality. Any poverty reduction strategy must therefore include statements that indicate the amount of social welfare provision to be given – as food supplies or food coupons, for example – or whether agricultural reforms will give previously landless people the opportunity to produce food for their own consumption.

The process of formulating poverty-related policies should involve not only the government setting priorities. It is also crucial to have appropriate procedures which ensure participation by private enterprise and civil society. However, criteria for identifying and assessing such participation are still lacking.

Experiences gained when producing PRSPs have been mixed so far. With its «participación popular» policy, Bolivia, for example, has pursued ways of enabling non-state organizations to be involved in the formulation of poverty reduction strategies. However, the somewhat confused political situation meant that the political interests of the various groups involved – some organized by region and some by ethnicity – eclipsed a strategy oriented clearly towards hunger and poverty reduction that would have been binding upon decentralized state structures as well. Moreover, many indigenous organizations were not capable of staying the course during political negotiations. In Mozambique, Mali and Haiti on the other hand, the relevant state authorities (and in some cases the donor community) were not clear about who to address as civil society: Non-governmental organizations, trade unions or businesses people? Hardly any of the foreign experts had a

clear idea of the specific make-up of civil society in these countries, which caused a great deal of uncertainty during discussions and negotiations.

The close interlinks between poverty reduction strategies and potential debt relief meant that the former were often formulated under considerable pressure of time; this made it difficult, even for governments, to set priorities. In such cases no extensive networking or coordination between civil society groups occurred at all. As a result, government consultation among civil society representatives usually took place in a rather arbitrary way.

German Agro Action (Deutsche Welthungerhilfe), which played a leading role in elaborating the Voluntary Guidelines on the right to food, has observed that local indigenous organizations in developing countries – including our own partner organizations – are not yet aware of the Guidelines.

One encouraging example, by contrast, is our project partner «Fundación TIERRA» in Bolivia. This organization promotes active participation by civil society in shaping

legal frameworks and in ensuring they are implemented in rural development. This includes, first and foremost, access to land as well as any interventions necessary at the level of both the target groups and of local, national and international decision making organizations (see box). The Fundación TIERRA also participated in the process of elaborating the Voluntary Guidelines.

Despite the existence of some exemplary cases it seems highly unlikely, under existing circumstances, that the right to food will be mainstreamed in poverty reduction strategies in the immediate foreseeable future, given the amount of work that is still required to build civil society institutions and to improve knowledge among non-state organizations in developing countries about what the right to food entails.

A provisional conclusion

The right to food is a new approach in development policy. The Voluntary Guidelines, to which every government has

become a signatory, offer an ethical and moral basis for political lobbying at national, European and international level. They provide a foundation for the legal entitlements of people suffering from hunger and malnutrition to be formally mainstreamed to a greater extent in relation to their own governments, and up to the level of international law. This will not work, however, without appropriate sanctions and enforcement mechanisms: a challenge to be faced not only by FAO but also by the international community as a whole.

It may be too late for the Voluntary Guidelines to be integrated in the poverty reduction strategies currently in operation – be it in a «top-down» or «bottom-up» fashion – , but it is important to support non-governmental organizations in their role of representing the interests of their clientele, to strengthen their political clout and, in addition, to support interest-based groupings and coordinating forums. Civil society must gain strength and wield influence if the Voluntary Guidelines are to have a greater binding force.

Giving farmers a legal voice in Bolivia

Since 1997, German Agro Action (Deutsche Welthungerhilfe) has provided funding for the project «Civil society involvement in the process of land consolidation and land registry in Chuquisaca» run by the Bolivian non-governmental organization «Fundación TIERRA» (Taller de Iniciativas en Estudios Rurales y Reforma Agraria). The aim of the project is to support farmers, indígenas and settlers in the Chuquisaca Department in their active involvement in and monitoring of the process of land consolidation and land registry. The target groups are small farming families from 250 small communities, 60 percent of which own no legally valid land deeds, along with the farmers' trade unions and their federation, the council of the Guaranís and the settlers' association. The following measures are part of the project:

- The production of radio programs about land issues and their role in current political debates in Bolivia, such as the Constituent Assembly due to be held in 2006;
- Support for village-based initiatives in preparation for the state-implemented procedure of land consolidation and land legalization procedures in 30 communities;
- Updating the land register, arbitration of existing tenure conflicts and inspection and completion of the documents needed for legalization;
- Training for promoters of peasant rights in issues of agricultural legislation;
- Legal advice for representatives of peasant and indigenous organizations for and during their negotiations with relevant authorities in eleven regional advice centers.

In 2002 Fundación TIERRA, in collaboration with the peasant organizations, devised a procedure for a village-based process of preparatory stocktaking of land, clarifying property rights, arbitrating conflicts over land ownership and collating existing documents. This procedure, known as «saneamiento interno», has now been successfully completed in 70 village communities. So far, 650 «rights promoters» have been trained who now facilitate the arbitration procedures and advise the villagers concerned.



Photo: DW/HH