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Cherry picking the reasons for hunger?

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Cherry picking the reasons for hunger?

Bonn, 29 March 2016. The issue of household food security is not simple. And the recipe for a solution is even more complex. In January 2016, Oxford Medicine published the third edition of its factbook "Nutrition for Developing Countries". This landmark publication is highly acknowledged in the nutrition field and has the potential to shape the nutrition communities' perception and approach on key issues. It explains in simple language what good nutrition is and how poor households could acquire proper nutrition with the little means they have. The book draws from extensive experiences of international authors to create practical solutions to meet nutritional needs of babies and children, pregnant and breastfeeding women, to counteract malnutrition and vitamin deficiencies, and to manage obesity and diabetes.

However one key chapter deals with an altogether different issue: Chapter 26, "Improving household food security". While it is good that food security and nutrition are increasingly merging into one single field, it is important that the merger is well-informed and balanced. This implies that each side tries to understand what the issues are on the "other" side of the field. If this is not the case, future interventions might not target the right problems or might target the right problems in the wrong way. This chapter presents numerous ways on how to jumpstart and sustain small household scale food production via "kitchen gardening" in rural and urban areas. Kitchen gardening entails growing small amounts of a large variety of seasonal vegetables, fruits, herbs, legumes and tubers, in order to have a year-round supply of food. The book suggests crops that are rich sources of micronutrients whose production could be adjusted to suit available household resources. It also presents a winning argument for integrated crop and livestock production. This means mixing, whenever possible, the production of crops with small scale production of livestock – such as chicken and ducks, rabbits, goats and fish – in order to cover protein needs for the families and for selling in the market.

While "Nutrition for Developing Countries" lists a lot of practical ways of improving nutrition, it alarmingly identifies only urbanization and an increasing population as root causes of food insecurity. It does not look at the dominant role that economic access to food plays in explaining food insecurity. By overemphasizing nutritional and population aspects and downplaying or even ignoring income poverty and other factors affecting access, the perspective becomes economically and socially myopic and politically blind. Food insecurity is a muddled and dynamic interplay of various elements, many of them heavily anchored to poverty. Poverty is a result of extremely low (or lack of) incomes in the majority of the population and/ or a lack of economic transfers, either based on social relations or by government transfer systems. Without neglecting other reasons for low incomes in rural areas – such as low land and water endowments – incomes in rural areas are low because productivity in agriculture is low. In many poor countries smallholder yields are only 15-30% of their potential. This reduces the amount of production for subsistence and for selling on markets to purchase other much needed products and services, from food to education to health to communication. These are all required to improve basic living conditions including food security and nutrition. Low agricultural sales and income also reduce local economic dynamics, do not create demand for labour and inputs, keep wages low and do not contribute to vibrant economic off-farm activities. The deeply needed social and cash transfers in poor countries are often lacking because a large part of the population is poor, lives off the informal sector, has no resilience against shocks such as droughts, floods and war, does not pay taxes and has only little political influence. This is poverty!

The engine for improving agricultural productivity and higher incomes for rural population often lies in a better integration into markets. To be integrated into the market, smallholders have to produce substantially higher yields through intensifying their production. This requires increased efforts of, for example, land, water, labour, biological resources and knowledge. If smallholders rely more on internal resources such as mulching, composting, manuring, multi-storey cropping, agro-forestry or irrigation, this usually requires more labour during critical periods which poor households do not have. They have to hire labour or invest in mechanization, which only is possible if additional capital is available. Cash earnings from agricultural production require good and predictable marketing channels, as well as remunerative and stable prices. Assuming that indeed, a marketable surplus is achieved, the hurdle of bringing the produce to the market and selling it at competitive prices still needs to be overcome. They compete with other providers, either locally or internationally. In the case of communities that live in peripheral areas with negligible market access, integrating them into the value chains is a barrier that is extremely challenging to overcome.

"Nutrition for Developing Countries" makes the implicit assumption that homestead crop production could safeguard household food security. It thereby is evading the critical concern of chronic poverty among rural households and downplaying the challenges of market integration. The issue of household food security is not as simple as what many people believe, and the recipe for a solution, even more complex