

SETTING PRIORITIES FOR FOOD AND NUTRITION POLICY RESEARCH IN WEST AFRICA

Joachim von Braun, Director General, International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI)

Introduction

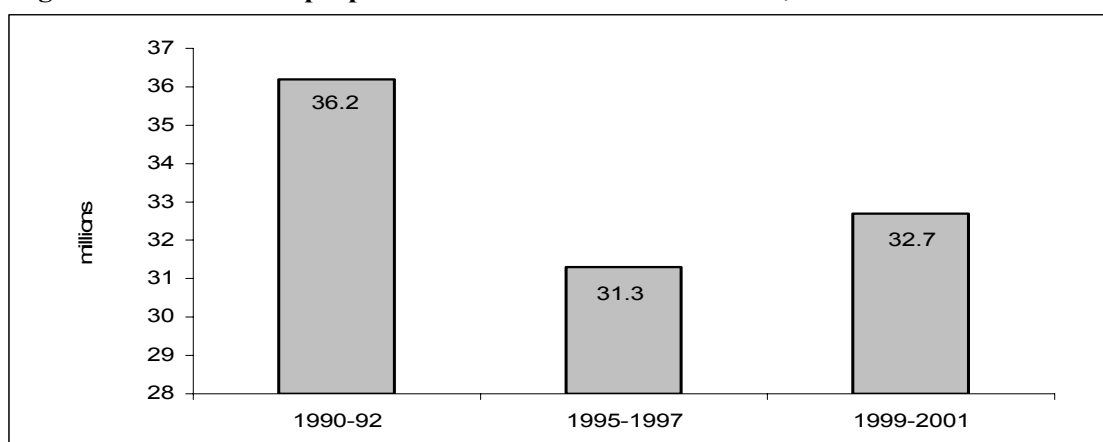
West Africa is home to a strong scientific research community and vibrant national agricultural research systems. IFPRI takes a keen interest in cooperation with this research community to develop appropriate food and nutrition policies to combat hunger in the region. In 1998, IFPRI, along with its partners in West Africa, identified a comprehensive set of regional policy research priorities for West Africa. We can draw from this previous strategy to shed light on our future research agenda, as many of the issues identified therein are still very relevant. Here, I will briefly suggest several priorities for food and nutrition policy research and action in West Africa.

The Food Security Situation in West Africa

Unfortunately, the food and nutrition problem in the region is large: since 1990, of the 14 West African countries surveyed by the FAO in the *State of World Food Insecurity 2003*, 3 (Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, and Mauritania) have not experienced any reduction in hunger in absolute numbers of malnourished people, 5 (Burkina Faso, Ghana, Guinea, Nigeria, and Togo) have reduced levels of hunger (but only 2 have dramatically reduced hunger), and 6 (The Gambia, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Sierra Leone) have experienced slight to dramatic increases in hunger.¹ Looking back to 1980, 7 countries have experienced rising numbers of their malnourished population (Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo).

For the most part, this trend toward rising hunger mirrors the trends displayed in Sub-Saharan Africa as a whole in the late 1990s. But the lack of progress in reducing hunger in West Africa is especially severe. These figures indicate a major setback in the fight against hunger. Without question, the Millennium Development Goal of halving hunger in the region by 2015 cannot be realized if policy action does not come quickly (Figure 1).

Figure 1 — Number of people undernourished in West Africa, 1990–2001



Source: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) 2003. *The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2003*. Rome.

¹ Countries with dramatic increases in hunger since 1990 are Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Identifying Policy Research Priorities

Sound research provides the basis for successful policies; therefore, West Africa's research community and its international partners must work together to identify and prioritize regional information needs in order to build a policy framework for greater food security. We can briefly identify several policy research priorities for West Africa that are critical today.

Regional market and trade integration is high on the list of policy priorities in West Africa, in large part because of a renewed emphasis on regional integration for economic and agricultural growth by the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). An ongoing policy survey by IFPRI suggests that many West African countries' national policies reflect an increasing focus on regional integration. The coordination of policies and physical development of intraregional transport, telecommunications, and energy systems are especially important in supporting West Africa's integration. Policy research can play a large role in providing insight into the key opportunities and constraints to economic integration in the region and into the concomitant effects on poverty, smallholder livelihoods, agricultural production, and food and nutrition security. Specific policy research tasks include identifying the obstacles restricting the free movement of people and goods within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the impact of the multiplicity of regional organizations on the effective integration of West African markets, and the study of optimal institutional arrangements for improved agricultural markets and trade in the region. Also increasingly important are issues of food retail, quality control, and food safety for both intraregional and international markets, and the accompanying implications for smallholder farmers.

Researching *methods to improve nutrition* through agriculture is a key area of both scientific and policy research. Direct nutrition interventions as well as new production technology need to be combined. A positive sign is the continuing adoption and dissemination of the high-yielding New Rice for Africa (NERICA) rice varieties developed by The Africa Rice Center (WARDA), which have contributed to alleviating food insecurity in parts of the region. Research must continue to explore how policy can play a role in strengthening the linkages between smallholder agriculture and nutrition.

Developing and disseminating types of *technology*—such as information and communication technologies (ICTs), geographic information system mapping, integrated pest management technologies, postharvest technology, early warning systems for drought and flooding, irrigation systems, and other types of water and soil management technologies—to rural areas and small farmers is vitally important for food and nutrition security. This is another area where policy research can provide insight into the best application of these technologies to smallholder agriculture and to the diverse realities of the poor and food insecure in West Africa.

Institutional innovation is a cross-cutting research priority for optimizing governance, public goods and service delivery, and natural resource management. Trends toward the decentralization and devolution of central government responsibilities (fiscal, administrative, and political) call for further research to understand and improve their impacts on poverty and food security. Fostering and strengthening the role and impact of rural institutions, in particular, on food security and management of natural resources is especially important. In addition, policy research related to the role of collective action and property rights in sustainable agricultural development and natural resource use will continue to be a priority. Furthermore, understanding the impacts of rapid urbanization—expected to dramatically increase in major West African cities by 2020—is also another main concern, especially in terms of the impact on natural resources, agricultural productivity, and food security in both urban and rural areas.

There is also recognition of the special acute and structural problems of the region related to *war, conflict, and migration*. Understanding the long-term impact of forced displacements on basic social services, economic systems, and social stability in the region is critical for food and nutrition security. Policy research can yield fruitful insights into the creation of domestic and regional food-security safety nets for displaced persons and victims of conflict and natural disasters.

Finally, faced with small and often shrinking national budgets, policymakers must target *public investments* wisely. Investigation into the impacts of public spending on poverty and food insecurity is crucial in this regard; this is a main area that calls for further research in West Africa. In addition, successful targeting requires reliable statistical research and knowledge systems. Investment in poverty and hunger mapping, for instance, can help federal and local policymakers more efficiently target areas that are most in need.

Framework for Policy Action

Based on the above, the policy framework that I propose has three closely interrelated themes, supported by several main policy actions.

Theme 1: Efficient and equitable resource use to foster economic growth

- Equitable regional integration policies, including trade, investment, and fair migration policies
- Massive scaling-up of infrastructure investments in the region, that is, roads and ICTs, especially
- Increased agricultural research investments for crops, livestock, and fisheries from along the entire supply chain

Theme 2: A strong focus on nutrition, health, and labor productivity

- Increased investment in nutrition and health programs
- Improving children's access to education
- Assuring access to finance and insurance against risks

Theme 3: Strengthening institutions and governance

- Establishing and strengthening of institutions to facilitate trade, employment, and natural resource management and use
- Creating optimal decentralization of administrative, fiscal and—most important—political decisionmaking

The Way Forward

Reducing hunger and malnourishment in West Africa is a formidable goal that must be addressed through sound research agendas and progressive policy actions. Importantly, this framework must have goals and action instruments that are feasible and timely, and it must make more efficient and equitable use of West Africa's vibrant resources: its people, cultural diversity, rich natural resource base, large land area, and favorable location. We must also focus on policy research along the *entire* food supply chain. Finally, it is clear that policy commitments to agricultural and rural development, along with nutrition and health, must be translated into budgetary allocations for impact on the ground. We are confident that progress in food and nutrition security is possible in West Africa, with its abundance of excellent subregional and national research organizations and strong political commitments to reduce poverty and hunger.

Most important for success of the Mali workshop will be the collective follow up, especially in the region. The implementation constraints for moving forward must be more effectively addressed. Two follow-up actions are scheduled thus far:

1. The Africa 2020 Conference in Kampala will give voice to West African actors in a continent-wide context.

2. We are planning to work toward a joint research program with colleagues in the West Africa region and international partners, especially CIRAD in France.

It is IFPRI's hope that a sound policy research agenda related to agriculture, rural development, and nutrition will ultimately lead to effective policy change in West Africa and to the substantial alleviation of food insecurity and undernourishment in the region. In order to achieve this goal, West Africa and its international partners must keep a strong "forward-focus" by collectively revising and building on strategies for food security, mobilizing new agricultural research and investment built around the realities of West Africa's food insecure, and seizing opportunities for new and fruitful partnerships between diverse actors.