

## ***Putting Community Voices at the Centre: Where Food Security Counts***

### The Role of Societal Actors in Solving the Food Crisis

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Food prices and political instability are not new. They have been with many countries in the developing south over generations. While the 2007-2008 food prices spike has spurred momentum for action, it has also fueled large-scale acquisitions of land in developing countries by foreign investors. Their dominant rationale is not to combat the food crisis in the south, but to secure their own food and energy supplies. The price spike is said to have spurred capital-rich countries to circumvent the open world market and secure dedicated sources of food imports.

Investment in farmland for offshore food production, often in food insecure countries, is one face of a much wider trend of increasing demand for land not only for food, but also for fuel, fiber, tourism, mining and ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration.

In a world with limited arable land, feeding current and future generations means growing more food on land currently under cultivation, making growing corn for cars instead of corn for people not only a food but also an ethical issue. For example, in 2009 Saudi Arabia received its first shipment of rice produced on land it had acquired in Ethiopia while at the same time the World Food Programme was feeding five million Ethiopians. Similarly, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, China has acquired 7 million hectares for palm oil production while millions of people in the DRC are dependent on international food aid.

Investors interested in exploiting the commercial potential of land and natural resources are more and more coming into direct competition with local populations, for whom such resources are a critical source of local food security, rural livelihoods and incomes.

In this context, civil society organizations (NGOs) are increasingly following a two track strategy.

One is to form cross-sector partnerships to support community based development. This strategy has local and international components. Beyond the classical support, between donor NGOs to their in-country counterparts, are cross-sector partnerships between the citizen and the private sectors. The context for these partnerships is the changing nature of the aid and development world. Among these are the opportunities presented and threats posed by global financial flows through which private direct investment dwarfs aid and concessional flows. For local and international NGOs, the opportunity is the promote ways for the private sector to positively impact communities by influencing the thinking and practice of private sector actors. This may involve, for example, the uptake of Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) as a way to act on the principle of do no harm, a fundamental principle underpinning all conventions of the United Nations. For the private sector, partnerships with the citizen sector are seen as a way to dialogue with relevant actors and to learn of best practices in responsible community investment as a way to avoid social discord and manage reputational risks.

The other is to advocate in support of the resource rights of disenfranchised peoples and communities. This advocacy has three pillars. First, there has been a failure to understand that hunger and poverty are most prevalent among those whose livelihoods depend on agriculture – smallholder farmers and farm workers. The failure to invest in the rural economy is a direct cause of urban migration and its attendant livelihood and food security issues. Second, aid and development investments in such factors as technology, credit, and marketing have, all too frequently, been captured by elites. Lacking property rights the poor are constantly vulnerable to expropriations and forced evictions, losing their livelihoods and primary asset. Third, the institutions that control resource rights and those that control worker rights are, most often, in the hands of the powerful non-poor. A primary policy question is whether the institutions created by political elites, to serve their own interests, can be transformed to ensure food security and create the conditions for equitable growth. Even more immediate is to question if the government granting a resource concession to a foreign investor has the legitimate disposition rights to the land being rented or sold.

International NGOs and community based organizations understand continuing food price volatility to be at the nexus of a market-based versus rights-based approach to achieving global food security. While responding to the current crisis to the best of its ability, given reduced levels of aid and donations from traditional donor countries, there are systemic issues that are integral to avoiding spiraling prices and greater instability. These include, inter alia:

1. Acting on the evidence that smallholder producers/family farmers are central to increasing global food supplies. This strategy is based on the evidence that in many agro-ecological conditions there is an inverse relationship between farm size and productivity. The per hectare productivity of small farms is higher than large holdings. This requires securing the land rights of smallholders and investing in their production systems to close the yield gap between current and potential harvest levels.
2. Avoiding a return, as appears to be occurring, to a development model based on markets overcoming hunger and poverty on the premise that overall economic growth will produce trickle down benefits. There is resounding evidence that commercial agriculture, where it displaces smallholders or fails to provide fair employment for workers, has failed to find replacement livelihoods for those affected. Investing in the assets of rural peoples gives them future income choices.
3. Strengthening the capacity of governments to provide public goods essential to the achievement of food security. Markets and therefore corporate social responsibility, while important, should not be expected to provide public goods. Markets, including appropriate balances of commercial with smallholder agriculture, are essential to national growth and development. However, rather than schools, clinics, rural infrastructure being provide by investors, their conditions of operation should involve fees and taxation systems to raise government revenues who have responsibility to their citizens for public goods. In particular countries that are rich in natural resources should not be poor. Yet poverty, the root cause of food insecurity, is high in many countries experiencing high levels of direct foreign investment in extractives and agriculture land.
4. Seeking transparency, accountability and compliance. The plethora of international conventions and ratified agreements pertaining to food security is more than sufficient to inform good legislation, regulation and juridical support to the systems needed to achieve food security. National compliance by signatory governments is all too often

disappointing. This in combination with the need for transparency and combating corruption are forces that are necessary features of food security strategies. For donor and investing countries, like Canada, it is necessary to use the full force of the law to enforce the Corruption of Foreign Officials Act.

5. Ensuring that international standards are embedded in Free Trade Agreements (FTAs). The view that business is business and stands separate from development, including targets such as the Millennium Development Goals, is thinking that impedes the achievement of global food security. While seemingly absurd, there is a need to identify areas requiring harmonization between the UN development organizations, the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and the World Trade Organization, among others.
6. Building cross sector partnerships between NGOs and governments. Donor countries, working through NGOs with trusted relationships with civil society and community based organizations in recipient countries can provide channels for effective program and financial delivery. National governments can use local civil society organizations not only for service delivery, but as monitors and as ombudsman to ensure that community concerns are brought into government policy making and service design.

The public, private and citizen sectors all recognize that the challenge to achieve food security is beyond their separate capability. In more and more contexts they are mediating their differences and building programs based on areas where they have found common ground. There is a growing maturity through which these three primary sectors are able to work on areas of agreement, while setting to the side areas where differences still exist. This approach to building partnerships is in the best interests of using their distinct resources, relationships and powers to rethink the ways to become more effective development actors.

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