In many places there is no lead agency that gives sustained attention to food and nutrition issues in a comprehensive way. Permanent local Food Policy Councils could help. According to World Hunger Year,

A food policy council (FPC) brings together stakeholders from diverse food-related areas to examine how the food system is working and propose ways to improve it. A FPC may be an official advisory body on food systems issues to a city, county, or state government, or it may be a grassroots network focused on educating the public, coordinating non-profit efforts, and influencing government, commercial, and institutional practices and policies on food systems (WHY 2008).

A good example is the Toronto Food Policy Council in Canada, which has served as a leader in the worldwide movement to create such councils (Toronto 2008). The idea is catching on. Googling on Food Policy Council yields about two million hits, and Food Security Council yields a similar number. Most are in the United States, but they could play important roles anywhere, including less wealthy countries and communities. They could be organized and operated in many different ways. Suggestions are offered here on the design and operation of these councils, but of course adaptations would be have to be made to accommodate specific local circumstances and interests.

The councils are commonly referred to as Food Policy Councils (FPCs), but some are called Food Security Councils or Nutrition Policy Councils. No matter what their names might be, they should deal with all aspects of food and nutrition in a comprehensive way. They should provide a locus for providing sustained attention to, and dialogue on the issues, and for providing recommendations to relevant policymakers.

If food sovereignty is taken to mean the right of all people to participate in the shaping of food policy, then FPCs could be understood as a locus for its exercise. Here, food sovereignty means that everyone has a voice, and no one may exclude others or claim priority over others. Perhaps a better term would be food democracy.

FPCs may be governmental or quasi-governmental. Where governments do not provide a mandate for creating FPCs, local people could organize them on their own initiative.

Food Policy Councils span the usual boundaries of governmental agencies, cutting across the usual “silos” of governance (the separate ministries and departments), and providing a place for much needed dialogues. They should operate on the basis of openness and broad participation, and operate democratically, grounding their recommendations mainly on clear analysis and compelling principles.

FPCs should facilitate dialogue on nutrition-related activities not only horizontally, across particular levels, but also vertically. FPCs could be organized in layers, with small FPCs in local jurisdictions (e.g., cities, villages), medium-sized ones at intermediate levels (e.g., states, provinces), and larger ones at the national level. There could also be regional ones, housed in appropriate regional organizations. There could be one at the global level as well. At the global level, the Committee on World Food Security based in the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, and also the United Nations System Standing Committee on Nutrition, have roles comparable to those of FPCs.

FPCs at different levels would work differently, but with good coordination among them they could complement and support one another. The FPCs at higher levels should not provide instructions to those at the lower levels, but should provide support services such as technical advice and coordination services according to the wishes of the lower level FPCs. The ones at lower levels could provide information and recommendations to those at higher levels.

This layering has not yet been worked out in an orderly way anywhere, but the potential is there.

FOOD SECURITY

According to the Plan of Action of the World Food Summit of 1996, “Food security 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 1996, para 1).” It is comprised of three major elements: availability, access, and utilization:

Food availability in a country, region or local area means that food is physically present because it has been grown, processed, manufactured, and/or imported.

Food access refers to the way in which different people obtain available food. Normally, food is accessed through a combination of means. This may include: home production, use of left-over stocks, purchase, barter, borrowing, sharing, gifts from relatives,
and provisions by welfare systems or food aid.

Food utilization is the way in which people use food. It is dependent upon a number of interrelated factors: the quality of the food and its method of preparation, storage facilities, and the nutritional knowledge and health status of the individual consuming the food (International Federation 2007).

The challenge is not simply to ensure adequate food supplies, but to ensure that everyone is well nourished. Thus, attention needs to be given not only to food supply but also to issues such as eating habits and child feeding. The overall objective should be to ensure good nutrition for all, under all conditions. These bodies could be called Nutrition Policy Councils to highlight the point that they are concerned with nutrition in all its dimensions, and should not limit their focus to food supplies.

The FPCs main task would be to give recommendations and to facilitate the operations of other agencies, and not to undertake field operations themselves. They would not have a fixed pot of money to allocate, but their recommendations could influence the allocations made by others. Similarly, the pool of human resources that are available is not fixed, but could grow in response to the FPCs’ encouragement. The people who are drawn in to work on improving infant feeding practices, for example, would be different from those who want to promote homestead food production, and they would draw from different pools of resources.

Participants in FPCs would be expected to have a shared high level goal, the assurance of good nutrition for all people under all conditions. However, as a diverse group, the participants would have different interests in how to approach it. Different interests do not necessarily mean conflicting interests. The assumption here is that malnutrition must be addressed on many fronts at once, and there needs to be a division of labor in doing that. FPCs should facilitate all approaches, and help the groups that are involved to harmonize their work.

**TASK FORCES**

FPCs could organize their work in terms of Task Forces that cover all the major dimensions of food issues. Their mandates could be divided into groups something like this:

**Basic Food Supplies**
Agriculture and fisheries are important means for maintaining livelihoods for the producers and for meeting nutritional needs of consumers. This Task Force would focus on the contributions of agriculture and fisheries, and also food imports, to the nutrition of local people. It should cover not only commercial operations but also homestead food production and non-commercial food harvesting in natural settings. It could promote community gardens of various forms. The Task Force should give special attention to the need for a balanced mix of local production, imports, and exports, giving attention to costs, environmental concerns, and vulnerability to changing circumstances.

**Nutrition and Health**
The Task Force on Nutrition and Health would consider ways in which diets could be modified to improve people’s health. It would give attention to all nutrient needs, and give special attention to problems of excess fat, sugars, and salt. It would propose policies that would help to reduce overweight and obesity, and thus reduce associated non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, and cancer.

**Special Needs**
This Task Force would consider the needs of particular groups such as infants and young children, people with low income, people who are disabled, and the elderly. It would also give attention to the nutrition of people in schools, hospitals and prisons. In addition to its discussions with various agencies, this Task Force should discuss the issues directly with these vulnerable people and their representatives. Some should be included in the Task Force.

**Food Safety**
This Task Force would monitor and propose means for improving food safety in all contexts, including markets, restaurants, and homes.

**Resilience**
Resilience may be defined as:

The ability of natural or human systems to survive in the face of great change. To be resilient, a system must be able to adapt to changing circumstances and develop new ways to thrive. In ecological terms, resilience has been used to describe the ability of natural systems to return to equilibrium after adapting to changes. In climate change, resilience can also convey the capacity and ability of society to make necessary adaptations to a changing world -- and not necessarily structures that will carry forward the status quo. In this perspective, resilience affords an opportunity to make systemic changes during adaptation, such as addressing social inequalities (Worldwatch 2009).

On this basis, the FPC Task Force on Resilience should focus on food and nutrition issues under possible future changes in conditions, including both rapid changes such as disasters, and slower changes such as climate change or price inflation. This would include possible changes in policies of various external agencies.

**Legislation**
The Task Force on Legislation would work with all the other Task Forces in the preparation of comprehensive laws and regulations regarding food and nutrition. This would include establishing a clear framework of rights, obligations, and
accountability.

Monitoring and Reporting

The Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting should support each of the other Task Forces in preparing their annual reports, and also use those reports to prepare an annual FPC report to the government and the public at large. All of the Task Forces should report on nutrition issues in their particular domains, describe the status of implementation of their past recommendations, and describe their impacts. The comprehensive annual report from the FPC to the government and to the community is an important tool for sustaining public attention to the major nutrition security issues. It should set the agenda for future work, not only for the FPC, but also for the government and for the community as a whole.

These Task Forces could be combined and renamed in various ways. However, it is important to assure that all important issues related to food and nutrition are given attention by at least one of the FPC’s Task Forces. The titles and descriptions of the Task Forces could be modified to align with the functions of the relevant departments of government, and possibly nongovernmental organizations as well. Each Task Force should have its own agenda that it works on continuously, perhaps with different subgroup addressing particular issues.

While the leaders of these Task Forces should be members of the FPC, their members could be drawn from the local community, in accordance with their special interests. It would be important to get representation from diverse sectors of the community. In some cases Task Forces might create temporary Working Groups to deal with specific issues.

DESCRIPTING FOOD SYSTEMS

FPC Task Forces could organize their efforts into an ongoing cycle of steady improvement, based on three distinct phases of work: describing existing food systems, critically assessing them, and, based on these foundations, improving them.

FPCs could serve any defined place in which people live, such as villages, cities, islands, territories, prisons, countries, or regions. Their first job would be to understand the place’s current food system. Information should be collected about patterns of food production in that place, and its imports, and exports. Attention should be given not only to foods that are marketed, but also to homestead food production, foods that are harvested in nature, and locally bartered or gifted food.

Prevailing “food ways” should be described, regardless of whether they are judged to be good or bad. This account should distinguish ways of feeding special groups such as children, the elderly and the ill, and it should also describe what is usually done when food supplies fall below their normal levels in terms of quantity or quality. In some places, attention should be given to the ways in which the shift from traditional to modern foods might have affected people’s well-being. In this descriptive phase of the work, the focus would be on what is the case. Attention would be given to what could be or should be in later phases.

In describing local food situations, it is important not to limit attention to aggregates and averages, especially where there is great diversity. The conditions of the general population, or what might be called its middle class, are likely to be very different from the conditions of those who are especially poor or who are marginalized in other ways. The middle class may be doing quite well, but there is always a less visible group that has difficulty getting adequate food on a regular basis. The undernutrition of those who are marginalized makes them especially vulnerable to serious infectious diseases.

Nutrition concerns are not only about the needs of people at the bottom. There may be a middle class group that is significantly malnourished, demonstrated mainly by overweight and obesity. This often results in serious non-communicable diseases such as heart disease, cancer, and Type 2 diabetes. There are also concerns about child feeding practices, food safety, and the need for reliable food supplies in emergency situations. All of these issues need to be considered.

The study of food systems should include a review of the legal and policy frameworks that shape them. What are the roles of local government, national government, local businesses, multinational corporations, etc.? What roles do regional and global organizations play?

Government-sponsored social service programs, including those not centered on food, might play a significant role in assuring good nutrition for all. Similarly, remittances of money from abroad might have an important influence on the local nutrition situation.

It is important to understand the legal status of the place under study. What is the role of higher levels of governance on the local nutrition situation? Who gets to make what decisions? How are those decisions made?

Within that legal framework, one should ask whether people have clear legal rights relating to food and nutrition, whether the corresponding obligations of the relevant agencies are clearly spelled out, and whether there are there effective mechanisms of accountability in place to assure that those obligations are carried out properly (Kent 2005).

ASSESSING FOOD SYSTEMS

Assessment is the task of determining whether the patterns that have been described should be judged as good or bad, with emphasis on the question, what needs to be improved? Views may differ, depending at least in part on how the viewer is positioned in the system. The person who runs the local food market is likely to see the advantages of importing food more
In some cases the linkages between food distribution patterns and malnutrition may not be obvious. The harms that follow from bad diets are not immediately evident. The linkages may need to be explained, based on solid evidence.

Food systems should be assessed to determine how well they serve various subgroups. It might be found that people in the urban center do better on some aspects of food security while those in more remote areas do better on others. There might be some people whose income is so low that they cannot manage on their own and need help. There might be some groups that suffer from discrimination and thus cannot provide for themselves adequately. Young children might show signs of malnutrition, perhaps by being underweight or short compared to the norms for their age and gender.

In addition to looking at how well food systems operate from day to day in normal times, it is important to also ask how resilient the system would be under various kinds of shocks. What would happen if the trucks or ships that normally bring in food did not come? What would happen if the local food supply were to be contaminated, whether accidentally or deliberately? What would happen if some sort of disease or climate disturbance interrupted local food production?

There is a need to consider how the system would cope with sudden disturbances and also with slow disturbances. There are possibilities not only for tsunamis but also for slow sea level rise. Fuel prices could increase slowly and steadily to the point that imported foods become unaffordable. How would the existing food system deal with such contingencies?

Attention should be given to how local and higher levels of government might—or might not—assist under various contingencies. What would happen if some current support programs, such as social welfare programs, were to be discontinued? Such changes in policies might seem unlikely, but the possibility cannot be excluded, especially during times of economic stress.

If there were sudden and serious food shortages in the place under study, what would the different layers of government do to help? What would private agencies do? Are the answers based on assumptions or written agreements? What is there to assure that written agreements will be honored, especially under difficult conditions?

What stocks of food are maintained in the place under study? How long would they last if supplies from outside were cut off? What policies are in place to manage the stocks under the various difficult contingencies that could be imagined?

**IMPROVING FOOD SYSTEMS**

Systematic assessments help in identifying the ways in which food systems need improvement. What are the current food and nutrition problems? What are the vulnerabilities regarding future contingencies? In addressing these questions, there are might be serious cultural issues that must be addressed. Work on strengthening local food security should begin with identification of the main issues that need to be addressed. This should be done in close consultation with the local population, with other levels of government, and with outside experts.

Many different kinds of improvement should be considered. Some don’t require detailed prior analysis to justify them. For example, knowledge about how to produce food around the home could be encouraged simply by arranging to have people with experience in homestead food production share their knowledge with others who are interested. Simple things like that don’t cost much and do not involve any serious risks.

In many places there is excessive consumption of fat, sugar, and salt. Things could be done to make fatty, sugar, and salty foods less available, and healthier foods such as fruits and vegetables more readily available. Health-based pricing could be used, taxing bad foods and subsidizing good foods. In New York City, it is now illegal for restaurants to use trans-fats. In Samoa, importing fatty turkey tails is now prohibited. Various jurisdictions are considering ways to limit salt intakes (Economist 2008). The governor of New York State has proposed a special tax on sugary drinks. Efforts are underway worldwide to control food and beverage advertising that is targeted to children (International Obesity Task Force 2008). Some interventions might go against ingrained food habits, but when health problems become serious enough, it makes sense to press for changes in those habits.

The World Health Organization says:

As a global public health recommendation, infants should be exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life to achieve optimal growth, development and health. Thereafter, to meet their evolving nutritional requirements, infants should receive nutritionally adequate and safe complementary foods while breastfeeding continues for up to two years of age or beyond (WHO 2003).

Child feeding practices are sub-optimal in many places. One of the simplest and cheapest methods for improving child health would be to improve breastfeeding practices. Several organizations have developed good programs for doing that.

Attention should be given to the most glaring weaknesses of the food system, but at the same time thought should be given to ways in which the overall system might be strengthened. For example, methods might be found to help policymakers track its current status.

If policymakers want to ensure continuing improvement in nutrition status, they should monitor it. Various tools could be used for that purpose, as suggested in the United States Department of Agriculture’s discussion of food security measurement (USDA...
The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations has a Special Programme for Food Security that offers a variety of resources on the issue (FAO 2008). These agencies offer many good ideas, but they would have to be adapted for the situations in the location of concern.

Collecting new data could be expensive and difficult to sustain over time. FPCs should make full use of data that are already collected on a regular basis. Public health data generally include indicators that relate to nutrition status. In some cases the regular data gathering practices might be adjusted to gather more nutrition-related information.

A few approaches to nutrition issues have been mentioned here for illustrative purposes. Each Task Force should dig deeply, locally, nationally, and globally, for the best knowledge and ideas relating to the concrete issues that they address.

CONCLUSION

In many places, there is little systematic attention to local food systems and their impacts on people's nutrition, and practically no planning for them. Yet these systems always need improvement. The issues will not be dealt with adequately if policymakers imagine that they can simply undertake a burst of activity and finish the work.

Moreover, no locality should rely on outside agencies to look after its nutrition situation. No one has as much concern for the well-being of local people as they themselves do. Without that, the issues are likely to be neglected, and forces of change that originate elsewhere will shape local conditions.

Thus, there is always a need for a central place in which nutrition issues could get the attention they require. Every locality should have a Food Policy Council, a permanent, broadly representative, well-supported agency whose primary responsibility is to ensure steady improvement in nutrition in all its dimensions. Creating such a council could be the single most important action taken to ensure good nutrition for all over the long run.

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