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**Advancing women’s rights in post-2015 development agenda
and goals on food and nutrition security**

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The protection of women’s rights and women’s empowerment should be placed at the centre of food security strategies. Yet, although the importance of women’s empowerment to food and nutrition security is well-established, as I discuss in greater detail in my 2013 report to the United Nations Human Rights Council (A/HRC/22/50) and in the report “Gender Equality and Food Security: Women’s Empowerment as a Tool against Hunger” (ADB & FAO, 2013), this realization has only slowly been changing policy making in these areas. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) formulated in 2000 usefully underlined the importance of gender empowerment, but failed to effectively mainstream gender considerations into the Goal on eliminating hunger (MDG 1). As a new post-2015 development agenda is being crafted, and new global sustainable development goals are being formulated, the present article reflects on the extent to which the MDG targets on hunger and nutrition promoted women’s rights and gender equality (1). It underlines the importance of women’s rights to address the underlying causes of food and nutrition security (2). And it asks how the post-2015 agenda can embed a gender perspective in future targets on hunger and nutrition (3).

1. The MDG targets on hunger and nutrition

One important shortcoming of Millennium Development Goal 1 on poverty and hunger, as formulated in 2000, is that it was largely gender blind. While the broader MDG framework did give specific attention to the issue of gender, notably in a specific goal (MDG 3) on women’s

* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

empowerment and in a few targets and indicators, gender considerations were only partially mainstreamed throughout the eight MDGs.

This omission reflects an important weakness of the MDG framework. Its focus on aggregate figures and overall progress directed attention away from disparities and inequalities within populations. This was also a key finding of the Global Thematic Consultation on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, “Addressing Inequalities”, co-led by UN Women and UNICEF. As is pointed out in the report of the consultation, many types of inequalities have worsened since 2000, in a period when the MDGs “did not focus systematically on trends ‘beneath the averages’” (United Nations 2013a: 7). This led to a situation in which countries have achieved national MDG targets by focusing on the ‘low-hanging fruit’ -- the targets easiest to reach --, while the situation of the poorest and most excluded populations have worsened.

Tellingly, while global MDG progress reports on hunger and malnutrition highlight disparities amongst countries and world regions, they remain largely silent on disparities within countries, including with regard to disparities in progress amongst men and women. The exception is the few MDG targets and indicators that are explicitly aimed at addressing gender disparity, notable indicators under MDG 3 measuring the ratios of girls to boys in education, the share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector, and the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments.

According to the latest global MDG progress report, the MDG target of halving the percentage of people suffering from hunger by 2015 is within reach, as the proportion of undernourished people in developing regions have decreased from 23.2 per cent in 1990-1992 to 14.9 per cent in 2010-12 (United Nations 2013b: 10). On the face of it, these figures are encouraging. When looking beneath averages, however, the figures are less impressive. Progress has been very uneven across world regions and within countries. Moreover, the actual number of people suffering from hunger and food insecurity has only slightly decreased since 1990. Thus, the more ambitious global target set at the 1996 World Food Summit to halve the absolute number of hungry people by 2015 - rather than the percentage - is today out of reach by far.

It should also be noted that since 1990 the prevalence of one form of malnutrition, overweight, has increased, and more than doubled in Sub-Saharan Africa, which is now home to almost one quarter of the world’s estimated 43 million overweight children under the age of five (United Nations 2013b: 12). The current MDG target and indicators on hunger and food security, by only focusing on underweight and dietary energy consumption, fail to capture such developments. Likewise, the current MDG targets and indicators give little attention to the large number of people (though children and women are disproportionately affected) who suffer from micronutrient deficiencies.

As is becoming increasingly evident, the realization of sustainable development goals is closely bound up with the realization of basic human rights based on the principles of equality and non-discrimination. Accordingly, while progress has been made on reducing aggregate figures on hunger and malnutrition in some parts of the world, for such gains to be inclusive and sustainable, greater attention must be paid to the underlying structural causes of hunger and malnutrition. As the Global Thematic Consultation on Addressing Inequalities showed, situations of deprivation are often associated with discrimination based on factors such as gender, age,

caste, race, ethnic and indigenous identity, minority status, (dis)ability, place of residence, marital and family status, HIV status, and sexual orientation. Amongst the multiple and often intersecting forms of discrimination, gender-based discrimination was found to remain “the single most widespread driver of inequalities in today’s world” (United Nations 2013a: 8). This is why I and other special procedures of the United Nations Human Rights Council are advocating that the concern for equality and non-discrimination must be placed at the center of the post-2015 development agenda.¹

2. Women’s rights and food and nutrition security

Women and girls face various types of obstacles as a result of discriminatory laws or social or cultural norms that have important impacts on food security and nutrition, not only of women and girls, but also of the broader society. Discrimination faced by women and girls results from certain stereotypes about gender roles ; unequal access to land and other productive resources and to economic opportunities, such as decent wage employment; unequal bargaining position within the household; gendered division of labour within households, that result both in time poverty for women and in lower levels of education; and women’s marginalization from decision-making spheres at all levels. Addressing these various forms of discrimination that women and girls face is critical to effectively tackle root causes of hunger and food and nutrition insecurity in the world today.

Removing the obstacles women and girls face requires more than reforming discriminatory legal provisions. The social and cultural norms themselves, and the gendered division of roles that these norms impose, must also be challenged. Therefore, empowerment – an increased role for women in decision-making, at all levels, including the household, local communities and national parliaments – is required. Women’s empowerment is a goal in itself and a human right; but it also has an instrumental value in allowing society to benefit from the increased contribution of women to food and nutrition security. The following examples serve to underline these points.

Education and employment

Discrimination against women and girls hindering their access to educational and employment opportunities may limit their economic independence, thus restricting their access to sufficient and adequate food. This may be the case either through the market, where lack of economic opportunities for women result in a lack of purchasing power for female-headed households; or it may be because the lack of economic independence of women results in a weaker bargaining position of women within the family: differential feeding and caregiving practices then favours boys over girls, and discriminatory household food allocation practices lead to poorer nutritional outcomes for women and girls.

¹ See “Inequality, not in the name of progress – key UN expert group looks beyond the Millennium Development Goals” (1 March 2013) and Statement by 17 Special Procedures mandate-holders of the Human Rights Council on the Post-2015 development agenda (21 May 2013), available at:
<http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=13063&LangID=E>,
<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=13341&LangID=E>

Access to education and employment which allow women to obtain adequate incomes are critical means ensuring access to adequate food and nutrition. Improved education for girls and women can lead to improved feeding practices and lower rates of population growth, more economic opportunities for women on and off the farm; and greater economic independence and improved bargaining position of women within households, resulting in choices that are beneficial to the health, education and nutrition of children.

Access to education, however, does not ensure access to employment for women. Importantly, access to education should be combined with efforts to break down gender stereotypes, not only as regards the type of employment that can be performed by women, but also as regard the allocation of responsibilities between women and men in the discharging of family responsibilities.

Nutrition and caregiving

In recent decades, we have come to better understand the so-called “1,000 days” window of opportunity, which refers to the significant importance of the nutrition of the child during pregnancy and until the second birthday. Maternal and child undernutrition have been shown to be directly related to outcomes in life. The learning performance of children (and thus their incomes as adults) and the height of children (and adults) all depend on the quality of their nutrition as young infants during the 1,000-day window. The disadvantages of poor nutrition during pregnancy or early childhood cross generations. A girl who has been poorly fed as an infant will have an offspring with a lower birth weight (Ashworth 1998).

This underlines why adequate nutrition for pregnant and lactating women – or indeed, for all women of child-bearing age – is to be treated as a priority in all food and nutrition security programmes. Thus, ensuring women’s access to health care services and water and sanitation should constitute an important element of public policies aiming to achieve food and nutrition security. The redistribution of power within the household is equally important, not only in order to allow women to make the choices that matter for infants, and to provide them with the care they require, but also in order to ensure that men contribute to giving such care, and that this activity is valued as it should. Inadequate caring practices and discriminatory attitudes that discourage or impede the provision of such care are important underlying causes of malnutrition. Breastfeeding provides another example of the relationship between the status of women and adequate nutrition. Exclusive breastfeeding for the six first months, and continued breastfeeding up to 2 years of age or beyond combined with complementary foods, is recognized to be the optimal way of feeding infants, which improves learning abilities and reduces the risk of non-communicable diseases later in life (Horwood and Fergusson 1998). Still, many countries still find it difficult to achieve targets in exclusive breastfeeding for the six first months and continued breastfeeding until the second birthday. Among the major obstacles they face in this regard is the lack of information accessible to women about the benefits of breastfeeding to counteract the impact of the promotion of substitutes; and employment practices that discourage working women from continuing to breastfeed after having returned to work.

Role in the 'care economy'

In September 2010, Heads of State and Government at the High-level Plenary Meeting on the MDGs pledged to ensure that women benefit from policy measures to generate full and productive employment and decent work for all, “recognizing women’s unpaid work, including care work” and to invest in “infrastructure and labour-saving technologies, especially in rural areas, benefiting women and girls by reducing their burden of domestic activities, affording the opportunity for girls to attend school and women to engage in self-employment or participate in the labour market” (UNGA 2010: para. 72, (d) (e)). By their insistence on reducing the burden of women, the Heads of State and Government acknowledged that time poverty is one of the major obstacles that women face, and that removing this obstacle would allow them to improve their access to education and employment, particularly employment outside subsistence agriculture.

Cross-country comparisons show that in all regions, women perform the bulk of unpaid work in what this report shall refer to as the “care” economy: this includes the minding and education of children, fetching water and fuelwood for the household, purchasing and preparing the food, cleaning, or caring for the sick and the elderly (Bread for the World Institute 1995: chap. 6). In developing countries and particularly in rural communities, women are underserved by public services (Razavi 2007; Budlender 2010), and remedying this could bring about significant improvements. It has been estimated for instance that reducing to one hour a day the time spent by women in the Indian State of Gujarat to fetch water, would allow these women to increase their incomes by 100 USD per year, thanks to the time this would release for them (UNDP 2006). Defining priorities for public services in a way that recognizes the imperative of focusing on relieving women and girls from these chores, is without doubt vital to their empowerment. In addition to the establishment or expansion of childcare services and of public transportation systems, the improvement of access to cleaner energy sources for household needs should be central to such a strategy.

It is important to recognize the immense contribution that care represents to society and the economy. It has been estimated that, in middle-income countries such as South Africa and South Korea, unpaid care work (if it were to be valued in monetary terms, as happens when the services are subject to market transactions) represents the equivalent of 15 per cent of the GDP; and the figure is 35 per cent for low-income countries such as India and Tanzania (Budlender 2010). This gives an idea of the considerable debt society as a whole has towards women who perform the vast majority of this work – unpaid, undervalued, and largely unrecognized. The recognition of women's unpaid work in the care economy breaks down the dualistic representation that, while men (or women who join the labour market) produce, women at home consume. The difference is not between production and consumption: it is between work that is recognized and compensated, and work that is not.

Reduction and recognition are incomplete, however, unless accompanied by the redistribution of roles (Elson 2010; Eyben and Fontana 2011; Fälth and Blackden 2009). Until the responsibilities in the care economy will be more fairly shared between women and men, such responsibilities will continue to be undervalued and neglected – and those who perform them, will not be supported as they should. “Redistribution initiatives are about supporting men’s and women’s own efforts to change gender norms that prevent men assuming equal roles in care responsibilities, making it easier for men to become more involved in and respected for sharing

the family's caring responsibilities as well as for doing paid care work” (Eyben and Fontana 2011: 10). Given the importance of care for the improvement of nutritional outcomes, initiatives ensuring that men contribute a greater share in the care economy are key for food and nutrition security, and must go hand in hand with reduction and recognition of women’s unpaid care work.

Political and economic decision making

As the 2010 review summit of the MDGs, Governments committed to “improve the numbers and active participation of women in all political and economic decision-making processes, including by investing in women’s leadership in local decision-making structures and processes, encouraging appropriate legislative action and creating an even playing field for men and women in political and Government institutions” (UNGA 2010: para. 72 (f)). Improved representation of women at local level is just as important as their improved representation in national parliaments and executives. In fact, it could be even more significant: not only are the decisions made at local level of great practical importance to what matters most to women's ability to contribute to food security (as such decisions concern the allocation of land, the choice of which crops to grow, or how the available labour shall be shared between the plots of land), but in addition, it is by participation in local decision-making that women can most easily challenge the dominant representations concerning power and voice. This is one reason why enhancing leadership and participation of women in rural institutions is one of the four pillars of the initiative “Accelerating Progress Toward the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women” launched in September 2012 jointly by the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and the World Food Programme (WFP). The initiative is premised on the idea that economic and political empowerment are mutually supportive and should go hand in hand, leading in time to a virtuous cycle in which women's economic emancipation facilitates their ability to have “voice” in decision-making, which in turn shall help remove the current obstacles they face in expanding their economic opportunities.

Access to productive resources

The discrimination they face makes it more difficult for women to adequately fulfil the important roles in the food systems, both as producers of food, or in other economic roles at the processing and commercialization phases of the food chain, and as caregivers. The cost to society is considerable, both in lost productivity and worse, in health and nutritional outcomes.

The Gender and Agriculture Sourcebook, prepared jointly by the World Bank, IFAD, and FAO, recommends that land policy promote secure access to land and other natural resources for women, independent of men relatives and independent of their civil status (World Bank online 2009, p. 126). That was pledged in 2010 by the heads of state and government at the High-Level Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly on MDGs, where they committed to promote and protect women’s access to land, property, and productive resources (UNGA 2010, para. 72 (k) and (l)).

Indeed, women often have little legal protection or rights to property ownership, and they face cultural and social norms that hinder their ability to improve productivity. For the large number of women who depend on agriculture, there is an urgent need to improve their opportunities to

thrive as producers. Gender-sensitive agricultural policies are required, consistent with the FAO Voluntary Guidelines to support the progressive realization of the right to adequate food in the context of national food security, guideline 8.6, concerning women's full and equal participation in the economy and the right of women to inherit and possess land and other property, and access to productive resources, including credit, land, water and appropriate technologies.

3. How can the post-2015 agenda embed a gender perspective in future targets on hunger and nutrition?

As world leaders agreed at Rio+20 Summit in 2012 and as was reaffirmed in the Report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda (May 2013) the new goals and targets must be grounded in universal human rights, including women's rights and the principles of equality and non-discrimination. The challenge will be to ensure that this commitment is adequately reflected in what will have to be a relatively short list of post-2015 sustainable goals and targets.

Learning from the experience of the MDGs, the post-2015 agenda should give particular attention to inequality and discrimination in all its forms, bearing in mind that gender inequality and gender-based discrimination remain key obstacles to inclusive and sustainable development. New goals and targets should aim to progressively eliminate disparities between the most marginalized groups and the general population as well as between regions and countries in order to achieve more inclusive forms of development. The post-2015 framework must be designed in a way that does not let other targets, including those on hunger and food and nutrition security, be met on paper if they are not met for women and other population groups who may be in a particularly disadvantaged situation.

The suggested global goals put forward this spring by the UN high-level panel on the post-2015 development agenda usefully underline the human rights dimension of food and nutrition security in proposed target 5(a) "End hunger and protect the right of everyone to have access to sufficient, safe, affordable, and nutritious food". The high-level panel also suggested a self-standing goal to "Empower Girls and Women and Achieve Gender Equality", with four associated targets. These are useful suggestions which reflect the right intentions. Still, it will be important to spell out clearly that food and nutrition security cannot be dealt with in isolation from broader issues related to inequality and discrimination.

The greatest inroads against hunger and malnutrition can be made by empowering women in a broad sense, notably through improved access to resources, education, paid employment. It is across the board, in each goal and target, that a gender-sensitive approach is needed, as part of efforts to make all targets contingent on various indicators of equality (not just between men and women). Only through this broad empowerment of women, and this broad pursuit of equality, will true progress be seen in tackling food security.

While the targets on food and nutrition security proposed by the high-level panel of experts refer to "the right of everyone to have access to sufficient, safe, affordable, and nutritious food", there is no specific target reflecting the gender dimension. Simply, referring to "equality of opportunity" as an overall concern, requiring that all indicators "should be disaggregated with

respect to income (especially for the bottom 20%), gender, location, age, people living with disabilities, and relevant social group” (United Nations 2013c: 29), would not seem sufficient. Taking stock of the experience with the MDGs, the importance of finding ways to adequately incorporate a concern for equality and non-discrimination can hardly be overstated. Only by effectively tackling inequality and discrimination can inclusive and sustainable development be achieved. This is why, special procedures of the Human Rights Council as well as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights have advocated for the incorporation of equality in the post-2015 agenda, both as a stand-alone and cross-cutting goal.

Such specific focus on equality and non-discrimination will trigger the generation of more precise data that is disaggregated according to gender, as well as age, disability, and other factors. Collecting data which allows situations of discrimination and marginalization to come into light should inform policy making and action to make progress towards development goals. Moreover, in order to assess progress in reducing inequalities, monitoring must go beyond income and capture other causes of lack of access to basic rights and services. Notably, unequal access to services is often particularly acute for women in rural areas, who are often denied access to credit and agricultural extension services.

With regard to gender-based discrimination, the post-2015 development agenda must create an enabling environment for transformative social schemes that break the cycle of discrimination and fight hunger by empowering women. States must be encouraged to go beyond piecemeal actions, and start to think systematically and holistically about challenging gender roles. Individual measures to support women are susceptible to fail unless more is done to tackle the underlying norms and cultural practices. States must therefore pursue, and be encouraged to pursue, transformative food security strategies that address cultural constraints and redistribute roles between women and men.

Finally, the post-2015 development framework must include strong accountability mechanisms. Such mechanisms will be crucial in monitoring the situation of women and other groups in order to ascertain whether development approaches are delivering the broad-based, sustainable empowerment of women that is needed to tackle hunger.

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