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The elusive search for sustainable food security

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Food security and sustainability are concepts that are perhaps two of the most over-worked, over-used concepts in development. They have virtually become empty words. Agencies throughout Africa have initiated programs and projects ostensibly to create sustainable livelihoods or to ensure sustainable food security but which in reality achieve neither in the long run. SADC, for example, has extensive infrastructure to monitor food security vulnerability. However, there is no agreement on the indicators or approaches to measuring vulnerability. Further, the recommendations are all grounded in humanitarian relief including grain imports and stimulating production (e.g., through input subsidies). This paper suggests some fundamentals are not sufficiently understood or accommodated in policy and project planning that prevents achieving sustainable food security. First it suggests contextualizing food security in the broader aim of advancing populations toward prosperity and well-being understanding more starkly what food security is and what it is not. Linked to this is the need to review responses to human issues along a spectrum of relief, project development, systems and institutions and vision-led human capacity development. This paper then suggests that the underpinnings of what makes things sustainable need to be examined. It concludes that while food security is important, it is but one milestone on the pathway to prosperity and not an end unto itself. The paper also concludes that no matter how well relief and development projects are designed and implemented; they do not and cannot address the root issues bedeviling achieving a permanent, widespread sustainable food security. Achieving an enduring solution will require substantive changes in social and political norms, structures and systems, working from the ground up as well as from the top down. And it will require pervasive building of human capacity, particularly, but not exclusively, building capacity at the level of the farmer and the household.

Biography

Steve Worth is an Associate Professor of Extension and Rural Resource Management and Academic Leader in Teaching and Learning in the School of Agricultural, Earth and Environmental Sciences at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), South Africa. He is also the Director of the African Centre for Food Security (ACFS) at UKZN, South Africa. For 13 years, he has worked in agricultural extension and development in the North West province of South Africa. Since 2001, he has been serving as an academic involved in teaching, research and community in agricultural extension, curriculum development, rural development and food security. He has also consulted with various international and South African agencies, writing and editing books and training materials, drafting policy for agricultural extension, agricultural education and food security and developing agricultural curricula.

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