Food Security and State: Policy Considerations for the Contemporary Food Crisis

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In 1996, The World Food Summit (WFS) set a target to eradicate hunger in all countries and an immediate goal to half the number of undernourished people by 2015. Backed by the United Nations (UN), international organizations launched a global effort with the intent of achieving food security for all people. A variety of approaches were employed, including the distribution of food aid and farming supplies, skills training in agricultural development, funding for country-specific research, and legal counsel for states. Despite international efforts, over a decade later the number of undernourished was calculated to have risen by nearly 60 million people (FAO 2011). It appears unlikely that the WFS will reach its immediate goal.

The problem of feeding an ever-increasing world population has attracted the attention of scholars across a wide array of disciplines, all seeking better explanations of food security. Food security is a “condition in which 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 2001). At face value, one-dimensional perspectives seem to pinpoint an obvious cause of the problem – that population pressure has outstripped the earth’s capacity to feed an increasing number of people (Brown and Kane 1994; Smil 1994). Yet in 2002, world agriculture produced 17 percent more calories per person per day than it did 30 years prior, despite a 70 percent population increase (FAO 2002). Others assert that human resources in science and technology need to meet the demands of an increasing population in order to achieve food security (Cohen 1995; Tweeten and McClelland 1997), yet enough food was produced in 2002 to provide every single person on Earth with at least 2,720 kilocalories per day (FAO 2002).

The complexity of the contemporary food security crisis requires a comprehensive view of the global food system that not only draws on multiple disciplines but recognizes a wide array of contributing factors beyond considerations of supply and demand. One must consider the food system as a whole – that is the aggregate of all food-related activities and processes, be they natural, political, economic, or social. An understanding of the dynamics to food security inherently requires an understanding of contributing factors to food insecurity. In this education policy brief, we highlight the need for a more comprehensive view in policymaking by considering food insecurity and the outcomes of food-related policy along three dimensions. The first is the
availability (supply) of food, meaning the actual presence of food in a geographic area. Second, food accessibility brings into consideration economic and non-economic barriers such as inequality, access to productive resources, and entitlements. The third is the nutritional value of accessible food and whether it is sufficient in meeting the health needs of a population; a dimension that frequently intersects with issues involving the household and intra-household dynamics such as gender. This use of multiple dimensions captures the complexities of understanding food insecurity and can guide initiatives taken to address it.

Approaches in sociology of development provide a useful basis for examining food security issues. Theories of development fall into three broad categories: modernization, dependency/world-system, and ecological (to be discussed below). Each of these approaches provides a lens to examine various social issues; the most pressing being the fulfillment of a population’s basic needs, and enables focusing on macro-institutions and micro level household dynamics. In this regard, one of the most basic components of development and development theory is food. The social science approach to issues related to food (and nutrition, therefore health) can add a social structural and institutional perspective. Social systems of gender and class within households and communities are important for understanding and addressing barriers to accessing food. Social science research also contributes to policy making. The theories of development can be found in the substantive body of literature examining the ongoing global food security crisis, each of which can guide policy recommendations. The implementation of economic and social development policies is central to these perspectives. The state is a major actor in policy making and it is therefore logical to integrate both development and state theories in considerations of food security policies.

This brief is organized in five sections. First we briefly focus on the state with specific attention to the transformative nature of state power in an increasingly globalizing world. Second, we use this framework of state power to discuss three predominant development theories pertaining to food security along with their policy implications. Third, we discuss the importance of household dynamics in allocation of food and the challenges associated with policies to address them. Fourth, we demonstrate how policies that seek to address only a single dimension of food insecurity can produce deleterious effects on others. And finally, we present a list of questions for consideration by policymakers when developing initiatives.

State and Globalization

A state is a “complex apparatus of centralized and institutionalized power” (Levi 2002: 40), which performs a variety of tasks including (but not limited to) maintaining a legal structure, a mechanism for trade, and interacting with other states. A government represents the corporeal embodiment of state and is the institution tasked with deciding and administering policy, often in response to social, economic, and political conditions. Globalization has increasingly compelled states to respond to conditions outside their own jurisdiction or control. Globalization is a complex, multi-dimensional phenomenon where processes, be they economic, political, cultural, or geographic, take on an increasingly transnational or global form. In particular, the economic and political dimensions have contributed to a world system where states have become inextricably linked with the capitalist global economy, with neither able to act as separate entities (Chase-Dunn 1989).

The intensification of globalized economic processes has prompted the consideration of new conceptualizations of state power. Some scholarship suggests that global institutions and financial markets are eliminating state independence by infiltrating previously state-directed economic processes (Cable 1995). Yet others position the state as autonomous from external economic forces, with responses being intentional acts meant to secure power in the world economy (Skocpol 1985, Kohli 2004). A transformative conceptualization of the state, which we adopt here, recognizes countries as actors that will both initiate and respond to externalities (Robinson 2001, 2006).

A transformative conceptualization recognizes state, market, and society as mutually embedded within one another and constructed by their interactions. As actors in the global economy, states exercise their sovereignty by establishing
policies for trade, finance, investment, and program development. States engage in strategic interactions, taking into consideration both domestic and international actors to different degrees (Levi 2002). The state has the power to exercise control over the economy by shaping policies that significantly impact the flow of capital, the accumulation of capital is not its only purpose or concern. As a regulatory mechanism, the state intervenes in market transactions and establishes policies, which guide economic outcomes. However, the prevailing ideologies shaping contemporary investment, trade, finance, and business transactions task states to construct a framework promoting open competition and free exchange at a global level. For instance, state’s implement agricultural policies that affect nearly every stage of the production process – from importing and subsidizing seeds and inputs to regulating and managing the final yields. Therefore one cannot consider a market, no matter how “free”, as operating outside of the state’s purview since state intervention is required for its very formation and continuation. The converse also holds true – although states act in a supervisory capacity, the organizing principles of market interactions underlie its very foundation.

No clear boundary isolates state, market, and society from one another – each sphere is multiply embedded within the others (Riain 2000) locally, nationally and transnationally. Consideration of this multi-locality is essential in examining policy outcomes – simultaneously drawing attention to both domestic and transnational effects in numerous spheres. This transformative conceptualization allows for a more nuanced understanding of how the state relates to food security.

Development Perspectives and Their Policy Implications

Issues involving food and hunger are rooted in complex global interactions and broad socioeconomic contexts which in-turn requires a holistic understanding of relations and their effect on policymaking. Shaped by their multi-locality in social space, states implement diverse and at times conflicting policies as they are simultaneously concerned with both international and domestic relations. Three predominant theoretical approaches of development can serve as a guide to food security policy: modernization, dependency/world-system, and ecological theories. Table 1 provides an overview of the strengths and weaknesses of each approach in relation to the three dimensions of food security.

Modernization

Modernization theory celebrates the Western model of free enterprise that serves as a guide in development policymaking. Economic growth is central to this perspective and it is believed that developing countries should mimic Western developed countries by industrializing, liberalizing trade and investment, and forming global linkages.

General economic growth is often cited as a mechanism for reducing food insecurity within a country. Not surprisingly, no particular set of strategies or policies have proven to guarantee prosperity and the best path to economic development is a highly contested topic. However, evidence suggests that policy itself may not be an accurate predictor of broad-based economic growth (Leathers and Foster 2009; Easterly and Levine 2003).

Modernization theory emphasizes the need for global economic integration. International trade and foreign investment are presented as indispensable mechanisms for developing countries to further modernize. Integration into global markets provides access to global capital, technology, ideas, and opportunities that otherwise would be unavailable. As countries utilize their comparative advantage, a global interdependence arises resulting in production processes situating in places of the highest return. It is posited that these linkages have the potential to counter unequal economic development, increase real wage levels, and stabilize input prices globally.

Globalization and food security are intimately linked in the modernization perspective, especially in regards to economic integration. It is suggested that the re-situation of production will have a positive effect on both national and human development through productivity gains and positive spillover effects within developing countries (Gilpin 1987). The demands of global capital will increase social well-being by requiring a rational and democratized government, stable infrastructure, strong education system,
capable labor force. For example, foreign direct investment, which often is used as a proxy for economic integration, has been shown to promote economic growth (Firebaugh 1996; Alfaro 2003; de Soysa and Oneal 1999), improve local financial markets (Alfaro et al. 2004), and improve human capital (Borenzstein, de Gregorio and Lee 1998).

Other work drawing on the modernization framework suggests that access to global food markets and increases in trade will address problems of food availability and accessibility which in turn will reduce hunger (Tweeten and McCelland 1997; Bongaarts 1996). Global integration will also lead to higher productivity, wages, and purchasing power as firms compete for labor (Firebaugh and Beck 1994). In turn, this increase will make food more accessible by alleviating economic barriers to consumer consumption.

The role of the state is a contested topic among modernization theorists; however the arguments generally follow that of the liberal vs. Keynesian debate in macroeconomic theory. One camp tends to emphasize the role of markets (Rostow 1962) while the other emphasizes state intervention and regulation (Huntington 1968; Kerr 1969). Arguments include the role of the state in sustaining economic growth (Huntington 1987), political stability (Janowitz 1977), and producing positive health, education, and dietary outcomes for the poor (Goldsmith 1986; Goodell and Powelson 1982; Kholi 1986; Sorenson 1991). All of these issues have the potential to influence food security and hunger.

While modernization theory acknowledges the significance of the state, there are disagreements regarding the role of the state in development. The state guides modernization by creating, securing, and protecting markets through the development of production sectors; installation of infrastructure; creation of social, political, and economic institutions; and eventually the management of international trade and global integration. Here, agricultural policies greatly influence food security, including but not limited to subsidies for seeds and inputs, insurance programs and other safety nets, trade regulations, storage facilities, and overseeing the market’s infrastructure. In this regard, the state has the power and ability to make food available and accessible.

Dependency/World-System Theories

The dependency and world-system approaches highlight historical disadvantages arising from decolonization and contemporary imbalances in power relations in global capitalist development (Chase-Dunn 1989; Wallerstein 1974, 1983). While these perspectives are distinct in numerous ways, they both attempt to identify how and why underdevelopment occurs. The global dominance by a few countries arose from a long history of colonialism – empires characterized by the exploitation of populations and resources – which ultimately caused uneven economic and human development along with wide-spread poverty and food insecurity (Thomas 1994; Isbister 1995). Rooted in Marxist theories of exploitative imperialist relations, the perspectives emphasize how mechanisms of the global capitalist system distort economic development in favor of those who control the most capital (Gilpen 1987). Here, the world economy is not composed of individual national economies interacting independently of one another, but tied together by a complex network of capitalist relations.

The relations among core, periphery, and semi-periphery countries are conditioned and shaped by an integrated single capitalist world-system. Periphery countries are subject to the core’s development and expansionist policies and practices because they lack an internal dynamic that would allow for acting as an independent and autonomous entity within the world system (McMichael 2012). Core countries retain power through the domination of economic, political, and cultural life on a world scale. Peripheral and semi-peripheral countries are subject to what Emmanuel (1972) terms unequal exchange through trade; meaning that core countries define terms of international trade which are disadvantageous to less developed countries. In the context of contemporary neoliberal globalization, unequal exchange is no longer propagated by core states alone but also by transnational corporations that seek to maximize accumulation through the creation of a system of dependency and exploitation (Bradshaw and Wallace 1996).

Numerous empirical studies have highlighted the detrimental effects of global integration on development. Foreign capital penetration is central to most studies framed using the dependency and
world-system perspectives. It is argued that dependent industrialization hinders economic development, discourages domestic investment, increases within-country inequality, and creates unemployment (Bornschier and Chase-Dunn 1985; Dixon and Boswell 1996; Wallerstein 1983). Export dependence and increased levels of foreign direct investment have been found to have a negative effect on numerous indicators, including income equality, health, education, pollution, access to clean water, and food supply (Kentor 2001; Kentor and Boswell 2003; Lee, Nielson and Alderson 2007; Ragin and Bradshaw 1992; Bradshaw et al. 1993; Jorgenson, Dick and Mahutga 2007).

Empirical evidence examining the effect of foreign capital penetration on food security is inconclusive. While some statistical evidence suggests that transnational corporate penetration and foreign direct investment reduces food security (Wimberley 1991; Wimberley and Bello 1992), other evidence suggests a possible increase (Firebaugh and Beck 1994) or perhaps no effect at all (Jenkins and Scanlan 2001). Mihalache-O’keef and Li (2011) suggest that the conflicting evidence may be in part due to the aggregation of all types of foreign investment into one variable. Their analysis, the most comprehensive of its kind, disaggregates foreign direct investment (FDI) into sector-specific inflows and found that manufacturing FDI improves food security while primary sector FDI, including agriculture, may reduce food security.

The dependency and world-system frameworks primarily focus on the economic development of a state in terms of external influences – political and economic – which in turn affect national development. According to the dependency framework, the role of the state is to minimize foreign influence while adopting a self-reliance model focused on independence and autonomous national development. For agricultural policy, the primary focus of the state is to maximize the domestic production and consumption of high yielding indigenous commodities, in turn minimizing reliance on foreign imports. The world-systems approach moves beyond national policy and calls for total reform of the world system itself. Both frameworks ultimately challenge the state to promote a more egalitarian system – one that provides equal access to resources and decision-making power.

**Ecological Theories**

Ecological perspectives focus on the earth’s capacity to meet the demands of an increasing human population. The roots of such theories are found in Thomas Malthus’ 1798 publication *An Essay on the Principle of Population as it affects the Future Improvement of Society*, where population growth was found to increase at a rate faster than food supply. It was predicted that these trends would eventually lead to food shortages – triggering famine and radical social change. Contemporary theorists continue to build on this tradition by considering the possibility of imminent crises, including global food insecurity (Leisinger, Schmitt and Pandya-Lorch 2002).

The political and economic realms are relevant to ecological perspectives. Political ecology informs this perspective by linking population with environment through the consideration of shared causes, such as poverty (Gray and Moseley 2005; Jolly 1994). Both the earth and members of its population are victims of structural inequalities. For example, land degradation is the result of more than simply population pressure, but also because poor farmers lack access to credit and technology.

The ecological approach explains population growth despite resource depletion and increasing poverty (Dasgupta 1995; O’Neill, MacKellar and Lutz 2001). The focus is on intergenerational wealth flows, positing that high fertility in traditional societies is in part due to an increase of net flow of wealth from children to parents over the life course (Caldwell and Caldwell 1987). Similarly, high fertility is also posited as an adjustment to risk, where children can serve as social and financial safety nets (Cain 1983). Fertility rates impact a society at large through an increased demand on both resources and the state. Drawing on the neo-Malthusian framework, policies that seek to minimize population growth may impact food security by reducing demand for food. On the contrary, low fertility rates may also hinder production and overall economic growth. The issue of fertility has guided policies in developed and developing countries alike (Shorto 2008; Moore 2006; Kakturskaya 2003). Policies can take the form of both economic incentives and disincentives meant to impact fertility rates and state subsidized family-planning services.
Empirical evidence suggests that population pressure and food security are related, however not necessarily directly. High fertility levels have been shown to be associated with indicators that affect food security such as economic development and modernization (Jenkins and Scanlan 2001). In the same study, techno-ecological developments are found to positively impact food supply with little explanation about food accessibility.

Consideration of the state is essential to building a more comprehensive ecological perspective of food security. Not only does the state govern over a population but it also regulates the geographic space within which they reside. The ecological framework of food security directs states to exercise power in numerous capacities, such as guiding population growth, demography, and land use.

**Intra-household Dynamics and Food Security**

Households are important decision-making units throughout the world. Food insecurity affects households differently depending on their production and consumption patterns, the share of household income allocated for food, and the degree to which world prices are transmitted to local markets. Food insecurity can also affect different groups of people within households differently. Gender is probably the most widely discussed aspect of intra-household differences (Quisumbing et al. 2008). Gender, along with other forms of structural inequities such as race, ethnicity or caste organizes social prestige and enacts status in rituals of interactions. Cultural norms of seclusion and segregation can exacerbate gender inequality by their assumptions about what men and women need and to what they are entitled. Studies from developing countries provide accounts of practices that differentially allocate resources, such as food and medical care, within households, particularly in poor households (Griffiths, Mathews and Hinde 2002; Malhotra and Mather 1997; Messer 1997; Sen 1993; Dasgupta 1987).

Although specific evidence on the impacts of the recent food crisis on women is lacking, there is ample research to demonstrate that economic crises of varying forms affect women disproportionately (Quisumbing et al. 2008). The impact of a crisis on the food and nutrition security of vulnerable members of a household, particularly women and children, is of concern. Poor people typically allocate a large proportion of their household budget to food, and during a food crisis, higher prices means women are compelled to stretch the limited food budget even further. Households cut back on food quantity (caloric intake) and quality (nutrients) which is particularly important for women and girls. In addition, pregnant and lactating mothers are at risk. Evidence from a wide range of developing countries shows that women’s status and control of resources within marriage has significant impacts on two aspects of the next generation’s human capital—children’s nutritional status and educational attainment (Quisumbing and Smith 2007). As noted by Quisumbing and Smith (2007), policy decisions to improve women’s status offers significant benefits. Empowering women cannot only improve their own nutritional status but also that of their children. Specific state programs involving the local people can facilitate these goals (Subramaniam 2006).

State policy directed at addressing food insecurity should take into account the unique dimensions of women’s poverty and recognize them as producers (women farmers). Recent initiatives targeted to small farmers, mostly in Sub-Saharan Africa, to help them grow food for the World Food Programme could benefit women both as producers and as consumers of food aid if efforts are made to ensure that female farmers have access to such opportunities (Quisumbing and Smith 2007). Policies need to recognize that all rural people are not the same. Rural people who are net buyers of food will suffer from input price increases, and net sellers of food may gain. Rather than simply buying the farmers’ crops outright, initiatives focusing on teaching better farming methods and helping farmers store their crops in warehouses, plant higher-yield seeds, and transport their produce to customers can be meaningful. Local procurement also avoids the disincentive effect on domestic production that foreign procured food supplies may create. The state can coordinate such policies across its various institutions.
Toward More Comprehensive Policymaking

When addressing food security, one must consider the role of the state, as it is instrumental to policymaking. We draw on the central tenets of the predominant development frameworks to explore the numerous considerations policymakers must take into account when addressing food insecurity. The simultaneous consideration of not one but all the development perspectives encourages a more multidisciplinary systematic approach to policymaking. Moving beyond reductionist understandings of food security as supply versus demand, we consider the crisis along three dimensions – availability, accessibility, and nutritional value. Further, we conceptualize the food system as the aggregate of all food-related activities and processes, drawing on the transformative conceptualization of state and considering both domestic and international effects of policy. Table 2 provides specific questions for policymakers to consider when drafting food security initiatives.

The narrow focus of each perspective neglects the contributions and explanatory power of other perspectives. Table 1 demonstrates that no single initiative can produce positive outcomes along all three dimensions of food security. Further, a policy may positively impact one group of food insecure people but negatively affect another along the same dimension. The success of good policy depends on its specific content and implementation on a case-by-case basis. The questions posed in Table 2 will help guide policymakers to consider a range of outcomes – both domestic and international.

In summary, the complexity of the food security crisis requires a more nuanced and holistic approach to policymaking. This begins through the consideration of numerous theoretical frameworks and the recognition of food security as being multidimensional. Failure to do so put at risk even the best-intentioned food security policies and the people they seek to help.

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References


Table 1. Potential Effects of Development Policy on Food Security

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Policy</th>
<th>Food Availability</th>
<th>Food Accessibility</th>
<th>Nutritional Value of Food Supply</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Modernization</td>
<td>Public investment for economic development</td>
<td><strong>Pro</strong> • Agricultural investment can increase supply</td>
<td><strong>Pro</strong> • Infrastructure can facilitate exchange</td>
<td><strong>Pro</strong> • Targeted public investment can address nutritional deficiencies</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Con</strong> • Does not necessarily address inequality</td>
<td><strong>Con</strong> • Urban bias hurts rural populations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market liberalization</td>
<td><strong>Pro</strong> • Access to global food supply</td>
<td><strong>Pro</strong> • Can decrease prices</td>
<td><strong>Con</strong> • Domestic farmers must compete on global market</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Con</strong> • Dependency on global food market</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Con</strong> • Potential food price volatility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependency/World-System</td>
<td>Redistribution of wealth</td>
<td><strong>Pro</strong> • Addresses inequality of access</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Market protectionism</td>
<td><strong>Pro</strong> • Potential for food sovereignty</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Pro</strong> • Agricultural planning can address nutritional deficiencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecological</td>
<td>Limit population growth</td>
<td><strong>Pro</strong> • Over time can decrease demand</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family planning</td>
<td><strong>Pro</strong> • Eliminate financial burden of unexpected pregnancy</td>
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Table 2. Considerations for Policymakers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy Focus</th>
<th>Considerations</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Increase income equality</strong></td>
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</table>
| General economic growth                   | • Which sectors stand to benefit the most? How will this affect other sectors?  
• How will policy affect urban populations? Rural populations?                                                                                      |
| Taxation                                  | • Is the tax code regressive or progressive?  
• What effect does this have on low-income populations?  
• Are low-income populations disproportionally affected compared to those with higher incomes?                                                      |
| Minimum wage                              | • Does this policy impact the rural population differently than those in cities?  
• What affect will this have on urban migration?  
• In which sectors will the labor supply increase/decrease?                                                                                        |
| Land reform                               | • Will any groups be displaced?  
• Will land reform efforts promote or diminish class stratification among producers?  
• What sizes of land holdings would land reforms apply to? Would smaller size holdings positively or negatively impact food production?                 |
| **Agricultural Policy**                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Farm subsidies                            | • How will local, regional, and international markets be affected?  
• What effect will this have on countries that import food?  
• How will the provision of particular seeds effect different stages of production?  
• How would subsidies affect production and therefore possibly consumption patterns?                                                              |
| Increase investment                       | • What effect will foreign investment have on state autonomy?                                                                                                                                                |
| Credit subsidies                          | • What constitutes a “deserving” borrower?  
• Who stands to benefit? Workers? Entrepreneurs? Lenders?  
• Is a financial infrastructure in place capable of assisting the targeted group(s)?  
• How would policies recognize collateral beyond assets? (peer group lending may be an option that has successfully been used for lending)  
• Are mechanisms for women’s access to credit (particularly if not literate) in place?                                                        |
| Subsidized consumption                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Direct distribution/ targeted subsidies    | • Are mechanisms in place to ensure the intended targets are reached?  
• Do women and other marginalized groups have access to distribution centers?                                                                         |
| targeted subsidies and programs           |                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Rationing                                 | • Does the food-rationing system reach urban and rural populations?  
• Who specifically is being targeted?  
• What effect will rations have on public markets?                                                                                                   |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food-for-work</td>
<td>- Do landholders disproportionally benefit compared to the landless?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- How will this impact women laborers and their families?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- How will the informal work sector be changed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food aid</td>
<td>- How will food aid impact local farmers?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- How does this affect the market for domestically-produced goods?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Change in fertility rates</td>
<td>- How will changes in the fertility rate impact economic growth and equality?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Is the necessary infrastructure in place to facilitate a change in population growth?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Will incentives/disincentives impact people differently depending on their socioeconomic status?</td>
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