

Food and Nutritional Security, a Vital and Imprecise Concept

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Dear Editor.

Food and nutritional security (FNS) is a vital concept because it is related to life, human rights, and health; however, it leads to a diversity of scopes and understandingsⁱ because it can be considered an objective such as solving the problem of hunger and nutrition in the world; it can be an end or goal such as the search for safe food, or a paradigm from the political, economic, social, cultural, legal and the sciences and technologies related to food.ⁱ It has a multi-dimensional character expressed in the distance between the conceptual formulations in national and international public policies, as it also depends on the context and the formulations of academia since it is a concept in continuous change.

The conceptual evolution of FNS began as a matter of public attention at the conference in Hot Springs, Virginia, United States of America, in 1943 “with the conviction that the eradication of hunger and poverty is a condition for peace.”ⁱⁱ Later, in 1974, during the “World Food Conference” held by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in Rome, the concept of food and nutritional security “as sufficiency” was formulated. This conference developed the definition of food security based on food supply: “Availability at all times of sufficient world supplies of basic

staple foods to sustain the steady increase in food consumption and compensate for fluctuations in production and prices.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In 1995, the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) proposed an approach based on this Framework, formulating the concept of nutrition security as “the right thing to do.”^{iv} The formulation of food and nutrition security emerged later as a proposal of field practices from the health and nutrition sector; it was globally adopted in 2008 by UNICEF, which states that: “Food and nutrition security is achieved when all people, at all times, have adequate food (in terms of quantity, quality, safety, and sociocultural acceptability), have access to it, and use it satisfactorily to ensure a healthy and active life.”^v

FAO in 2011 stated that: “food and nutritional security exists when all people at all times have physical, social, and economic access to food in sufficient quantity and quality in terms of variety, diversity, nutrient content, and safety to meet their dietary needs, and food preferences, to enjoy an active and healthy life, have an adequate environment, health, education, and care.”^{vi}

Over the years, other influencing factors have been added to the concept of FNS, such as health, the economy, or the environment, and various dimensions such as individual, family, community, national and international. These complexities were

incorporated without delimiting or differentiating their nature, which explains part of the imprecision of the boundaries of the FSN concept.^{vi}

The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of the United Nations, in the General Comment No. 12 of 1999, mentioned the obligations that Member States must comply with to fulfill the right to adequate food, which is achieved when every man, woman, and child alone or in community with others, has physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement. This right has become a priority for public action after successive crises that led to tensions, both globally and in Central America. In this context, concepts, instruments, and indicators have been discussed to organize public and private actions.^{iv}

There have been efforts to develop public policies on food and nutritional security, as well as in terms of concepts, indicators, and institutional articulations; however, there are still unclear elements that prevent the development of instruments and the implementation of adequate, effective, and sustainable policies.^{vi}

The international political community has worked on understanding the scope of these concepts, but the academic community does not seem to follow this effort in a concordant manner, as reflected in the divergent definitions of the political community in public instruments and definitions and the academic community in the Descriptors of Health Science.

It is necessary to develop a debate aimed at discerning the nature of the phenomena we designate as food security (related to agriculture, economy), nutritional security (at the biological and life cycle level), food and nutritional security, and the different approaches, dimensions, and measurements.^{vi} The purpose of the discussion would be to clarify the elements or characteristics that make up FNS and to evaluate the relevance of establishing a specific institutional framework to strengthen it and a national food and nutrition security system, to provide recommendations for its effective implementation.

To facilitate the discussion, it is proposed to simplify the factors and dimensions and focus on the nutritional status of individuals, rather than considering various determinants and dimensions related to food and nutritional security. It is also advised that the values of a healthy environment be considered constant and positive, and the values of healthy consumption be managed as

variable values during the development of explanatory models. Then, for the models' simplification, it is proposed to focus solely on healthy food consumption.

From this perspective, the nature of food and nutritional security can be defined from an individual perspective, as well as differentiate the indicators in which it is expressed; this also involves identifying the accompanying positive public policy instruments. From this point, it is possible to advance in a finer understanding of the set of factors and dimensions that affect each of these conditions.

The issue of food and nutritional security is a challenge that must be addressed to develop effective, efficient, and sustainable national systems; the different actors involved must be integrated to conceptualize FNS in a clearer and more precise way.

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