Source: Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)
United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)
World Food Programme (WFP)
Palestinian Authority

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Socio-Economic and Food Security Survey West Bank and Gaza Strip, occupied Palestinian territory 2011

Executive Summary

Background

The 2011 Socio-Economic and Food Security (SEFSec) survey is the third in an annual series of surveys jointly conducted by the Palestinian Authority via the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the United Nations Refugee and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and the World Food Programme (WFP).

Food security exists when all people, at all time, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Estimations of the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) food security levels are primarily based on economic access to food and essential non-food items, hence food prices and household income (i.e. employment, own production and external assistance) are key determinants of food security. Other dimensions of food security, including food availability and food consumption, are generally less problematic in the current context although, given the high dependence on staple food imports and the small size of the local food productive sector, these remain vulnerable to ongoing Israeli restrictions on access to international markets and volatile global food prices.

Food Security in the oPt

In 2011, after assistance, 1.3 million Palestinians (27 percent of the Palestinian households) were living in food insecurity and unable to meet their basic food and household expenses. This represents an improvement in food insecurity by 9 percentage points from 2009 (36 percent of the population) and by 6 percentage points from 2010. A further 14 percent of Palestinians were able to cover their basic food and household expenses but remained vulnerable and at-risk of falling into food insecurity. Twenty-two percent of Palestinians were marginally food secure and 37 percent of Palestinians were food secure.

Overall, recent economic growth, high levels of social assistance, regular payment of Palestinian Authority (PA) salaries, informal tunnel trade (in the Gaza Strip) and some relaxation of Israeli movement and access restrictions in 2010 were found to have contributed towards improvements in post-assistance food insecurity rates. Furthermore, 6 percent of Palestinians reported a decrease in household expenditures in 2011 as compared with 16 percent in 2010. Still, the number of households with 'poor and borderline' levels of food consumption remained high in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, at 20 percent and 26 percent respectively.

While food security levels have improved across the oPt, the SEFSec clearly highlights the uneven and ephemeral nature of these gains. Food security in the oPt remains high and vulnerable to the ongoing closure regime, as well as to the more recent and projected reductions of external assistance and extra-budgetary support to the PA. It is clear that the Palestinian private sector cannot sustain or maintain the current economic growth led by the PA public sector, the foreign assistance and the tunnel trade economy for the Gaza Strip in particular.

Food Security in the West Bank

In the West Bank, post-assistance food insecurity has dropped by 5 percent between 2009 and 2011 and reaches 17 percent. Food security levels also improved steadily between 2009 and 2011 to reach 45 percent of West Bank households. Food security gains are most apparent in the Northern and Southern West Bank where food insecurity levels have dropped by 5 percent. The Central West Bank continues to show the lowest levels of food insecurity (12 percent), but at a lower rate of improvement as the productive capacity of the private sector remains stifled due to the restrictions on movement and access within and outside the West Bank.

Food insecurity in Area C was estimated at 24 percent as compared to 17 percent in Areas A and B. Vulnerability is higher in Area C, with only a third of the population classified as food secure compared to 46 percent in Area A and B.

With a 7 percent improvement in food insecurity from 2010, refugees in the West Bank showed significant food security gains. However, food insecurity amongst refugees remained higher than amongst non-refugees, and refugees were 5 percent less food secure than nonrefugees. The only deterioration in food insecurity levels were found in West Bank refugee camps that had the highest food insecurity rates at 29 percent in 2011 as compared with 25 percent in 2009.

Food Security in the Gaza Strip

Food insecurity rates in the Gaza Strip remain significantly higher than in the West Bank. Post-assistance food insecurity dropped by 16 percentage points from the 60 percent peak following the 2009 conflict in Gaza, reaching 44 percent in 2011. Food insecurity levels appear consistent across the sub-regions at 44 percent, with the Southern Gaza Strip experiencing the fastest rate of improvement, most likely due to the tunnel trade economy.

Improvements between 2009 and 2011 result in part from the recovery of the employment market (especially in the previously dormant construction sector) and from the continuation of external assistance ensuring access to food, combined with some easing of restrictions on entry of goods from Israel starting from mid-June 2010 and uninterrupted imports from Egypt through tunnels – especially construction material. However, the dependence on external food assistance and the low-waged nature of recent employment gains, preventing any significant increase of purchasing power, have resulted in food security levels that have remained virtually unchanged over the past three years at 23 percent. Substantive improvements in food security levels in the Gaza Strip are dependent on the growth of the productive private sector that would require the lifting of the strict blockade (including for exports) and the flow of products, services, and people between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, as well as with the rest of the world.

Continued Vulnerability

The three year trends provided by the SEFSec survey between 2009 and 2011 clearly indicate that recent economic and employment recovery – especially in the Gaza Strip – has translated in a significant reduction in food insecurity in the oPt. The 2011 SEFSec however shows that food insecurity remains considerably

high, and that improvements in food security – while partially due to a marginal recovery of the private sector, a slight relaxation of the closure regime in 2010, and reforms to social assistance programmes – are largely dependent on external assistance, informal tunnel trade (in the Gaza Strip) and the public sector.
As experienced in past years, by dedicating nearly half of their total cash expenditure on food, the food insecure households remain highly vulnerable to any food price increase and have limited options to cope with any decline to household incomes. The recent fuel price increases, expected to continue, are likely to translate into higher transport and food commodity prices, bringing adverse consequences and potentially pushing vulnerable households towards greater food insecurity.
Declining levels of external assistance without a corresponding growth in the productive private sector poses a greater threat to food security gains as any significant decline in the public sector will result in job losses and a slowing of the oPt's economic growth. Eighty percent of households in the Gaza Strip and 25 percent in the West Bank reported receiving assistance, with external assistance reportedly preventing 7 percent of Gazan and 5 percent West Bank households from falling into food insecurity.

Recommendations

The closure regime in place in the West Bank, and the ongoing blockade of the Gaza Strip continue to be a major driving force to the high level of food insecurity, requesting continuous advocacy from all stakeholders to lift restrictions and ensure a productive and sustainable economic growth in the oPt. Further measures to ease the movement and access of people and goods – including exports from the Gaza Strip – are required to enable a shift to sustainable, private sector-led recovery which would generate greater employment opportunities, thus reduce the need for social expenditures (including humanitarian assistance) and allow the PA to generate sufficient domestic revenues to cover its own programme in a mid to long term perspective.
In the meantime, the key recommendations in the current context are:

• Maintain support to the Palestinian Authority and Social Assistance Programmes until the productive private sector is able to sustain economic and employment growth.
• Restrict unconditional assistance to the most food insecure/poorest Palestinian households.
• Devote greater efforts in protecting livelihoods and creating sustainable employment opportunities when access conditions are sufficiently available.
• Support the development of an oPt Social Safety Net as a key assistance reform.

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