

## ISABELLE TSAKOK

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I suggest we go to the third part of our workshop, looking at what we called urgencies, one of which is indeed food security, and the second one being the electricity supply challenge. I would like to hand over to Dr. Isabelle Tsakok. The floor is yours.

### **Isabelle Tsakok**

Looking around the room, I can see none of us really go to bed hungry on a routine basis, but I come from Mauritius, where it is not so uncommon. A lot of people go to bed hungry year in, year out. In fact, this is what got me interested in poverty and food security. When I compare Mauritius to parts I have been to in Bangladesh or Africa I think we are actually well off. It really depends on the context. We can see from the statistics that billions of people are either chronically hungry or severely malnourished. In simple terms, this is a nightmare. It is really a nightmare to live that way.

You referred to the United Nations Food Systems and I think that was fantastic. The global cry there was we need to transform our food systems. “Transform” is a very big term, and we need to transform if we want to eliminate hunger, if we want to achieve those sustainable development goals by 2030. That is only 10 years away. It is not a long time at all. That is a very ambitious goal.

I like the way the EAT-Lancet Commission puts it. Food in the Anthropocene represents one of the greatest health and environmental challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Food is fundamental. We have to eliminate chronic hunger. Now we have to transform the way we produce, process and distribute our food in what they call – and I think rightly so – the great food transformation. Ending hunger, poverty and sharp inequality is really an old problem. It is only in the modern industrial age that whole societies, like in the West, have been free from what is called hunger and premature death. However, we can see with the great inequality that so many people are still in that kind of nightmare scenario. That requires that we simultaneously – and this is the key – transform agriculture and food, macroeconomic management and social protection, not to mention many other things. We heard about energy and so on and so forth. Here we are talking about really heavy lifting.

This transformation, according to them, because we are in such an interdependent world, all living under the existential threat of climate change, will not happen unless there is widespread – widespread is key – multi-sector – not just in agriculture either – multi-level

action to change what we eat and how it is produced for the global population. It is a very big ambition. It is something we have not been able to do despite the growth of some countries in the West. It is really a minority of countries that are well off. The majority of countries in the world are not well off at all. There are varying degrees, but they are not well off. Since food is the first medicine, if people cannot have food they cannot be healthy. The pandemic has shown that if people do not have food, then they are vulnerable and can easily get struck by disease. This is therefore really an urgent problem to assist them and I am really glad you put it as an urgency. It is absolutely urgent.

I would like to point out the conceptual approach that is required to solve this food security problem. I hope we can later discuss the specifics and what happens in the world. I would like to draw from Peter Timmer, who is a foremost authority on food security. This is a complicated issue, but I just want to make a few points that are really characteristic of his approach. Number one: his approach is holistic, and that is important. It is macro, micro, short term and long term. As you can see in the chart, there are so many quadrants; and we can talk about each of them. Each of them is very difficult to achieve, but now you have to achieve all of them. As he puts it, sustained policy attention is required to achieve these objectives.

His book has a really great subtitle. It is *Food Security and Scarcity: Why Ending Hunger Is So Hard?* Everybody says we should end hunger, but it is actually really hard to do it. There is a good reason why we did not get there. It is not because people are wicked or whatever. It is just that the nature of the task is really difficult. I hope we can discuss all of the quadrants more.

I would like to look at his approach, but from a different angle, where he talks of the development trilogy. Peter Timmer has worked a lot in Asia, including in Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam and so on, and his view is that Asian governments have the goal of the development trilogy. They do not just want growth. They want growth, equity and stability. They are like the three legs of a stool. You have to have the three. I do not want to go into every little detail, but the key point is that agriculture and rural development are central to achieving growth, equity and stability. We therefore come back to those little farmers that we all look down upon. You know for many people, to be a farmer is to be dumb or whatever. Well, why? Because they are poor. I mean American farmers are not in that category at all. That is the key point about that: to see the centrality of agriculture and rural development.

There is a question that has fascinated me professionally: how do we change low-productivity subsistence agriculture into high-productivity successful agriculture? This is what my research has been on. I always said when I retired from the World Bank that is the first thing I am going to do. I am going to see why we cannot do it. In the World Bank we do a lot of agricultural development, but it is so disappointing despite efforts from everybody, and I was just wondering why that is. People say, "You are the World Bank, you can do this, you can do that", but we cannot transform agricultures. What is wrong with us? When I looked into it, I became a lot more lenient on my evaluation of the Bank. I have looked at all the agricultures on which I could get data. It is therefore not all the world as data is hard to come by.

What is striking is I find there is a strong pattern in all successful agricultural transformation and that is the topic of my book. It is called *Success in Agricultural Transformation: What It Means and What Makes It Happen*. Now, what does it mean? Success is an elastic term.

Well, we mean two things: number one, that there is productivity increase that stretches over decades – not one year, not yo-yoing, not with the election cycle, but decades, 10 years, 20 years, 30 years, depending on the country, and we can go into specific cases. Number two, the agricultural productivity growth actually helps most of the people, and by that we mean at least 50% of farmers and rural people. We look at the poverty level and we look at all kinds of socioeconomic indicators.

What is striking about what we learned? (I did this research with another professor from the University of Maryland) -- is that, number one, all these countries had a stable framework of macroeconomic and political stability. You need stability for growth. This is the Asian development trilogy. You cannot have growth if you have wars, ups and downs. All this excitement does not work. Number two, you need an effective technology transfer system, and we just heard how much emphasis the UAE is putting on that. Technology is key. Without technology you are just digging the old way and we cannot afford the old way anymore. We just cannot afford it.

An effective transfer system therefore means research, funding research, extending it to farmers and doing it over decades and decades. That is the weak part of most governments. They do it and then they forget it. Number three: access to lucrative markets is essential. That makes sense. Why would you produce so many potatoes when they all rot because you cannot sell? High productivity must go hand in hand with access to markets. When you look at these conditions, they all interact and support each other.

The fourth one, which is also very important, is an ownership system, including a system of use rights that rewards individual initiative and toil. I remember discussing this with my colleagues at the World Bank. They would say, "Isabelle, that is obvious". Yes, it is obvious. Every single one is obvious, so why so many governments cannot do it, what is going on? The political economy is critical. The fifth condition is employment-creating nonagricultural sectors, which tells you that agriculture cannot grow if the entire economy is not growing. To whom are you going to sell? We heard in the discussion yesterday when President Kagame was there, "Well, Africa has to industrialize". We all have to industrialize, but you have to transform your agriculture first. This is what the French call *passage obligé*. You cannot leap forward. We can look at China which tried to leap forward and what happened? The economy collapsed. Nothing good happened.

These five conditions are essential. The key thing to remember is all five must be maintained for decades; not for just one year, not just two, and not just now and then, and that is really heavy lifting. I shall stop here. I know I have only scratched the surface of an enormous issue and I hope you will bring up your questions. I will be more than happy to discuss them with you. Thank you.

**Arnaud Breuillac**

Thank you very much, Isabelle.