

Richmond Review Article – The World Cup of Food Security

By Stephen C. Mullins

The World Cup can be a humbling experience for rich countries when they discover that their team of football heroes can lose to one from a country they've barely heard of, but that is one of the things that makes the World Cup great. Top football talent can come from anywhere in the world, and the powerhouses of the sport can come from unexpected places.

In Brazil, the top thirty two teams in the world will meet head-to-head to determine which country will claim the honor of being World Champs. We will soon find out where these countries rank in the world of football, but I couldn't help but wonder how these countries compare in their efforts to feed their citizens. How do these nations fare in the World Cup of Food Security?

But how do you assess where a country stands in the rankings of food security? Not surprisingly, that isn't easy, since it depends on a great many factors that intertwine with others. To answer this question, the Economist Intelligence Unit (part of the Economist Group that publishes the Economist Magazine) designed a research tool called the Global Food Security Index to analyse food insecurity in 105 countries, looking at factors like food supply affordability, availability, quality and safety. The Economist is keenly interested in this because good food security is a leading indicator of a country's social and political stability, key factors that wealthy individuals and businesses need to assess before making investments.

So who is the World Cup of Food Security Champion? It's the United States of America.

Was that surprising? They are the richest country in the world, so it shouldn't be. But what makes them number one? The Global Food Security Index considers food affordability, availability, quality and safety as key indicators. Richer countries have the resources to address all of these concerns, and America leads in most of these.

But what about the other countries in the World Cup? How do they compare? Since there are thirty one other countries, we can only look at trends here. The host country, Brazil, is ranked 33rd in the world. The other South American countries all fall in the 30-40 range, with the exception of Ecuador at 56th.

Western European countries all fare well, filling out many of the top twenty spots, while former Soviet bloc countries reside in the 40s. Russia itself is ranked 40th. Asian countries like Japan and South Korea come in at 21st and 25th, while the African countries fare quite poorly, dropping way down the list, with the Ivory Coast at 76th and Nigeria coming in last at 87th.

It should be noted that these food security rankings are an aggregate/average of a country's performance, and can mask those who are disproportionately affected by differences in socio-economics and race.

While these rankings seem to tell a predictable story, there is some welcome indicators that give hope. Chief of these is that overall, food security worldwide is improving. According to Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada, in 2009 an estimated 1.02 billion people didn't have enough to eat. But as of 2013, the number of people suffering food insecurity has shrunk to 870 million. Though this is still a horrendous number, the trend downward is welcome.

You can see this trend developing if you look at the 3-year indicator of change in the Global Food Security Index. The country that has shown the biggest improvement in that time is the Ivory Coast, which has improved 6.2%. Many of the other African countries have seen steady improvement. But not

everything is well. Perhaps the most unwelcome news here is that the richest countries in Europe are showing noticeable declines on this scale.

And as for Canada, where do we stand? We are 8th worldwide, but showing a slow but steady decline in food security. While this may shock some Canadians, it is no surprise to people who advocate for food security. For example, poverty is a prime cause of food insecurity, and British Columbia has the highest child poverty rate in Canada, even though we are a rich province. The rate stands at 18.6%, a full 5% above the national average and almost double that of our neighbouring province, Alberta. Obviously food security is not just an automatic outcome of wealth, but of good policy and political will.

In football, the World Cup seeks to crown a single victor, but in food security, this would be tragic. In the World Cup of Food Security, the best result is if all sides win.

Steve Mullins is the communications manager for Richmond Food Security Society. We work to ensure that all people in the community have access to safe, nutritious, culturally appropriate foods that strengthen our environment and society. To contribute, check out www.richmondfoodsecurity.org and find out how you can get involved.