

# “Injustices make me angry – but I try not to show it.”

## Food and related policies provide endless fascination

How can policy make us healthier? How do desk researchers keep up with the world’s changing needs? What should they look out for on ‘gender’? We thought the right man to answer would be Shenggen Fan, Director General of the International Food Policy Research Institute, IFPRI\*. And we were right...

*Syngenta Foundation: Food is a colorful and emotional topic, but “Policy Research” sounds rather dry. What prompted your interest in the combination?*



**Shenggen Fan:** In my lifetime, I’ve personally felt the vital difference that food policy can make – for better and worse.

*In what way?*

I was born in China’s Jiangsu province in the early 1960’s, just after misguided policies had caused a huge famine. My mother was seriously undernourished, and so was I. Food was essentially rice three times a day. There was also the occasional

fish we caught, and eggs from the hen we raised. Many people in my village suffered from anemia, and night blindness from lack of Vitamin A was rife. The failings of a centrally planned economy were clear, but not being adequately tackled.

*What made the decisive difference in your life?*

Better policy and better education. In 1978, China began a major reform of its farming and food system. That was the decisive first step in the country’s transformation to its present economic strength. At the same time, I got the opportunity to go to Nanjing Agricultural University. That had multiple effects: the college provided lots of food, and in the next four years I grew 20 cm! It also greatly broadened my academic horizons, and stimulated my curiosity.

*Where did that lead you?*

In 1985, I won a place on a World Bank program to study Agricultural Economics at the University of Minnesota. Two particular memories I recall from my PhD there were meeting some really kind people – and reading lots of material from IFPRI! After then working for a while in the Netherlands and at an American university, I joined the Institute in Washington in 1995.

*24 years of loyalty to an employer are unusual nowadays. What has motivated you to stay?*

I believe passionately in the transformative power of wise food policy. I’ve felt it and studied it, and wanted to contribute. IFPRI is a great place to do so. The Institute lets everybody play a role, regardless of nationality, religion, family background, or whatever. It’s our goal that counts: reducing hunger, malnutrition and poverty, in a sustainable manner worldwide.



*Many research institutions would probably claim worthy goals and equal opportunities. What makes yours special?*

Throughout my time here, I've felt IFPRI's enormous respect for its researchers. They are our most important assets. However, the quality of all our staff is higher than I've seen in many other organizations. And crucially, we have stayed very dynamic.

*What do you mean by that?*

IFPRI has kept evolving to tackle new subjects and needs. At its creation in 1975, the big topic was whether the world could grow enough food. With time, the focus shifted from 'availability' to 'accessibility' – i.e. to subjects like consumption and income. In the 90's, researchers began to work heavily on environmental themes. Then along came the Millennium Development Goals. This meant a big shift for IFPRI, looking beyond farming to rural development and overcoming poverty. More recently, we've devoted considerable attention to climate change, and to nutrition. We are part of the CGIAR\*\*; I think it's fair to say we were the first people there to shift our focus from 'just agriculture' to link farming more broadly with nutrition and health for all. That meant, for example, addressing topics largely new to the CGIAR, such as the special needs of rural women, children and youth.



*Alongside dynamism, what have been other hallmarks of your time at IFPRI?*

One very valuable change has been the intensification of our country programs. IFPRI used to be highly 'Washington-centric'. Today, about half our staff work from the 15 country / regional offices. That has made our research much more locally relevant, increased our impact, and strengthened partners' capacity as well as our own. I hope that the country programs will soon also enable IFPRI to engage around policy not only with governments, but also with citizens in general.

*You're leaving at the end of this year, to start new work in China. What will be the next big thematic focus for your successor as Director General?*

Rural revitalization. It's a large, hugely important and fascinating area. It is related to many issues, including youth employment, environmental protection, female empowerment, institutional capacity-building, infrastructure, and more. IFPRI has to stay ahead of developments, and press for policy improvements in all of these areas.

*What would you advise your successor as regards the CGIAR?*

That organization faces a number of challenges, including funding. Reform is underway, and IFPRI needs to help shape it, even though we do a lot of work outside the CGIAR's thematic focus. IFPRI and the other centers must also ensure that the CGIAR develops a credible overall narrative – that's one of the criteria for improving funding. But I think IFPRI also needs to look further and engage more strongly with UN entities such as the FAO and UNIDO, as well as with the private sector.

*'Gender' plays an increasingly important role in IFPRI's work, as it does in ours. How do you tackle this aspect of policy-making?*

It's a multi-faceted topic. Our work includes developing methodologies to see how far and in what ways women are empowered. Our indicators include, for example, how income and assets are distributed within households, who takes production decisions on the farm, who has a political say, etc. We draw up indices for different countries and regions. We also stress that women have to benefit from policies and development work, not just be 'reached' as passive participants.

*As you travel the world and survey the policy scene, you frequently encounter injustices. How do you manage to keep smiling?*

Sometimes I am angry in my heart. But I try not to show it in my face. Anger is not a good counselor. It is much easier to raise important topics and challenge politicians when one approaches them cheerfully.

*You will soon be moving to Beijing, to work on national and international food systems. What are you particularly looking forward to?*

To assisting China in playing a positive role in worldwide solutions. I'm a globalist, and our planet is suffering. So are a lot of people, either because they eat too little, too much, or not enough of the right things. China can make a massive contribution to improving the state of mankind, and I am honored to be able to help a bit.

*What do you most like doing when you are not working?*

I love hiking. I tease my wife and adult children about driving to the gym to go on a running machine. Walking beats that on every score: It's healthy, environmentally friendly, cheap... and a great way to clear one's mind for new ideas!

\* [www.ifpri.org/](http://www.ifpri.org/) \*\* [www.cgiar.org](http://www.cgiar.org) \*\*\* [www.fao.org](http://www.fao.org)

**Shenggen Fan** has been IFPRI DG since 2009. He joined in 1995 as a research fellow, and later led the institute's program on public investment and then the Development Strategy and Governance Division. Dr. Fan is a Champion of Target 12.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals, dedicated to cutting food loss and waste. He advises several governments and other organizations, and has received numerous accolades.