

Policy Dilemmas of Food and Nutrition Security in South Asia

Policy Brief

Introduction

Historically, the canvas of food security in South Asia has been confined to food availability and food accessibility because of the paranoiac regional conception for uninterrupted food supply. However, food distribution, utilization and sustainability are less emphasized in policy formulation and implementation, particularly in developing countries like Pakistan. Nevertheless, for the last few years, the priority of key players (states, their think tanks and NGOs) has shifted to less focused dimensions of food and nutrition security. The inability of the governments to formulate and implement economically viable programs and policies to address food and malnutrition, which is also connected to “politics”, is seen to be unpredictable and irrational (Pinstrup-Andersen, 2014).

Sustainable commitments toward policy during pre- and post-government formation are failure dilemmas because of disagreement among ministries and external interventions over plans, ownership, roles and defined responsibilities and are the key challenges in the formulation and implementation of policies (Pelletier et al., 2012). The top-down nature of ideology exists in policy formulation and implementation in South Asian countries (Jamil et al., 2013).

Leaders having charismatic authority are usually unquestionable and there is hardly any disagreement among the members who would otherwise find it difficult to survive in the party. Political scientists generally give little attention and emphasis to the outcomes of the issues but they focus on the behavior of governments and societies, how individuals fail or succeed to overcome problems, and during crises correlate risks with the collapse of economies or natural calamities (Bosancianu et al., 2020).

Policies, programs and actions are worked out and approved by top party leadership, which are efficient in integrated policy documents (Suri, 2007). The specific targeted projects, programs, interventions, actions and policies contrived by countries targeting food security appear to be achievable or ascertainable at least for a definite time period but generally remain without fruitful results in improving the well-being of the people at large. Governments have a key role in safeguarding the common interests of their people. Policies based on “business as usual” need transformation and change in order to be more proactive rather than post-active regarding emerging challenges and complexities of food and nutrition security.

This brief aims to underline how the regional states of South Asia have been addressing the issue of food and nutrition security. How the “states’ ignorance” is confined to a few dimensions of food security while other areas are less targeted. And how efforts can be redirected to the less focused areas in the formulation and implementation of policies regarding food and nutrition security.

Regional Nexus of Food and Nutrition Security

Most of the South Asian countries have been self-sufficient in food production and supply like India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan. However, two major factors, climate change and particularly Covid-19, have been disastrous for policy formulation and implementation. Covid-19 has been affecting all four dimensions –availability, accessibility, utilization and sustainability – of food security by disrupting food supply, lowering incomes and less accessibility of food, which is required for sufficient intake of nutrients (Laborde et al., 2020). The situation in various countries is given below.

India's economic situation saw a stunning boom over two decades (1990-2010) and the country has attained previously unheard-of levels of wealth. Significant improvements in the agriculture sector have helped India transition into being self-sufficient in grain production and a major exporter (Tripathi and Mishra, 2017).

In Bangladesh, food supply and production were sufficient but have been disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic (Dev & Kabir, 2020; Bhuiyan et al., 2020). Producers are very sensitive to prices of their products and they are shifting focus from crop to crop and are now more inclined toward the production of vegetables.

Inadequate and poor condition of markets such as less physical food accessibility, lack of nutritious and healthy food items, and erratic supply chain are the biggest hurdles for producers in Sri Lanka (Dharmathilake et al., 2020). The country has been a peasant agriculture-based economy that was self-sufficient. The food system consists of multi-levels of supply chains with numerous intermediaries who deal with a variety of agricultural products that are generally seasonal, bulky, and occasionally extremely perishable. The current food system, which has undergone numerous changes in agricultural and economic regimes with time, includes both locally produced food (79 percent) and imported food (21 percent) (Sachitra, Vilani, and Padmini, 2017).

The food availability scenario in Nepal is different from other neighboring countries because production is very vulnerable to radical changes in climate, especially uncertain monsoon, though considerable achievement has been made in food production in previous years (Chhetri et al, 2012). Social, economic, political, cultural and environment factors are also the main drivers of food insecurity in Nepal (Chapagain & Gentle, 2015).

The supply chain is not as mechanized in South Asia as it is in South-West Asia. Planting, harvesting and food supply largely depend on availability of labor (Neo, 2020). A collaborative and transdisciplinary approach with focus on food production, safety, nutritious food, processing, supply chain and health facilities is required (Cole et al., 2018).

It is observed from the above discussion that policies are operating in isolation, particularly focusing on food supply and food production and related to incentives to farmers, food production, supply chain and regulation, labor force, climate change and

institutional collaboration. Agriculture is the mega driver of a nutritious diet but needs integration with other aligned sectors for sustainable nutritional food production. Social protection schemes prevent nutritional inadequacy and improve health of small farmers who are struggling with seasonal variation, climate shocks, production stresses, feeble infrastructure and distribution system in South Asia (Gillespie et al., 2019).

In this context, India has developed the largest food distribution system based on ready-for-crisis management, provision of incentives to farmers and supply of products at reduced price. The Mid-Day Meal Scheme and Ration Card System (subsidized fuel, gas and food) are very effective and prominent initiatives by the Indian government to ensure food distribution and accessibility (Pillay & Kumar, 2019). cash transfer poverty reduction program

In Pakistan, cash transfer schemes, especially Benazir Income Support Programme, is the biggest scheme for increasing financial accessibility for food. However, despite food surplus availability and the large expenditure by the government, malnutrition, hunger and poverty are interwoven and food insecurity has been increasing. Food inflation has the largest impact on daily intake of calories (Sleet, 2019). The wheat procured by the government is sold to mill owners at subsidized rates while consumers face indirect effects of pricing.

Bangladesh, on the other hand, has minimized public stock distribution gradually and shifted to private sector involvement. The scope and standard of infrastructural services in Bangladesh can be greatly increased with private management and funding. The provision of water and communication services, and power to a lesser extent, have already seen notable contributions from the private sector.

Meanwhile, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan largely rely on supply decisions. Nepal gets open access from India and hardly needs public distribution. Sri Lanka controls domestic food production, supply and prices through price mechanisms and import duties (Ahmed & Jansen, 2010).

Hence, evidence shows that food availability is not a serious problem in South Asia (Mughal & Sers, 2020), however, disruption in food supply, climate change, and price volatility of inputs are the key threats for sustainable food production.

Policies for food accessibility largely depend upon stability in policy formulation and implementation to ensure market efficiency, value chains, infrastructure and healthy business activities through regulations and incentives (Qureshi et al., 2015). Particularly, financial food accessibility is a key component that determines the daily basket of goods that a household needs. Whenever food prices increase, the basket of household goods shrinks and the household members' health gradually deteriorates. Interdependency exists in financial food accessibility and food utilization. Food accessibility, especially financial accessibility, has emerged as a big challenge while child malnutrition depends on health, food and healthcare facilities (D'Souza & Jolliffe, 2013).

Having enough essential nutrients, access to sufficient feeding, caring, and hygienic practices, as well as to health, water, and sewerage systems, are necessary for nutrition security. Thus, accessibility to a good diet that contains all the micronutrients necessary for a healthy existence and physical health to ensure that the body can utilize these nutrients as effectively as possible for its various activities are the two requirements for nutrition security. Nutrition security is the determinant of food security while the attributes linking the right to food are availability, affordability, accessibility and quality (Korir et al., 2018).

Nutrition status and food consumption have been largely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. It has resulted in rising unemployment (70 percent are at unemployment risk), decreasing livelihood and narrow accessibility to food in South Asian countries (Kim et al., 2020). Women's contribution towards households' food and nutrition security are acknowledged by communities but are not reflected in policy formulation and implementation. The persistence of malnutrition despite economic growth demonstrates the need to resist social structures to ensure gender equality in South Asia (Rao, 2020).

The ability to meet daily basket of goods and calories intake is crucial to sustain healthy lives. Food inflation, dietary intake consumption patterns, sudden financial crisis shocks along with divergence in policy formulation and implementation are the major challenges in South Asia. For instance, the health policy works in one direction while education and food price regulations work in another direction. Therefore, integration of policies is the bottleneck impediment for productiveness in formulation and implementation.

The narrative of leadership at the international level and its transformation into actions at the national level

receives appreciation and acknowledgment (Gillespie et al., 2013). Actions of the leaders are based on policy advocacy, coordination, formulation, and implementation to reduce undernourishment in India (Haddad et al., 2014).

Bangladesh is the only South Asian state where child malnutrition has significantly declined because the government doubled the minimum wage rate for garment workers. Pakistan was the worst affected by the floods of 2011 and the number of cases of child malnutrition increased significantly (Narayan, 2011).

From the above discussion on all angles of food and nutrition security, it can be said that primary drivers or alpha policies have been somehow addressed in South Asian countries, particularly those related to food availability and food production. However, malnutrition and nutritional inadequacy are serious challenges in these countries. The health system was seriously exposed during Covid-19 and nutritional food insecurity persisted in the region. Post-pandemic environment is largely based on revisiting the policies in formulation and implementation.

The condition of sustainability satisfies when the cost, duration and dependent activities chains are met with demand (Zachary, 2014). Climate mitigation policy is being implemented unevenly in all regions and sectors and would have adverse impact on hunger and food consumption globally than direct impact of climate change (Hasegawa et al., 2018). Evidence shows that South Asia will live with large population, economic inequality, changing climate with local calamities, and worsening regional and global weather patterns. Policy implication should be emphasized in public sector as well as private sector to manage disaster risks and environmental hazards (Karim, 2013).

Quantitative goals to reduce emissions sector-wise are ignored in South Asian countries. Afghanistan is the only country where agriculture is included in numerical mitigation in the light of Paris Agreement commitment. Sri Lanka joined the Global Research Alliance only to encourage research, technological extensions, development and practices along with diversifying crop varieties (Amjath-Babu et al., 2019). Pakistan has thematic adaptation actions because 45 percent of the federal expenditure is consumed on water resources-oriented adaptation (UNDP, 2015). Sri Lanka and Bhutan have more potential in their national determined contributions for climate-smart agriculture to increase production, climate resilience and food security with decreasing emissions (Chandra et al., 2018).

A daunting threat to the overall narrative of food security is looming in South Asian countries. Isolated policies within countries and across the region are insufficient and inadequate to combat the challenge of food sustainability, particularly in the era of climate change.

Regional Political Dynamics

Decentralization of policy has positive implications according to various research studies. Significant and positive change was observed by decentralizing government ministries in some South Asian countries, particularly in India and Bangladesh. However, in Nepal decentralization remained ineffective due to lack of political will and legal framework (Thapa, 2014). Climate change mitigation policies have failed because a participatory approach is missing in the policy formulation and implementation (Nagoda & Nightingale, 2017).

Decentralization is considered a high priority at policy level. Bhutan's five-year plan and India's public spending showed competitive federalism and importance to local governance. In Nepal, decentralization is in full swing while Pakistan is taking initiatives to empower the local government system. Partial decentralization has been ineffective. Fiscal, administrative and political decentralization have interdependence, and integration into them can be effective in education and health sectors in South Asia (Sow & Razafimahefa, 2018; Morss, 2019).

Conclusion

Some valuable lessons can be drawn from this debate. The will of the political governments is a necessary condition for policy formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Moreover, in the era of technological advancement with increasing natural shocks and uncertainties, a proactive approach is fundamental for resilience and mitigation. Political stability within and across the region is also necessary against enemies of humanity like poverty, hunger, and food insecurity. Political spirit and focused role of leadership have to be converged to food security for sustainable solutions.

The consensus is that decentralization in power, authority, responsibility, and functions is imperative for result-oriented public policy. However, components of decentralization and centralization are required. Centralized regulation can be more effective to avoid conflict of interest among the stakeholders. A proactive approach in policy formulation is required

but in case of policy implementation, a reactive approach may bring considerable results, particularly during the shocks and after the shocks for speedy recovery.

A holistic and integrated approach is required within the sectors (agriculture, manufacturing, supply chain, climate change, oil and gas) and across the sectors for each dimension of food security. Moreover, role of political economy and political players is the locus in this theme because they conceptualize, prioritize, shape and reshape policies. The future of South Asian countries lies in adaptation capacity to give policy twist to generate resilience and increase the recovery speed.

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