

# Policy Review on Food and Nutrition Security to Eradicate Hunger in Nepal

NARBIKRAM THAPA, PhD

## 1. Background

Food scarcity is a severe problem in Nepal. Around 6.5 million people (around 22%) are considered food insecure. Among the children below 5 years, 36.5% are stunted and 9.6% are wasted (low weight-for-height), as caused by chronic malnutrition (WFP, 2021). Similarly, about 56% of all women in the country face food insecurity.

Nepal needs to produce sufficient food for its population as well as high-value products for export to reduce its trade deficit, for which it needs to redouble its efforts. The Constitution of Nepal (2015) has provisioned right to food and food sovereignty as a fundamental human right. The promulgation of the Right to Food and Food Sovereignty Act, 2018 is a crucial move towards translating the constitutional provision into reality.

## 2. Current Situation

In Global Hunger Index (2021), Nepal ranks 76th out of a total of 116 countries. With a score of 19.1. Although the country has a moderate level of hunger, food and nutrition insecurity is still a cause for concern (Welthungerhilfe and Concern worldwide,

2021). There are seasonal and regional variation in food security in Nepal. Seasonal poverty and food insecurity is the highest between May and August — just before the annual harvest, and the lowest between October and January — immediately after the annual harvest. The cereal deficit is the highest in the Mountain and Hill regions, whereas the Terai region generates a cereal surplus. This indicates that food deficit in the Mountain region is often caused by difficulties in food transportation and distribution (WFP, 2019, p. 17). Nepal's overall grain production is enough for the country but the distribution problem exists among the ecological belts, ethnicities classes and age groups, and between men and women.

It has been reported that province wise Karnali Province (Province 6) and region wise Mountain Region have the highest rate of child stunting, whereas the highest rate of child wasting prevails in Madhesh Province (Province 2). About 56% of all women and 75% of Dalit women experience food insecurity. Dalit women are most likely to be food insecure, even after accounting for factors such as education and wealth.

They are 82, 85, 89 and 92% more vulnerable to food insecurity than Muslim, Brahmin/Chhetri, Terai Indigenous and Hill Indigenous populations, respectively (Pandey and Fusaro, 2020).

Around the one-third of the arable land in Nepal has remained due to the out migration of the youth, especially men posing a serious threat to food and nutrition security.

Migration of the youth has led to the feminization of agriculture, making rural women increasingly responsible for farming. KC (2020) has pointed out that the impacts of the feminization process on women largely depend on their caste/ethnicity, gender, class and economic condition. Male out-migration has also brought huge changes in rural households, with women increasingly getting involved in decision-making. While new roles in farming have emerged for women, the traditional gender norms still constrain how they practice farming, which has undergone noticeable changes. Whereas less emphasis has been given to maximizing crop production and raising livestock and management of farmland closer to settlements, less intensive farming practice have received a special attention (KC, 2020). In addition, there is climate change occurring at an unprecedented level, which has not only affected production and availability of food but also has created negative impacts on access to food by poor and marginalized people, severely reducing their purchasing power, and hence pushing them further into food insecurity and undernutrition.

Major causes of food and nutrition insecurity in Nepal include: poverty, less employment opportunities, conversion of agricultural land for development purposes, low agricultural mechanization, and poor access to market and less attention to women-friendly agricultural technology generation. Besides, there are also other factors at

play such as import-oriented government policies, weak implementation of policies and programmes, poor coordination among local, provincial and federal governments and non-participatory top-down approach.

Proper coordination among the three tiers of the government under the new federal system is envisaged to streamline the resources and increase food production to achieve food and nutrition security for every citizen.

### 3. Problem Statement

Food and nutrition security is a fundamental human right. Quality food is the sole source of nutrient and energy for people. Meaningful participation of farmers in production planning, growing crops, fruit and vegetables and raising livestock, and their consumption and distribution is crucial to sustaining our lives and those of our future generations. However, the irony is that it is the traders who fix the price of agricultural produce rather than the farmers themselves during the value chain processes. Farming is regarded as a low-profile profession in the society, despite farmers being the producers, managers, leaders and care takers of the Mother Nature. Why are not they respected in the society? How are farmers surviving and maintaining their families? What is the dignity and position of farmers in the society? Answers to these questions have not been satisfactory so far. We need our own food bowl in our hands in order to live dignified lives ourselves and sustaining our future generations. Now, we are losing our food bowl. We are becoming dependent on others. Nepal has become a sole food importer from being a food exporter until the end of the 1960s. Hence, food scarcity has been a major problem in Nepal.

There is huge gap between 'achar' and 'bichar' among the ruling/political elites. What they say they do not do whereas

what they do they do not say, which has been creating illusion in the society since long. There is a need of demystifying this illusion created by these so-called intellectuals and bureaucrats in telling the truth to the 'Hudokhane Manchhe'. It needs critical consciousness to break the 'culture of silence' among the large majority of the people and to make a significant difference in the lives and livelihoods of these 'Bhuimanche'. How long do Nepali people have to live in the grim poverty and suffering? They are begging with their golden bowl despite living in the heaven. Many youths are out migrated from Nepal to overseas countries to fulfill their basic needs like food, clothes and shelter. This is an irony of contemporary Nepal. Nepal has previously had 'Dani Sanskar' previously as opposed to 'Magante Sanskriti' at present. The social values, ethics and self-esteem have been eroded due to the current dependency policies, practices, ideas and beliefs instead of self-sustaining export-oriented long-term socio-economic programming. We are easily forgetting the 'golden age' of Mahakaini governance. Why are we not learning from the past? How does this country have to sustain remittance and until when? Is this the permanent solution for the sustainable development of the country? Every conscious citizen knocking the door of the Singh durbar to seek the answer to this "Yaksha Prashna".

#### 4. Methodology and Definitions

A political economy approach has been adopted to analyze the issues surrounding food and nutrition security. Food has become a political issue. It affects lives as well as livelihoods, with almost every aspect of its production and consumption stimulating attention from interest groups and the public at large. Food issues inevitably involve struggles over the way the government balances corporate against public interests. Methods used for collecting

information for this paper include literature review and observation and literature review.

The World Food Summit (2009) has defined food security as "a situation in which all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (WFS, 2009). Forum for Food Sovereignty (2002) defines "food sovereignty is the right of individuals, communities, peoples and countries to define their own agricultural, labour, fishing, food and land policies, which are ecologically, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances. It includes the right to food and to produce food, which means that all people have the right to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food and to food-producing resources and the ability to sustain themselves and their societies" (Thapa, 2014, p. 13, cited by Thapa, 2020, p. 113).

#### 5. Current Food Security Policies

Nepal has formulated various acts, policies, strategies, and regulations related to agriculture, food and nutritional security. The Constitution of Nepal (2015) has provisioned about food in its Article 36 as: (1) Every citizen shall have the right relating to food; (2) Every citizen shall have the right to be safe from the state of being in danger of life from the scarcity of food; and (3) Every citizen shall have the right to food sovereignty in accordance with law (NLC, 2015; p. 17). In order to materialize this constitutional provision, the Right to Food and Food Sovereignty Act, 2018 is has been promulgated. The Act in its Article 2.a has defined food sovereignty as: (i) farmer's participation in food related policy making process; (ii) choice to adopt profession in food production and or distribution system; (iii) choice of agricultural land, labor,

seeds, technology and farm machinery; and (iv) protect from negative impacts of globalized agricultural trade (NLC, 2018; p. 2). Furthermore, the Act in its Article 5 has elaborated for the identification of target households who are suffering from poverty, geographical remoteness and any other factors, and in its Article 6 has defined provision for food support identity cards (ID) with specific focus on women-headed households to secure food for these vulnerable groups (NLC, 2018, Pp 5-6). All these are good legal documents. However, their implementation aspect in terms of relevant laws, policy, strategies, plans and programmes seem to be weak. There is a lack of separate food and nutrition security policy in Nepal.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal-2 (2015-2030) is to "End hunger, achieve food security and improve nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture". It has set five targets. The first is to end hunger and ensure food access for all, especially the most vulnerable people. The second is to end undernutrition, including stunting and wasting in children under five as well as provide sufficient nutrition to adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women, and senior citizens. The third is to double agriculture productivity and incomes for smallholders, particularly indigenous people and women. It should be achieved by increasing access to land and other natural resources as well as to technological advancement and inputs, capital, and markets. The fourth is for the food system to be sustainable and resilient to climate change and weather-related disasters. The fifth is to maintain genetic diversity in agricultural farms and wild plants and animals. It also envisages that food should be equitably distributed. It is quite a challenge to achieve these targets in the context of Nepal.

## 6. Policy and Practice Recommendations

The following policy and practice recommendations have been put forward:

- Bottom-up approaches and methods should be followed by policy-makers and decision-takers during policy-making and amendment processes.
- Existing good acts, policies and programmes should strictly be implemented to increase production and productivity per unit area. In this regard, civil society organizations can play a role of watchdog.
- There is need for strong coordination among local, provincial and federal governments to produce better results.
- Climate adaptation programmes should be implemented at municipal, provincial and federal levels to address negative impacts of climate change on food security.
- There is need for reorientation among people to change their food habits towards using local grains, vegetables, fruit, livestock products as opposed to imported products such as long-grain rice and junk foods.
- Separate food and nutrition security policy needs to be formulated in order to promote systematic investment, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Food security zone should be declared to ensure food and nutrition at community level.
- Equitable food distribution system should be in place, taking into account region (the Mountains, the Hill and the Terai), gender, ethnicity, class, age group, etc.

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*(Prof. Narbikram Thapa, PhD (in Food Security and Livelihoods) is a life member of NEPMN and engaged in Sulakshan Kirti Campus, Kirtipur, Kathmandu as Research Director and Subject Committee Member of LBLU. Email: nbthapa2012@gmail.com).*