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**Discussion Paper on
Food Security and Sustainable Agriculture: Policy Options for
South and South-West Asian Countries***

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Food Security and Sustainable Agriculture: Policy Options for South and South-West Asia

I. Introduction

Across South and South-West Asia, rapid economic growth has contributed steadily to improving levels of human development. Thus it seems surprising that a region that has in many respects been successful should still have serious problems with something as basic as food. Across the region, millions of people are still food insecure and children are dying every minute from causes related to malnutrition. But food insecure people are rarely visible in South and South-West Asian countries. They usually live far from centres of power and simply struggle on their own to feed their families. Food shortages, however, occasionally hit the national headlines and public discontent at high prices may crept into “food riots”, as it did most recently in 2007 and 2008, when global food prices suddenly soared to unimagined levels. But except such emergencies, food has much lower public profile. This is largely because what is termed as “food security” represents a complex multi-faceted issues, concerning not just agriculture, technology and trade, but also encompasses multiple social and political considerations.

The key food security question, nevertheless, is rather simple and straightforward. Can people in South and South-West Asia, specially those residing in LDCs, get the nutrition they need to live healthy and productive lives? This paper attempts to respond to this question by addressing the multiple dimensions of food security with special focus on sustainable agriculture. The objective, it may be emphasized, is not just to achieve an aggregate level of regional food security, but to ensure that everyone, no matter where one lives, can have enough to eat.

Section II reviews the major issues pertaining to attainment of food security through sustainable agriculture in South and South-West Asia. Section III identifies key policy options in the short, medium and long-term from both national and international/regional perspective for promotion of food security through sustainable agriculture especially among LDCs in South and South-West Asia.

II. Food Security through Sustainable Agriculture: Major Issues and Relevant Facts

The world has taken a more comprehensive view of food and nutrition over time. During the 1960s, the emphasis was mostly on food supply or availability at the national level from domestic production and/or from imports. The 1974 World Food Summit, held at the time of an earlier global food crisis, emphasized the need to make food available at stable prices in both national and international markets. Many developing countries then seemed to achieve this objective through the Green Revolution—dissemination of modern HYV technology—to grow more food. However, this boost in production did not appear to be benefiting everyone and it certainly was not eliminating hunger and malnutrition.

The most powerful critique of supply-driven approach was Sen (1982) who introduced the concept of “food entitlement” as a key element in the study of food insecurity and famine (which is a manifestation of food insecurity in the extreme form). Food entitlement, in a market economy, depends essentially on four elements: (a) production-based elements which depend on ownership of productive assets; (b) trade-based entitlements which depend on market price of food; (c) own-labour entitlements which depend on the productivity and the opportunity cost of labour power owned by an individual; and (d) inheritance and transfer entitlements which include relief and subsidies obtained from the government. The distribution of income and an individual’s ability to access food is the outcome of the complex operation and interaction of all those elements. Sen stressed that the output of food per se was not sufficient, that people needed access to that food, to gain their “entitlement”. He pointed out that people could be food insecure even when there was no general shortage of food.¹

As a result of these and other analyses, the concept of food security was broadened to: “ensuring that all people at all times have both physical and economic access to the basic food that they need”, a change in emphases from availability to access. The concept was later broadened further to take into account such factors as the nutritional value of food and people’s social and cultural preferences. This more comprehensive concept was encapsulated in the definition of food security presented at the World Food Summit in 1996: “Food security exists when all people at all times, have physical, social and economic access to

¹ Bangladesh, a LDC in South and South-West Asia, for example, suffered a famine in 1974 which was a year of peak food production. The problem was that although there was plenty of food available, millions of people, particularly agricultural labourers who had lost wages because of severe flooding, could not afford to buy food and so suddenly faced starvation (Sen, 1999).

sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets the dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”. This indicates that food security has four key elements: availability, access, utilization and stability.

Although the broader concept of food security is much more relevant to everyday needs, particularly those of the poorest people, it is, however, more difficult to assess and monitor than a narrow concept based only on food availability. In practice, the best way of monitoring food security is to look at outcomes—to count how many people are going hungry. There are two principal measures for this, which are also used as food targets for the first Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These are: (1) Proportion of population undernourished and (2) Prevalence of underweight children.

While the overall proportion of undernourished people remain high, it should also be emphasized that there are considerable variations across the Asia-Pacific region, sub-regions and LDCs located in the region/sub-regions. This is shown in Table 1. The greatest problems are in South and South-west Asia where some 21 percent of the population were undernourished during 2003-2005 period. Indeed, South Asia alone is thought to have more than one third of the food insecure people in the developing countries of the world (von Braun, J. 2007).

Table 1
Population Undernourished by Country Grouping, Region and Sub-region

	Proportion of the population undernourished (average, %)			Number of people undernourished (average, thousands)		
	1990-1992	1995-1997	2003-2005	1990-1992	1995-1997	2003-2005
East & North-East Asia	15	12	10	183,500	152,000	131,800
South-East Asia	24	18	16	105,600	88,600	86,900
South & South-West Asia	25	22	21	282,500	284,800	313,600
North & Central Asia	8	9	11	4,000	4,700	6,500
Pacific	15	14	12	862	909	881
Asia-Pacific total	20	17	16	582,400	535,000	541,900
Developing countries	20	18	16	776,600	774,700	798,500
Sub-Saharan Africa	31	36	32	131,900	192,100	201,400
World	16	14	13	841,900	831,800	848,000

Source: UNESCAP (2009)

A more detailed national level analysis indicates that the most acute problems are in Afghanistan, where more than one-third of the population are undernourished, a consequence not just of drought and bad weather, but also of the ongoing civil war. Table 2 indicates that

the levels are also high (ranging between 20 and 34 per cent) in a number of other countries including LDCs. These include Bangladesh (27%), Pakistan (23%), Sri Lanka (21%) and India (21%) in South and South-West Asia. However, countries where the level is between 10 to 19 per cent should also be considered as having significant problems.

Table 2
Population Undernourished, by Subregion and Country

	Proportion of population undernourished (%)				Number of people undernourished (thousands)			
	1990-1992	1995-1997	2001-2003	2003-2005	1990-1992	1995-1997	2001-2003	2003-2005
North and North-East-Asia								
China	16	12	12	9	193,600	145,600	150,000	122,700
Democratic People's Republic of Korea	18	34	35	32	3,600	7,300	7,900	7,600
Mongolia	34	45	28	29	800	1,100	700	800
Republic of Korea	<2.5	<2.5	<2.5	<2.5	800	800	800	-
South-East Asia								
Brunei Darussalam	4	3	3	3	10	9	10	10
Cambodia	43	46	33	26	4,400	5,400	4,600	3,600
Indonesia	19	13	-	17	34,500	26,700	-	37,100
Lao People's Democratic Republic	29	28	21	19	1,200	1,300	1,200	1,100
Malaysia	3	<2.5	3	<2.5	500	400	600	-
Myanmar	44	34	-	19	18,100	14,800	-	8,800
Philippines	21	18	19	16	13,300	12,800	15,200	13,300
Thailand	30	23	21	17	16,800	13,700	13,400	10,900
Timor-Leste	11	9	8	-	100	100	100	-
Viet Nam	31	23	17	14	20,600	16,700	13,800	11,500
South and South-West Asia								
Bangladesh	35	40	30	27	39,200	50,400	43,100	40,100
India	25	21	20	21	214,800	201,800	212,000	230,500
Iran (Islamic Republic of)	4	3	4	4	2,100	2,200	2,700	2,700
Maldives	17	15	11	11	37	37	30	30
Nepal	20	26	17	15	3,900	5,600	4,100	4,000
Pakistan	24	19	23	23	27,800	24,800	35,200	35,000
Sri Lanka	28	26	22	21	4,800	4,600	4,100	4,000
Turkey	<2.5	<2.5	3	3	1,000	1,500	2,000	-
North and Central Asia								
Armenia	52	-	29	21	1,800	-	900	600
Azerbaijan	34	-	10	12	2,600	-	800	1,000
Georgia	44	-	13	13	2,400	-	700	600
Kazakhstan	<2.5	-	8	8	200	-	1,200	1,200
Kyrgyzstan	21	-	4	4	1,000	-	200	200
Russian Federation	4	-	3	3	6,400	-	4,100	4,100
Tajikistan	34	42	-	34	1,200	-	-	2,200
Turkmenistan	12	-	8	6	500	-	400	300
Uzbekistan	8	-	-	14	1,700	-	-	3,600
Pacific								
Fiji	10	7	4	-	72	54	32	-
French Polynesia	4	4	4	-	8	9	9	-
Kiribati	9	7	6	-	6	5	5	-
New Caledonia	10	10	10	-	17	19	22	-
Papua New Guinea	15	15	13	-	620	706	700	-
Samoa	11	11	4	-	18	19	7	-
Solomon Islands	33	21	20	-	103	76	83	-
Vanuatu	12	12	12	-	18	21	23	-

Source: UNESCAP (2009)

The second main way of assessing the standard of nutrition is by weighing sample of children to arrive at the proportion who are underweight for their age. The results for Asia and the Pacific for underweight children thus measured are presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Children Underweight, Asia and the Pacific

Country	Proportion of children underweight (%)		Number of children underweight (thousands)	
	(oldest observation since 1990)	(most recent observation)	(oldest observation since 1990)	(most recent observation)
East & North-East Asia	19.8	7.2	23,951	6,288
China	19.1	6.9	22,703	5,885
Democratic People's Republic of Korea	60.0	23.4	1,206	389
Mongolia	13.2	6.3	44	15
South-East Asia	34.1	25.7	19,009	14,156
Cambodia	39.8	35.6	770	598
Indonesia	34.0	28.2	7,338	6,135
Lao People's Democratic Republic	44.0	40.0	357	312
Malaysia	23.3	8.1	616	223
Myanmar	32.4	31.8	1,625	1,327
Philippines	33.5	27.6	3,072	3,015
Singapore	-	3.4	-	9
Thailand	18.6	9.3	939	402
Timor-Leste	42.6	45.8	70	38
Viet Nam	44.9	25.2	4,222	2,033
South & South-West Asia	49.7	42.1	93,782	79,580
Afghanistan	48.0	39.3	1,691	1,830
Bangladesh	67.4	47.5	11,569	8,985
Bhutan	-	18.7	-	13
India	53.4	45.9	67,775	58,244
Iran (Islamic Republic of)	15.7	10.9	1,308	649
Maldives	38.9	30.4	15	10
Nepal	48.7	38.8	1,695	1,394
Pakistan	40.4	37.8	8,337	7,720
Sri Lanka	37.7	29.4	662	475
Turkey	10.4	3.9	730	259
North & Central Asia	13.9	4.8	965	717
Armenia	3.9	4.0	8	7
Azerbaijan	10.1	6.8	91	47
Georgia	-	3.1	-	8
Kazakhstan	8.3	4.0	121	48
Kyrgyzstan	11.0	3.4	66	17
Russian Federation	-	3.0	-	142
Tajikistan	-	17.4	-	150
Turkmenistan	12.0	11.0	58	54
Uzbekistan	18.8	5.1	622	145
Pacific	-	-	-	-
Cook Islands	-	10.0	-	-
Fiji	-	7.9	-	8
Kiribati	-	13.0	-	-
Micronesia (Fed. States of)	-	15.0	-	2

Source: UNESCAP (2009)

As with the proportion undernourished, the problems are most severe in South and South-West Asia where, on average, 42 percent of children are underweight, with the highest figure in Bangladesh at 47 percent and in India at 46 percent. The proportions are generally lower in East and North-East Asia and in North and Central Asia, as well as in the Pacific, though in the latter case few countries can provide adequate data. These high rates also mean that many countries are unlikely to meet the corresponding MDG target, which is between 1990 and 2015, to have reduced the proportion by half. Countries off-track on this basis include Cambodia, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and Indonesia, where the proportion has not fallen since 1990 and others which are making progress, but too slowly to meet the target, including Bangladesh, India, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Pakistan and the Philippines.

III. Key Policy Options for Food Security and Sustainable Agriculture

III.1 Short-Term Policy Options: Improving Access to Food

Food security depends as much on income as on food availability for a large number of people in South and South-West Asia. People who have sufficient income is most likely to have adequate access to food. Thus, effective efforts to eliminate poverty and enhance the purchasing power of poor and other vulnerable groups will contribute towards ensuring food security. The policy measures, suggested below, however, are those specifically related to food access and availability (and not enhancing income per se), especially with regard to the poor and vulnerable communities of LDCs in the region.

Economic and Social Access

Certain groups in LDCs must have the protection of the State for food security to be assured on an equitable basis: these include groups who are marginalised and face discrimination on the grounds of one or more of these factors: gender, economic status, vulnerability as single parents and widows heading households, disability and illness. Particular attention need to be given to addressing the multiple food insecurities that women and girl children face. This may require, among other measures, review and amendment of legislation and practices to ensure gender equality concerning inheritance and ownership of production resources, so that women's equal right to food is explicitly protected.

There is a need to establish and strengthen public food distribution systems that target food support at poor households, particularly who are most vulnerable. Public distribution systems should offer a wide variety of locally-produced foods. Governments could consider having such food distribution system managed by civil society groups.

Social assistance programmes, such as food and cash transfers, which already exists in several LDCs of the region, provide a measure of protection against decline in food consumption caused by shocks. Moreover, in the context of food security, a comprehensive social protection system can also play a vital role. Guaranteed employment for food insecure groups is major means of ensuring economic access to food. Public employment guarantee schemes, such as food-for-work or cash-for-work schemes, not only ensure minimum level of food consumption, but also help people avoid resorting to damaging coping mechanism that involves asset sales and indebtedness. School feeding programmes are critical to providing basic nutrition to children while encouraging attendance. The effective functioning of these schemes, however, requires attention to stopping leakages and more effective targeting of vulnerable groups such as landless agricultural labourers, small and marginal farmers, people who have been internally displaced, women in female-headed households and people with disabilities.

Physical Access

In order to enhance physical access to food, current logistics, storage and marketing institutions and practices need to be streamlined, with improvements in the corresponding infrastructure and services. Especially important in areas prone to disasters are improvement to transport and logistics infrastructure and decentralized food storage facilities. Measures can include realigning roads away from unstable slopes, protecting and raising river banks in

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