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Poverty, Food Security and Nutrition Analysis in the context of COVID-19 and the role of Social Protection in the Kyrgyz Republic



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Acronyms

ALMP	Active Labour Market Programme
CBT	Cash-based Transfers
CISSP	Corporate Information System for Social Protection
DHS	Demographic and Health Survey
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FSOM	Food Security Outcome Monitoring
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HHs	Households
KIHS	Kyrgyz Integrated Household Survey
MHSD¹	Ministry of Health and Social Development
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey
MSL	Minimum Subsistence Level
MSMEs	Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises
NBKR	National Bank of the Kyrgyz Republic
NCDs	Non-communicable diseases
NSC	National Statistics Committee
PwD	People with disabilities
SOFI	The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World
UBK	Ui-Bulogo Komok
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WB	World Bank
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

¹ Starting from October 2021 the Ministry of Health and Social Development was restructured in two separate ministries – the Ministry of Labour, Social Welfare and Migration (MLSWM) and the Ministry of Health (MoH).

Executive Summary

Food insecurity and malnutrition are often interlinked with poverty and inequality, creating a vicious cycle with each fuelling the other. National social protection systems play a central role in safeguarding and fostering the ability of the most vulnerable to meet their essential needs, including food security and nutrition, and to build resilience against shocks and stressors.

In Kyrgyzstan, over the last 15 years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, poverty rate has significantly declined from 39.9 percent in 2006 to 20.1 percent in 2019, with remittances playing an increasing role in poverty reduction. However, the share of population living below the minimum subsistence level in 2019 remained considerable. The gap between rural and urban poverty rates has shrunk from 21 percentage points in 2006 to 8.5 percentage points in 2019, meaning that more consideration should be given to urban poor as well.

Inadequate food security and nutrition take an enormous toll on the country's economy and negatively affect the livelihoods and economic capabilities of vulnerable populations. Malnutrition in all its forms, and diet-related non communicable diseases (NCDs), continues to be one of the main contributors to the disease burden of the country posing high social and economic costs on households, communities and the whole country. Kyrgyzstan is facing a triple burden of malnutrition, with an increased trend in overweight and obesity prevalence both among the adult population as well as in children and adolescents. Poor diets are a common denominator for both undernutrition and obesity. Micronutrient deficiencies also remain a concern. An adequate diet contributing to optimal nutrition outcome is vital for all-round growth and development, which ultimately leads to an improved quality of life and the graduation out of poverty.

Over the period from 2016 to 2019, food has made up over 60 percent of poor households' total expenditures. A high share of food expenditures leaves households little room for other expenses, hindering their ability to graduate out of poverty. In 2019, almost half of the population consumed less than 2,100 kcal per day and could not afford a healthy diet.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a profound economic crisis and the resultant negative socio-economic shocks pose a serious threat to food security through various transmission mechanisms. The pandemic has increased

the numbers of newly poor and unemployed people, with poverty reaching 25.3 percent and an additional 8 percent being at risk of poverty. The overall number of income sources has decreased as a result of protracted crisis in the country and the poorest quintile of the population mostly relied on irregular jobs and social transfers. Households spent almost all their income and have no savings. The COVID-19 crisis has deepened the poverty gap, making the existing poor even more deprived. Urban areas have been particularly hit by the crisis.



Income declines not only reduced demand for food but also compromised diet diversity and quality. In order to cope with their reduced economic capacity and purchasing power, households reported applying different negative coping strategies related to asset depletion or changes in regular food consumption practices, which have direct negative consequences to their nutritional, health and productivity status and are difficult to reverse in the future perpetuating the cycle of poverty and vulnerability.

The rise of food prices due to the pandemic is impairing access to basic food – overall food prices increased by 18.8 percent for staple food items, including meat, vegetables, milk and dairy products (January – August 2021 compared to the same period last year). In 2021, following the high inflation rates, 97 percent of households in both rural and urban areas reported high food prices as a problem. This confirms how the major impacts of the pandemic on poverty and food security came from shocks to household incomes (reduction or loss of income sources), and hence from accessibility to nutritious food, rather than from

impacts on food markets directly (e.g. supply chain disruptions). To overcome the economic hardships, 44 percent of households cut food costs. The consumption of vegetables and fruits has decreased, while bread, sugar and oils are now consumed more. The study also reveals how female-headed households are more likely to underconsume protein and hemoglobin-iron-rich food items compared to male-headed households, highlighting the need for specific economic empowerment and nutrition sensitive programming targeting women.

Social protection in Kyrgyzstan covers a broad range of risks throughout the lifecycle and includes pensions, social benefits, social services and labour market programmes. Universal pension system dominates in overall social protection budget and plays a major role in poverty reduction and in ensuring access to healthy diets. Even though social assistance payments are less effective in reducing poverty headcount, they are essential in reducing poverty gap, thus partially decreasing vulnerability and consumption shortage of poor households. However, the design of these benefits in most cases is not necessarily nutrition sensitive with low adequacy in most cases not covering the minimum food basket.

The COVID-19 crisis revealed that vulnerable households fully excluded from social security programmes became the most vulnerable to external shocks. 43.2 percent of vulnerable households were not covered by social

assistance and social insurance schemes at a national level in 2019, with exclusion being more severe at urban level. To increase the coverage as part of ad-hoc shock-responsive measures during the pandemic, the Ministry of Health and Social Development (MHSD) provided one-off food assistance to 523,880 newly poor and vulnerable beneficiaries through 1227 hotline. However, more holistic and sustainable approach is needed to improve the effectiveness of shock-response measures.

The following solutions provide a mutually reinforcing pathway of measures to break the vicious cycle of poverty, food insecurity and malnutrition. Given the role of social protection programmes in improving food security, nutrition and livelihoods, it is essential to foster inter-sectoral linkages, particularly between social protection and food system. Healthy and diverse diets should be promoted alongside efforts to address the constant issue of malnutrition, including micronutrient deficiencies. The design of social benefits is recommended to consider the nutrition-sensitive approach, including the cost of healthy diets. Strengthening the shock responsive social protection systems, such as digital registries and clear mechanisms for humanitarian assistance distribution are key to safeguard the poor and most vulnerable when crisis hits. Moreover, the recovery phase should focus on income-generating activities, provision of integrated services, labour activation and poverty graduation programmes.

Introduction

Food insecurity and malnutrition are often interlinked with poverty and inequality, creating a vicious cycle with each fuelling the other². Food insecurity and malnutrition are the main causes of poverty. They affect health, impairing physical and cognitive development and capacity, thus reducing the work capacity and human capital of individuals, making them more susceptible to poverty or unable to break the cycle of poverty. Improving the wellbeing is the key element to foster food security, as the poor spend a large share of their incomes on food, leaving them vulnerable to shocks like high food prices. Income inequality and other forms of inequality affect these interlinkages³. For these reasons, well-functioning national social protection systems play a major role in safeguarding and fostering

the ability of the most vulnerable to meet their essential needs, including food security and nutrition, and to manage risks and shocks.

This paper aims to shed light on the linkages between poverty, food security and nutrition by highlighting their interconnectedness and the role of social protection in addressing these challenges. In Chapter 1 the trends prior to the pandemic are presented to then reflect on the changes brought up by the latter in Chapter 2. Linked to addressing the vulnerability and the food security and nutrition of the most vulnerable, Chapter 3 presents an overview of the social protection measures in response to pandemic-driven crisis in Kyrgyzstan. Chapter 4 provides conclusive remarks and recommendations on the way forward.

KEY MESSAGES:

1. **Poverty, Food Security and Nutrition are interconnected; greater efforts and an integrated approach is needed to tackle these issues.**
2. **Although poverty levels were declining, the population at large still live around the poverty line, making them vulnerable to shocks. The pandemic increased the newly poor, especially in urban areas, while income sources have decreased.**
3. **Income declines not only reduce demand for food but also induce shifts in the mix of products consumed, notably resulting in less consumption of more nutrient-rich foods (like fruits, vegetables, and animal-sourced foods) and relatively more of calorie-rich foods (like basic grains and sugar).**
4. **Malnutrition in all its forms, and diet-related non communicable diseases, remains one of the main contributors to the disease burden of the country posing high social and economic costs on households, communities and the whole country. Prior to the pandemic, half of the population could not afford a healthy diet and this number is likely to have increased further due to the impact of COVID-19.**

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