

Assuring food security in preventing malnutrition in Sri Lanka

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Introduction

Food security exists when 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 (World Food Summit 1996).

Food security is a multidimensional concept that includes food availability, food access, utilization and stability (Figure 1). Availability of food includes the provision of food in adequate quantity and appropriate quality through either domestic production or imports, which includes receiving food aid. Access to adequate resources to acquire a nutritious balanced diet is a necessity to fulfil access to food.

In addition, there are several non-food inputs in food security such as clean water, sanitization and healthcare that contribute towards securing nutritional well-being. To be food-secure an individual, a household, and the population should have access to food at all times. Hence, the notion of stability addresses both the availability and access dimensions of food security.

Nearly 193 million population inhabiting 53 countries are in acute food shortage and need of urgent assistance. Thus, the level of hunger was alarmingly high in 2021. Global food insecurity has further deteriorated in 2022 with the repercussions of the outbreak of the Ukraine war on food, energy and fertilizer prices (Food Security Information Network 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic and the supply chain disruption by the Ukraine War have amplified the global economic fallout, thereby recording the highest-ever food prices worldwide. The impact on food prices is noted to be more apparent in low and middle-income countries, leading them into extreme poverty, hunger and malnutrition (World Bank 2022).

Since the early decades of the 20th century, food security has been a central concern in Sri Lanka due to the prevailing food deficit export-import economy since the 19th century. Being an island nation dependent on imported food supplies, it is highly vulnerable to being undermined by international developments. According to historical evidence, shortages of food during the Second World War and the rationing scheme adopted to ensure minimum food security demonstrated the country's vulnerability to food shortages (Sanderathne and de Alwis, 2014).

Impact on food security in Sri Lanka

Food availability: Rapidly unfolding economic crisis has imparted a massive blow to food availability in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka's main foreign exchange earning channels including the remittances from migrant workers, apparel exports, primary agricultural exports and

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tourism, were acutely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This decline in revenues and the unwise decision to defend the Sri Lankan Rupee and the simultaneous uncontrolled printing of money to settle domestic debts, led the island nation into massive inflation (CARE 2022). This directly impacted food imports and subsequently the Government had to curtail food imports which caused a massive blow to the food availability in the country.

The Government of Sri Lanka imposed an abrupt ban on imported chemical fertilizers in April 2021, which also was triggered by the depletion of foreign exchange reserves. This ad hoc policy on agriculture diminished the harvests, depleting domestic food production. The cumulative effect of these two factors impaired the food available to the population (CARE 2022).

Food Accessibility: As per the World Bank estimate, nearly 500,000 Sri Lankans have fallen below the poverty line since the inception of the pandemic. Inflation has been driven by monthly increases in prices in both Food and Non-food categories of items. In the Food category, prominent increases were observed in the prices of rice, fresh fruit, milk powder and bread. The latest report of the Department of Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka reflects that nearly 1 in 6 people in the country experience poverty. The official poverty line as reported in July 2022 was Rs.13,138.

Along with the pandemic, as many industries were faltering, a significant amount of the workforce lost their jobs. Prolonged power cuts, unavailability of fuel for vehicles and machines and lack of agricultural inputs, primarily chemical fertilizer, led to the loss of income for many workers. The reduction of food availability increased prices of the food, mainly impacting protein-rich food products. Thus, soaring prices of food and inadequacy of income are having a negative impact on the food accessibility of Sri Lankans.

Utilization of food: Sri Lanka is blessed with abundant seasonal fruits and vegetables that can be preserved and stored for future use

with appropriate science and technology. Being an island nation, the supply of proteins via sea fish is not a tough task. However, a lack of knowledge on the preservation of food has caused a significant waste of excess food products.

With the current economic crisis, public groups are becoming actively involved in assuring food security in communities by strengthening community teams to initiate community kitchens and community food cabinets.

<p>AVAILABILITY</p> <p>Sufficient quantity of appropriate and quality food is available from domestic production, commercial imports, food assistance or food reserves on constant basis.</p>	<p>ACCESS</p> <p>Adequate income or other resources to access food through domestic production/ local market or as exchange or as food aids</p>
<p>STABILITY</p> <p>Availability of adequate food all the times, thus access and utilization of appropriate food is not curtailed even at emergencies or crisis situations.</p>	<p>UTILIZATION</p> <p>People utilise food properly through food storing and processing practices while having sufficient knowledge on nutritional health, sanitation etc.</p>

Figure 1: Four dimensions of food security.

(Gunaratne et al., 2021)

Child malnutrition due to food insecurity

Child growth is recognized as an indicator of the nutritional status of a population. The percentage of children with a low height for age (stunting) reflects the under-nutritional situation of a population that may result from long-term food deprivation. The percentage of children with low weight for age (underweight) is an indicator of acute malnutrition status in a population.

Hence, protein-calorie malnutrition will first be apparent in the weight of the growing child and wasting of the child is the first indicator of malnutrition. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, about 17% of Sri Lankan children under 5 years were stunted and 15% of children were wasted. This situation will further

worsen with the current crisis if interventions are not instituted appropriately (CARE 2022).

Although these anthropometric measurements do not change immediately, all possible measures need to be taken to face the risk of malnutrition. According to international organizations, if malnutrition worsens, around 53,000 children are predicted to be admitted to hospitals during the upcoming months.

Ensuring food security

A person becomes food insecure when they lack regular access to safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and healthy life. Assessing the extent of food insecurity is the fundamental step in the process of ensuring food security. Globally, it is assessed by the grading of the ability to obtain food.

Severe food insecurity is the worst and extreme of food insecurity which signifies practically running out of food and experiencing hunger. Even in moderate food insecurity, people are deprived of access to food and they have to purchase food at the expense of other basic needs. In this scenario, they mostly consume low-cost and easily accessible food without considering the nutritional aspect, leading to the extreme ends of the malnutrition spectrum. Children who experience food insecurity may also be prone to obesity, overweight and chronic diseases like diabetes (The state of food security and nutrition in the world 2022). All Sri Lankan families should be screened and assessed to determine their food security level and the households that are identified as experiencing severe and moderate food insecurity need to be attended to immediately in order to prevent malnutrition. The grants and funding should be first directed to attend to the acute crisis.

In addressing food security in the long-term to ensure food sovereignty, strengthening food cultivation, fisheries, poultry and dairy industries, food transportation, storage and preservation of food, are of utmost importance. Further, education on nutrition and eliminating the myths and misbeliefs regarding nutrition is fundamental. Strengthening and empowering the communities to assuring food security at the grass root level is the key to a successful process of battling malnutrition.

In achieving the objectives of food security Sri Lanka is blessed with an effective system and infrastructure (Figure 2), which is capable of combating all weaknesses and threats.

<p>STRENGTHS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well-established public health system. • Well-established governing system. • High female literacy rate. • Empowered communities. • Conducive environment and climate for cultivation. • Availability of science and technology. • Skilled manpower. 	<p>WEAKNESSES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depleted foreign exchange reserves. • Political instability. • Unemployment and reduced purchasing power.
<p>OPPORTUNITIES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International funding and grants. 	<p>THREATS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Global economic crisis • Geo-political developments

Figure 2: SWOT Analysis in achieving food security in Sri Lanka

Conclusion

Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economical access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Enhancing food availability, accessibility, utilisation and establishing stability in all forms, are the key essentials in assuring food security. Although malnutrition is widely discussed, it is a long-term sequel to food insecurity. While assessing children's growth is an indicator of adequate food security of a population, assessing the extent of food insecurity prevailing in the country and planning to combat food insecurity is the mainstay in preventing malnutrition. Addressing severe and moderate food insecurity by directing funds and grants is an immediate requirement. Focusing on

strengthening food production, industries, transportation and preservation is the mainstay in stabilizing food security. Identifying the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and strengths in the systems is vital in planning strategies to ensure food security in Sri Lanka.

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