

Human Development in South Asia 2010/2011: Food Security in South Asia was launched on 8 October 2011 in Lahore, Pakistan. Khadija Haq, President of Mahbub ul Human Development Centre, started the proceedings of the event by presenting key highlights of the Report. Sartaj Aziz, a Board member of MHHDC and Vice Chancellor of Beaconhouse National University, delivered the keynote address while Adil Najam, Vice Chancellor Lahore University of Management Sciences, paid tribute to Mahbub ul Haq. Adil Najam highlighted Mahbub ul Haq's intellectual contribution to development economics and planning in Pakistan, and his role in initiating national, regional and international movement for human development and human security.

The launch was followed by a panel discussion on food Security in Pakistan. Munir Ahmed of Pakistan Institute of Development Economics talked about food availability; Abid Sulehri of Sustainable Development Policy Institute discussed access to food; and Abid Burki analyzed the issue of food absorption. Hafiz Pasha, another Board member of MHHDC and former Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations, chaired the panel discussion.

The issues and strategies

Today in 2011 about 30 per cent (500 million) of the population of South Asia live below the international poverty line of US\$1.25 a day, while 60 percent survive below US\$2 a day. South Asian countries need to renew their commitments to ensure food security for all their populations by 2020. In this context there is a need to address poverty more effectively. Water shortage is also a major problem for food security in South Asia. It is imperative that the countries of the region work together to find a solution to this problem.

To increase the availability of food is not a solution for South Asia; more important for the region is to improve the access of the poor to food through income and an efficient and equitable system of food distribution. Khadija Haq summarized the highlights of the report in six points. These are:

First, high economic growth is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for food security. To ensure food security for all people at all times, special efforts must be made through the adoption of a strategy of pro-poor and inclusive growth.

Second, all dimensions of food security have to be included in policies for food security. Food must be available for all; accessible to all with adequate purchasing power, marketing and distribution; and there must be facilities for healthcare, water and sanitation for the deprived.

Third, government policies have a critical role to play in ensuring food security. These policies include the maintenance of buffer stocks, support price, land reform, management of the food distribution system etc. Government policies must be based on the principle of equity and efficiency. Supportive government policies are particularly important especially for those that suffer from disadvantages due to income, geographical location and/or natural calamities.

Fourth, education levels and gender inequalities play a significant role in creating food insecurity within households. Women's role in food production, distribution and household consumption need to be recognized and supported with relevant policies.

Fifth, safety net programs are essential for government's food security strategy to protect food and income of the poor. But each country in South Asia needs to design its own program

according to the magnitude of the problem and the need of the country. In Pakistan, there is a need for better targeting, more coordination with all the implementing agencies, and improving accountability. In India, on the other hand, the analysis calls for a universal program of public food distribution system that includes all the food insecure people in India. Bangladesh needs to expand the current safety net programs to improve access.

And finally, global and regional commitments to protect the vulnerable peoples and nations from food security crisis through various goals and initiatives proposed over the years must now be implemented effectively.

Food Security in Pakistan

In Pakistan, the percentage of population living below the poverty line has increased in 2011 from 33 per cent in 2005 to about 40 per cent. Pakistan is facing a number of crises on economic, social and environmental fronts. Recently, high food inflation along with high rates of unemployment has negatively affected food security of millions of people, especially the poor. These crises along with the 2010 floods, recent rains in Sindh and conflicts in various parts of the country have exacerbated food insecurity in Pakistan. As a result, consumption of basic food items such as wheat and rice has decreased significantly.

A study by SDPI, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and World Food Program reveals that 80 out of 131 districts in Pakistan do not have conditions for adequate food security. The report also shows enormous inter- and intra-provincial food security disparity: for example, FATA has the highest percentage of food insecure population (67.7 percent) followed by Baluchistan (61.2 percent) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (56.2 percent). District level analysis shows that Dera Bugti in Balochistan has the highest percentage of food insecure people (82.4 percent), providing evidence of a strong link between food insecurity and militancy.

Food availability: Agricultural sector in Pakistan has been neglected over the last two and half decades resulting in reduced investment in research and development (R&D), decreased agricultural productivity, increased (rural) poverty and rural-urban income disparity.

Until recently, in Pakistan the emphasis has been on the supply side of food with focus on achieving wheat self-sufficiency by providing incentive in terms of subsidies. However, such subsidies rarely benefitted the small farmer and rural households. Overall food security in Pakistan has deteriorated over the last few years as reflected in the rising numbers of the poor and the hungry.

There are many challenges to increasing food production such as, fast growing population, limits of Green Revolution technology, structural transformation in the economy of Pakistan, post-harvest losses, and climate change. But these challenges could be overcome by raising productivity through increased investment in R&D, bringing marginal land into cultivation, land reforms, and strengthening the credit and other institutions to assist the agricultural sector.

Food absorption: Food absorption capacity is very closely linked to provision of health services and infrastructure. Despite this the government of Pakistan continues to under invest in health sector. Public spending on health is only 0.6 per cent of GDP which is lowest in South Asia. District level Food Absorption Index indicates significant disparity within provinces.

National Food Security Policy: The current state of food insecurity in Pakistan demands a comprehensive food security policy for Pakistan with a particular emphasis on poverty reduction. Also government of Pakistan needs to adopt a long-term solution of energy crisis. It was proposed at the seminar that the Pakistani parliament need to enact a food security legislation to make the 'right to food' a fundamental right. The MHHDC report suggests that a national food security policy should have four elements:

- Ensure adequate supply of food by achieving at least four per cent annual agricultural sector growth rate over the next decade. For this, there is need to address issues such as water crisis, evolving less energy intensive cropping patterns, and agricultural diversification to high value crops.
- Evolve an efficient and equitable system of food procurement, distribution and storage to provide food at stable and affordable prices.
- Improve access of the poor to food by adopting a pro-poor growth strategy and increasing non-farm employment.
- Build a transparent and well-managed system of safety nets to provide income support to the poor.

The MHHDC 2010-11 report on food security was also launched in Dhaka on October 22 at the Fourth South Asia Economic Summit. The Finance Minister of Bangladesh Mr. A B. M. Muhith launched the report in the presence of several South Asian political and intellectual leaders (see the picture).