

South Asia Regional Dialogue on Food Sovereignty and Nutrition

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Apologies: Vandana Prasad, Arun Gupta, Sylvia Karpagam, Sayyida Akhter (Narigrantha Prabartana) Samia Afrin (Naripokko)

Introduction and Context:

In our discussions in the PHM thematic circle on Nutrition and Food Sovereignty, we felt that many of the global south and region specific perspectives get missed in the global discourse in the area of food and nutrition. For ex- technical/corporate solutions being forced upon global south countries like food fortification, the discourse around meat consumption specifically relevant in India etc). More recently our friends from Argentina, India and Bangladesh shared how the fertiliser ban in Sri Lanka and the following national crisis is being used by the agro businesses to manipulate and create an adverse narrative around organic and agro ecology movements.

With this rationale we thought of bringing together practitioners and activists from different countries to understand the situation better, prioritise certain issues and strategize together. Most importantly, we look forward to and depend on the inputs and directions of people in this room to take this work forward collectively. Also in a couple of countries where we did not have contacts, we took the liberty to invite friends we knew so they help us make further linkages to activists working on the theme of F&N .

Session 1: Sharing from countries and identifying issues

Afghanistan

Afghanistan's food insecurity problems are different from other countries in the region. Chronic food insecurity in the region for decades because of the conflict, influence of other countries and instable government. 70 percent population is directly dependent on agriculture and 58% land is used for agricultural usage. According to estimates more than 95% of population is food insecure. Reasons being corruption, gender inequity, low literacy, poor infrastructure, poor access to markets etc. The issues in country have nothing to do with corporate food regime or industrial agriculture unlike some other countries in the region.

Since August 2021 after the current defacto government took over, poverty and hunger has exacerbated and one can visibly see it everyday. Only people with jobs in the country are the ones with UN or international aid agencies. Even those with government jobs are paid erratically.

In the last few weeks there have been flash floods which will make the situation worse. Since it is a landlocked country, there is very little trade for food products. International sanctions are in place, emergency aid comes but that is not enough and is channeled through the defacto authority.

The country has enough potential in terms of land, water and other resources. In Afghanistan, it is more of a political crisis leading to an emergency situation and conflict on a daily basis.

India

In relation to our incomes in India, the malnutrition levels are quite high and studies have shown that post covid food insecurity has risen. Not having enough food and poor quality of food are two aspects of this food insecurity. Government focus is on Behaviour Change Communication (BCC) types intervention and technical solutions like **Food Fortification**. In the name of science and expertise, corporate and anti-people solutions are being forced. The Indian government introduced fortification of rice to combat anemia. Instead of good food we give them chemicals. These are anti women policies.

In India, a government appointed nutritional committee is trying to create **new standards** of hemoglobin, undernutrition and so on. They are coming up with national standards even though we know we have only international standards in this regard. This is the next agenda by the scientific community not just in India and other countries that is going to be launched and largely outside the purview of activists.

Loss of agrobiodiversity is very much linked to nutrition. A large part of our calories comes from very few crops. Agro bio diversity is also resilient to climate change. Many communities have now gone back to growing traditional diversity of crops and it needs to be scaled up. How to mainstream agro biodiversity in our policies and conversations. There is a discourse in India that the government provides rice to people and that should be enough.

Push for vegetarianism by Indian state- Specific to Indian context is the push for vegetarian food by the right-wing Hindu government which is a political issue. Also the global debate of climate change is linked to reducing non vegetarian consumption whereas in India consumption of non veg per capita is extremely low.

Food affordability, inflation and income- Recent [SOFI](#) report talks that 65-70 % of the population in the entire South Asia region cannot afford a healthy diet. This links to issues of employment, income security etc.

Inflation has already started affecting India and soon will impact other countries too due to poor production. Poor production this year might have a threat on the food subsidy programmes by the state and that will be made worse by inflation.

Issue of forest, forest right, fisherfolks need to be taken into account when talking of food security.

Increasing push for control on seeds involving Intellectual Property Rights issue. Same with pesticides and antibiotics. Same with fortification. Relation of junk food with NCDs. Global changes and push by international corporate players is adversely affecting our small farmers.

Foregrounding women's labour and knowledge in our conversations- In India as well as South Asia the largest number of workers and especially women workers whose labour and knowledge and labour in the agricultural field is crucial. Who is controlling the resources for food (forest, farmlands, forest, seed and commons)? Shrinking control of the community and the alienation of women are visible patterns. When we talk about going to traditional crops etc, we need to ask whether it increases women's access, participation and decision making.

Bangladesh

Inequity in distribution of food and unaffordability of food- BD is one of the leading vegetable and food producing countries in the world and its share in the global food market is good. Even then 60 percent of the population does not consume WHO recommended diet. Price of the food and vegetables is very high in the country which is a deterrent for a good diet. CLPA study findings showed that government policies do not focus on ensuring access and distribution of food for poor and marginalised populations. Good Production of food is not enough, it should be distributed equitably through state intervention.

Fairda's inputs- Extensive use of pesticides, herbicides and chemical fertilizers are making food less nutritious and harmful for health. Loss of biodiversity is narrowing down the food diversity. Corporate control over processed food particularly Fortification of rice, salt, oil are rampant. Poor women and children are given these food through government and NGO nutrition support programme.

Pakistan

Loss of biodiversity - Pakistan is secure in terms of staple crops of wheat and rice but it has been accompanied by loss of nutrition diversity at household level.

Increasing dependence on the market causing food insecurity-Food that would come from local/household farms has now become dependent on one's access to market which requires income. Frequent shocks to real income of people (when during international fuel crisis) particularly rural farming community and that impacts their food consumption. Golden rice and fortified wheat has become fashionable today instead. Shahid Zia shared about the one acre one farmer policy in Lok Sanjh foundation, a model, where one acre can meet the requirement of the person. Third year of the programme it has been seen that the per capita food availability and income of the house has increased substantially.

Bhutan- Issues of food labeling standards in India (*Dear Chime, the recording did not record this section's audio so I missed some of the discussion by Chime. Pls feel free to add*).

We also could not get the Nepal situation from Meena Poudel. Her internet was erratic.

Summary: The most common issue highlighted by almost all in the region is the Loss in Biodiversity which itself is linked to increased market dependence and state push towards mono cropping. Further determination of food prices by market vagaries, growing inflation and poor income security has made food unaffordable leading to increased food insecurity.

Other issues raised were Mandatory Fortification, foregrounding gender and caste in our discussions, Forced Vegetarianism (India), labeling standards etc.

PLS ADD IF I MISSED ANY

Session 2: Strategizing

How to show solidarity, support each other's campaigns? We are thankful for some very concrete suggestions coming from you. I have tried to list them below along with names of people with whom it can be coordinated, pls add if any are missing.

Suggestions:

1. Sejal suggested to organize a campaign on 15th October which is world food day which is also the women farmers day. Mira and Sulakshana endorsed. @Sejal that sounds like a great idea to bring attention to the women issue too. I will ask @Farida if we can bring that

agenda in our next F&N meeting. I am sure MAKAAAM too will be doing an event and we can coordinate.

2. Webinar on (i) Food Fortification and dietary diversity (ii) Meat eating and push for vegetarianism in India.
3. There is less focus on how government subsidies are leading to unhealthy diets. Suggestion that each country can do a legal and policy analysis to understand the situation in different countries to food insecurity in the country. Would be useful for advocacy. @Syed ji can we have a conversation on how to take this forward and take help of CLPA's expertise in this topic. A country wise comparison will be quite useful. The study you presented was also very interesting and could be shared too.
4. The PHM F&N thematic group is preparing a webinar on the Sri Lanka crisis and how the fertiliser bans there are being used by agro businesses.
5. Preparing a petition based on common issues around food prices, food security and sovereignty.
6. How to put together a broader campaign on hunger and food insecurity globally? PHM region like West and Central Africa and some countries of South America too are facing the same crisis of hunger. Need to strategize concretely.
7. Fairda's suggestion- Webinar on "loss of biodiversity" in the south Asian countries
7. We will also request Zulaikha to guide us on how this group can help in giving more visibility and showing solidarity in the Afghanistan situation.

How can PHM F&N group support?

8. If anyone wants to upload their reports and studies from different countries on PHM F&N website can send it to Deepika. Dipa (India) requested that the hunger watch reports and the reports of the fact-finding visits on food fortification be put on the PHM website. Deepika and the RTF secretariat will coordinate.
9. Creating a common platform to discuss and exchange discussions. Those interested can ask Deepika to add them to the PHM global F&N group.
10. Report the South Asia discussion and discussions back in the Food & Nutrition group along with the 15th Oct World Food Day suggestions.
11. Amplify conversation between Latin America and South Asia as there are several common issues.

Meeting closes