

seminar on

Food Security and Hunger in South Asia

Hughes Hall, Cambridge

27th February 2010

REPORT



Young boy harvesting wheat in Afghanistan

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Report compiled by Holly Edwards, the Humanitarian Centre

1 Seminar objectives and participants

The Humanitarian Centre seminar on *Food Security and Hunger in South Asia* was held at Hughes Hall, Cambridge on 27th February 2010. The seminar was the second in a series of researcher-practitioner dialogues on key policy issues in development, to be held in 2009/10.

The objectives of the seminar were as follows:

- To bring together researchers and practitioners who are working on food security and hunger, and to facilitate a dialogue on the key issues.
- To explore the reasons for persistently high rates of hunger and under-nutrition in South Asia, despite the region's rapid economic growth – the so-called 'South Asian Enigma'.
- To support and promote the exchange of knowledge between researchers and practitioners.
- To give practitioners, academics and research students with an interest in food security in South Asia a space in which to make contacts and network.

'Food and nutrition security is achieved, if adequate food (quantity, quality, safety, socio-cultural acceptability) is available and accessible for and satisfactorily utilized by all individuals at all times to achieve good nutrition for a healthy and happy life.'

The Concept of Food and Nutrition Security (Lioba Weingartner, 2005)

There were four presentations from experts on food security and the drivers of undernutrition in South Asia. During the afternoon there was a panel discussion, and group sessions to further the key issues raised during the day. The 35 participants included academics, research students, NGO workers and independent consultants.

This report summarises the key messages from presentations and discussions.

2 Programme

The introductory presentation by Steve Jones, Chair of the Humanitarian Centre, introduced the notion of the 'South Asian Enigma' and examined some of the main drivers of undernutrition in South Asia.

Key points from presentation were that:

- Almost all countries in South Asia have 'alarming' levels of under-nutrition, according to the Global Hunger Index. Levels of wasting (a measure of acute undernourishment) and stunting (chronic) are high across all regions of South Asia.
- South Asians, in general, are less well nourished than Sub-Saharan Africans and in parts of the sub-continent, hunger rates are similar to those in the poorest parts of Sub-Saharan Africa.
- The long term consequences of child undernutrition are severe – impaired cognitive function, stunted growth and reduced economic productivity. Undernutrition has damaging effects on overall social and economic development.
- Despite rapid economic growth, reductions in child underweight have been limited over the last two decades. Levels of undernutrition are highest in socially excluded groups.
- The first 20 months of life are the most vital for child nutrition – if interventions are made during this stage they will have the greatest impact on weight and growth.
- A study by the International Food Policy Research Institute shows that improving women's education and status has the greatest impact on reductions in child undernutrition.

- Governance of must be improved at community, local, state, national and international levels if programmes to tackle food insecurity and hunger are to succeed.
- Countries that have succeeded in reducing hunger and under-nutrition (e.g., China and Vietnam) did so through an integrated approach involving increasing food availability, improving access to food and tackling direct nutritional and health problems.

The second presentation was given by Dr Mahabub Hossain, Executive Director of BRAC Bangladesh, the world's largest non-governmental development organisation. Dr Hossain's gave a situation analysis of food security in South Asia, with a focus on food production and access.

Key points from Dr Hossain's presentation:

- Due to the success of the 'green revolution', food production in the region has grown at a faster rate than the population – there is more food being produced per person now than in the 1970s. Although progress has varied across countries and over time, all regions have seen improvement and India and Pakistan are now rice-exporting nations.
- Increased rice and wheat production has been at the expense of non-cereal crops, which have seen rising market prices as a result and a negative effect on food security.
- The economic growth in the region has increased income inequality, and many people remain very poor. Although food availability per capita has increased in almost all areas, food access is a problem for those with low incomes. Many diets are also deficient of pulses, oils and livestock products.
- Social safety nets (SSNs) – targeting the bottom 40% of population on the income scale – can help protect vulnerable people from stresses and shocks such as natural disasters and the recent food price crisis. Though, SSNs are often poorly designed and implemented.
- The priority interventions should be around availability (more research and development, improved agricultural planning), access (helping people move out of extreme poverty, more efficient SSNs) and nutrition (maternal, neonatal and child health, educating mothers, school feeding programmes).



Dr Hossain presenting (photo: Steve Jones)

The final presentation of the morning session was given by Professor Nicholas Mascie-Taylor, of the Department of Biological Anthropology, University of Cambridge. Professor Mascie-Taylor discussed in more depth some of the drivers of undernutrition and hunger in South Asia.

Key points from Professor Mascie-Taylor's presentation:



Professor Mascie-Taylor (photo: Steve Jones)

- The usual methods of measuring nutritional status are using anthropometric indicators (to measure stunting, wasting and underweight) but these do not take in to account other aspects of nutritional status such as anaemia and lack of micronutrients.
 - If stunted children receive no intervention by the age of five, the height deficit will remain unchanged into adulthood.
 - Inadequate dietary intake and disease are the two immediate causes of undernutrition, but poverty is the primary underlying cause.
 - Parasitic worms cause damage to the gut, impairing the ability to absorb nutrients and causing a decline in nutritional status. Worms also result in blood loss leading to anaemia. Anaemia has an adverse effect on cognitive abilities, which is partially reversible with treatment.
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- Regular deworming leads to significantly better appetite, weight gain and growth as well as reducing the risk of anaemia in both children and adults.
 - Disease control is hampered by inadequate hygiene practices (such as hand washing), lack of health awareness and knowledge (for example a survey of mothers in rural Bangladesh showed that 40% of respondents believed that worms are good for health, and nearly 50% believed that a deworming tablet provided life-long protection) and lack of potable water, sanitation and health services.
 - Inadequate dietary intake is driven by poverty, inadequate child feeding practices and women's status.
 - Social protection programmes, without any specific interventions around undernutrition, have been shown to significantly improve the nutritional status of mothers and children – if people have more money their diet will improve.
 - Exclusively breastfeeding children up to six months of age significantly reduces the risk of gut damage. Mothers need to be educated about appropriate practices when weaning children.
 - Problems of undernutrition start before birth, with South Asia having the highest rate of low birth weight children in the world. Interventions should not therefore focus only on children under 2 years of age.
 - Undernutrition can only be reduced with a holistic approach – combining social protection approaches with appropriate nutritional and health measures.

The afternoon session started with a plenary discussion, involving all participants, chaired by Dr Mukesh Kapila, Chief Executive of the PHG Foundation. Key messages and questions from the plenary session are included in section 3.

The concluding presentation of the day was from Professor Prakash Shetty, Professor of Public Health Nutrition at the Institute of Human Nutrition, University of Southampton, and Editor in Chief of the European Journal of Clinical Nutrition. Professor Shetty's presentation focused on hunger and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Key points from Professor Shetty's presentation:

- Food and nutrition insecurity are an impediment to achieving the MDGs – persistent hunger and undernutrition are drivers of poverty as well as vice versa. MDG 1 is concerned with hunger and poverty, which are drivers for all the other MDGs.
- Reducing hunger and improving nutritional status leads to increased productivity and greater incomes, which in turn has a positive impact on progress towards the MDGs.
- Progress in hunger reduction matches the progress on the other MDGs. In South Asia, only 4 out of the 18 targets are on track.
- South Asia is performing badly in most of the MDG targets – however in the areas of stunting, wasting and underweight children it is performing the worst.



*Mukesh Kapila, Prakash Shetty, Mahabub Hossain, Nick Mascie-Taylor and Deepta Chopra
(photo: Steve Jones)*

3 Key messages from the seminar

1. High hunger rates in South Asia are due to a complex combination of factors, including food availability and access, disease and inadequate dietary intake. The drivers for this are many, but poverty and gender inequality are the key underlying causes.
2. Despite rapid economic growth and increased food production, hunger rates in South Asia have remained high. South Asia's per capita energy intake is greater than Sub-Saharan Africa – yet stunting, wasting and underweight levels in children under 5 are the highest in the world. This is partly due to the increase in income inequality that comes with growth.
3. Women's status and education are paramount. Women are the primary care givers, so educating them in appropriate feeding habits and hygiene has a big impact. Economic empowerment of women also improves family nutrition.
4. There should be caution about depending too much on behaviour change – it may not be practical for women to exclusively breastfeed for 6 months, for example, and behaviour can revert over time.
5. There is a need for more frequent data on nutrition– in many cases primary care workers do not record undernutrition.
6. There is the need for a strong economic analysis of the costs versus benefits of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) such as high-yielding and drought resistant rice strains. The next big step could be the 'gene revolution' if there is public sector investment in biotechnologies.
7. There are examples of countries where the nutritional status of the population has dramatically improved, for example China. Is it possible to achieve the same results in a democracy?
8. Good governance is at the heart of changing the situation in South Asia. The example of India shows great discrepancies between regions, suggesting that governance is more effective in these regions. There needs to be co-ordination between ministries, as this is a problem which spans several areas.
9. Social safety nets can have a great impact on reducing undernutrition, but these need to be well conceived and targeted.
10. Social exclusion plays a big role. Participatory approaches must find a way to include the poorest of the poor, who tend to be the ones who do not attend community meetings.
11. It is not necessary to create special paradigms, merely to use the best of what we know and continue to innovate. Some big, wide-reaching changes such as providing clean water for all and universal primary education would have a huge impact.

4 Summary Evaluation

The event was very well-received, with several participants commenting that the subject matter and information was valuable for the work that they are doing.

‘The conference was excellent, well managed and diverse in content but also focused and specific to the topic. The presentations were extremely well put together. The dialogue was equally vibrant and educational – a great day’

‘The seminar was timely as the number of governments and donors interested in the topic is growing’

‘The presentations were well executed and thought provoking’

Comments from seminar participants

‘Events like this bring a wide range of actors together and make them realise how many facets there are to this problem; if we appreciate each other’s positions and all contribute, it may help us all get there in the end’.

Professor Prakash Shetty



Participants take part in group discussions in the afternoon session (photo: Steve Jones)

*The Humanitarian Centre would like to thank Hughes Hall for generously hosting this event
Cover photograph courtesy of Charlotte Dufour*