

REGIONAL COOPERATION, THE WAY FORWARD TO ENHANCE FOOD SECURITY IN SOUTH ASIA



H.E. Prof. K.V. Thomas, Minister of State for Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, Gov. of India delivering the Inaugural Address at the South Asia Policy Dialogue on Regional Cooperation for Strengthening National Food Security Strategies held on 13-14 August in New Delhi, as Dr. Nagesh Kumar, Director, ESCAP-SSWA; H.E. Dr. Rabindra Kumar Shakya, Vice-Chairman, National Planning Commission, Gov. of Nepal; and Ms. Lise Grande, Resident Coordinator, United Nations India look on.

New Delhi, 16 August 2013 – A sense of urgency to ensure food security for all was palpable at the South Asia Policy Dialogue on Food Security which concluded in New Delhi on 14 August, precisely when discussions about enshrining the fundamental right to food in the Constitution of India were going full swing in the Parliament, with the eminent passage of the groundbreaking National Food Security Ordinance. Some 90 food security experts and policy makers from seven countries in South Asia had come together for a two-day meeting organized by ESCAP South and South-West Asia Office.

The participants of the South Asia Policy Dialogue on Regional Cooperation for Strengthening National Food Security Strategies, held on 13 and 14 August at the Taj Mahal Hotel, New Delhi, voiced serious concern over the alarming level of hunger and food insecurity in the subregion, which affects over 300 million persons, and

highlighted the potential of regional cooperation to provide solutions to this multidimensional issue.

“A case is clearly emerging that the situation with regards to food insecurity in South Asia is totally unacceptable and that the status quo needs to be changed”, stated Dr. Saman Kelegama, Executive Director, Institute of Policy Studies, Sri Lanka, addressing a session of the Policy Dialogue, which focused on pathways to increased regional cooperation. “There is ample room for regional cooperation to make a difference, including in the areas of food trade, storage and post harvest losses, connectivity to allow rapid movements of food, for example in emergency situations”, he said, urging countries in South Asia to adopt a common stance at the agriculture negotiations of the WTO.

Dr. P.K. Joshi, Director, South Asia, International Food Policy Research Institute, New Delhi, chaired the last session of the Dialogue and summarized a multipronged agenda for the way forward: “It is evident that past policies will not function in the future. We need climate-smart agriculture, enhanced water crisis management and new types of seeds and agriculture insurance... Priority areas for regional cooperation on food security include enhanced connectivity among countries, non-tariff barriers and WTO agriculture discussions for which the subregion should speak with a unified voice”.

Issues specific to South Asia, lessons learnt and good practices worth emulating were underscored and shared over the course of the two-day event. Although the subregion is dotted with rich natural resources and abundant manpower, hunger and food insecurity have been prevalent across South Asia -- which is home to one in three of the food insecure persons in the world. The following unique features were underlined by participants to illustrate the many deficits and gaps South Asia is confronted with: the coexistence of a range of production systems, mixed farming system, smallholding -- compounded by issues such as poverty, inequality, including gender inequality and the low status of women.

“A peculiarity of the subregion is that some 80 to 90 per cent of the agricultural production in South Asia originates from smallholders, while many are also landless,

including many women”, stressed Dr. Purvi Mehta-Bhatt, Regional Representative South Asia, International Livestock Research Institute, New Delhi. She stressed that the subregion also accounted for leading milk producing countries, such as India and Pakistan, and was home to a livestock population of over 600 million animals – itself the source of livelihood for some 150 million persons. Dr. Mehta-Bhatt emphasized the need to bring issues related to livestock on the policy agenda and urged intergovernmental agencies such as ESCAP to assist with promoting regional cooperation including for the management of livestock and surveillance and control of transboundary diseases.

Earlier in the day, Dr. N.C. Saxena, Member National Advisory Council, Government of India described the critical situation with regards food insecurity in India, especially chronic child malnutrition, and the overall low consumption levels by poor segments of the population as causes of major concern.

Discussing the four components of food security, as availability, access, nutrition and stability, Dr. S. Mahendra Dev., Director (Vice Chancellor), Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, Mumbai, India, raised, among other matters of concern, the situation and low status of women in South Asia, and their low decision making power. “The problem of malnutrition is particularly acute among women and children, with 45 % of them being underweight and 38% stunted in India. This is actually valid for South Asia in general as the levels of malnutrition in the subregion are almost double those of sub-Saharan Africa”, he stated. Among other priority actions, Dr. Dev called for greater women’s empowerment and reforms of property rights, as well as support for institutional innovations such as women’s cooperatives and women producers’ groups.

New challenges brought about by climate change and evolving realities such as increased urban population, scarcity of land and water, and high incidence of natural disasters in South Asia, permeated the discussions on the way forward and sustainable strategies. Greater investment, including in research and development, policies favouring productivity enhancement using lesser land and water, increased intra-regional food trade, greater coordination of prices, early warning systems, use of alternate energy for agriculture and environmentally-friendly and sustainable agriculture practices, as well as the promotion of organic farming, were among the strategic policy options discussed.

“South Asia is rich in resources but food insecurity remains acute”, noted Dr. Mohammad Azeem Khan, Director General, National Agricultural Research Council, Pakistan, highlighting future challenges of population pressure, water scarcity and climate change. “Low income levels and extreme weather events lead to serious disruptions in food security efforts”, he said, calling for greater investment in innovation and R&D, citing the prospect of creating massive number of employment in the agricultural sector and deliver pro poor policies.

“In the context of the post-MDG era, the right to food is poised to gain even more prominence... Regional cooperation is crucial including to ensure fair global trading regimes”, stated Prof. Mustafizur Rahman, Executive Director, Centre for Policy Dialogue, Bangladesh.

Bringing the Policy Dialogue to a close, Dr. Nagesh Kumar, Chief Economist, ESCAP and Director, ESCAP-SSWA underscored the vital importance of food security. “Considering that food security touches the lives of millions in the subregion, political will can only follow. I wish to sincerely thank all distinguished participants for the rich array of strategies and recommendations brought forward over the past two days for enhancing regional cooperation on food security in South Asia. This will also provide a strong basis for setting up a knowledge sharing platform on this very topic. We will keep the discussions alive and growing”.



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