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Nutrition Security in Sri Lanka

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1. Main text

The world faces an escalating challenge to meet accelerating demand driven by both increasing population and per-capita income growth for sustainable, nutritious food in the face of multiple constraints – climate change, human population pressure, local and global resource scarcity, and ecosystem preservation. About one billion people in the world are hungry and lack of sufficient nutrients and 1.5 billion are overweight and obese¹. In addition, about two billion people already suffer from a number of micronutrient deficiencies and these may worsen due to increasing atmospheric CO₂, which not only drives climate change but also lowers crop concentrations of zinc and iron². Therefore, of more than 7 billion people worldwide, over half are not achieving a healthy diet and hence are food insecure: they consume either too little or too much energy with or without too few nutrients.

The idea of “security” is usually taken to mean the state of being free from danger or threat. The concept is developed in relation to nutrition to mean free from threat of insufficiency of any essential nutrients. The key issues for those who do not get enough energy/nutrient is generally the lack of access to appropriate food often due to poverty, but also for cultural and/or infrastructural reasons, and poor intake and utilization that may result from situations of poor sanitation and hygiene. Overconsumption of food can lead to obesity, which may occur in the presence of nutrient deficiencies due to excessive intake of low-cost, high-energy food that is low in nutrient density. As such, food and nutrition insecurity is already a serious concern today, and there is a real risk of increasing it as population and wealth continue to rise. An assessment of the role played by food insecurity is likely to yield useful information on planning broad-based nutritional interventions. Household food security is assessed on three dimensions: a) household food utilization (meal frequency, food consumption patterns and *dietary* diversity) b) food access and c) food availability.

Food security is a concept that has evolved over time. According to a currently accepted definition of FAO the ‘Food Security’ is achieved when it is ensured that “all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”. Food is here defined as any substance that people eat and drink to maintain life and growth. As a result, safe and clean water is an essential part of food commodities. This definition already includes aspects of nutrition but yet not sufficient. Food security at household level is a key factor that influences nutritional outcomes.

Even though the FAO definition includes the word “nutritious”, food security is generally recognized to have multiple dimensions, but for lack of data is often measured in terms of access to sufficient food energy. This is certainly the case with approximately 1 billion hungry people who do not have access to sufficient energy intake. However, nutrient adequacy, embodied in the concept of safe and nutritious food, must also be taken into account. UNICEF was among the first to capture the nutrient component of food security³. This concept is adapted to illustrate the role of food as a part of nutrition security, including external factors that influence health and nutrient intake, which are also contributing factors in nutrition security.

The necessity to include also nutrition into food security evolved over time. The nutrition focus adds the aspects of caring practices and health services & healthy environments to this definition and concept. This aims at what is more precisely called ‘Nutrition Security’, which can be defined as adequate nutritional status in terms of protein, energy, vitamins, and minerals for all household members at all times and thus, in principle, is more than food security.

Food security and nutrition security are two quite different terms, but often used interchangeably in the literature. The “food security” element is derived from the widely-used definition of food security stemming from the 1996 FAO World Food Summit, where it is defined as the state or condition wherein:

All people, at all times, have physical, economic and social access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life^{4,1}.

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