



Food Crisis in Nepal

Gokarna Prasad Gyanwali, PhD¹, Prajwal Man Pradhan²

¹Lecturer at Department of Anthropology, Patan Multiple Campus Tribhuvan University, Nepal

Email: gyanwaligp@gmail.com

²Lecturer at Central Department of Rural Development (Co-Author)

Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal

Email: prajwal.pradhan@cdrd.tu.edu.np

Abstract

The food crisis is a global and local issue since the expansion of COVID-19 and after that period. Most developing countries including Nepal has been facing food deficit before and after the pandemic because of the irregular supply-demand chain of food and increasing food dependency on foreign countries. According to WFP (2022), 345 million people in 85 countries have been facing food crises in the world in 2022 and most of them are from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. According to Pandey & Fusaro (2020), approximately 56 percent of women overall and 76 percent of Dalit women reported having food insecurity. Similarly, most of the districts of Karnali and some of the districts of Madhesh Pradesh and SudurPachhim Pradesh has been facing food deficit due to the low productivity and the bad policies of the government.

Key words: Food crisis, deficit, malnutrition, food security, Karnali, Sudurpaschim

Introduction

The food crisis is a major challenge in the contemporary world. Nearly 690 million people, or 8.9 percent of the world's population, are undernourished (Zero Hunger, 2020). Another metric that closely resembles hunger is the number of individuals who experience acute food insecurity, which also exhibits an upward trend. Nearly 750 million people, or almost one in ten people around the globe, encountered significant food insecurity in 2019 (FAO, 2020). Undernutrition, overweight, and obesity are all possible scenarios of food insecurity, which can also degrade diet quality and raise the risk of various forms of malnutrition. And over 3 billion people worldwide cannot afford the exorbitant expense of healthy food.

The Global Report on Food Crisis (GRFC) (2021) mentioned that in 2020, at least 155 million people in 55 nations or territories that requested aid will be seriously vulnerable to food insecurity and in need of immediate assistance. This represents an increase of about 20 million people since 2019, about 135 million people in 55 countries or territories were at risk. This article will explore the concept of the crisis of food, the food crisis in the world, and the impacts of COVID-19 on food security in the context of Nepal.

Objective and Methods

The general objective of this article is to study the context and situation of food insufficiency and crisis in Nepal. The specific objective is to familiarize the notion of the food crisis, the global and local

situation of food, and the present situation of the food crisis during the period of COVID-19 in Nepal. Regarding the above-mentioned objective, the descriptive method is to be applied to this article. The data used in the study is qualitative which are collected from secondary sources like the central bureau of statistics, Nepal law commission, La ViaCampesina, reports, dissertation, and other relevant research documents.

Theories of Food Security

The concept of the crisis of food means insufficiency or insecurity of feeding materials in the world that can be understood through the concept of food security. Food security is that concept when all people have physical and economic access to sufficient, secure, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (World Food Summit 1996). According to FAO (2008), the food security concept has four dimensions: availability, accessibility, utilization, and stability. Food availability refers to the physical accessibility of acceptable food in a specific area and it should be culturally preferable. Similarly, accessibility of food states the physical and economic access to food and it must be safe, absorbable, and fulfill the health status of the people. The concept of food utilization refers to the national, regional, district, and household levels of the use and misuse of food. It focuses on household, inter and intra-household distribution of food and the steadiness of food supply and access over time, weather change, price variation, and other limited shocks or periodic stresses (FAO, 2008). It is also related to the right to food and food sovereignty concept advocated by FAO and La ViaCampesina respectively.

There are a variety of theories that have been incorporated into and evolved from knowledge to understand food insecurity. According to Scanlan (2003) and Nord (2014), there are seven principal models and they are- the new Malthusian theory that analyzes food insecurity from the standpoint of food production. The techno-ecology theory considers food insecurity as a root cause of the inadequacy, underutilization, or non-use of technology; the modernization theory perceives food uncertainty as being the effect of the absence of the will of countries to modernize their infrastructure, food production system, institutions, savings, and revamp/restyle their governments; the dependency and world system theory view food insecurity as a product of world trade imbalance, world capitalism, and food aid politicization and the degree to which development goals are followed; the urbanization theory recommends that the major cause of food insecurity is the unequal distribution of development between urban and rural areas. Similarly, social stratification theory postulates that food insecurity is a result of social stratum and subsequent imbalances, while militarization theory uses food insecurity as a weapon of war and as a source of food aid in negotiations. Hence, food security or the crisis of food has various theories developed by an intellectual circle as well as international organizations.

Global Food Shortage and Food Crisis in South Asia

COVID-19 has multiple effects in the world. According to UN World Food Program, 957 million people in 93 countries are underfed. Global Humanitarian Outlook predicts 239 million people need lifesaving humanitarian response and protection in 2021 (Laganda, 2021). The life-threatening weather events in 2021 prompted thorns in the prices of agricultural products, which endured preeminent into 2022, as the infrequent circumstances that scratched harvests resulted in continuing scarcities. Global food shortage will continue in 2022 because of the COVID-19 impacts and low production of food in the world. It is also common in South Asian countries. Due to the impacts of the pandemic, the GDP growth of this region was revised descending by 14 percent, total unemployment was predictable to upsurge by

28 percent and youth unemployment rises to 72 percent. There are also worrying projections about poverty and food insecurity, with extreme poverty projected to rise by up to 50 percent, corresponding to an additional 72 million people living in extreme poverty (IFPRI, 2021).

South Asia has higher deteriorating stages than any other region in the world with 14.3 percent of 6–59-month-old children wasting (UNICEF, WHO & WB, 2020). About 3.1 million Afghan children, almost half of them under the age of five, suffer from deteriorating. Of these, 895,000 are severely malnourished. One in four pregnant and lactating women, or an estimated 720,000, are malnourished (HNO 2021). Growing food insecurity and poor or disrupted access to health and nutrition services are the main causes of poor nutrition among children in rural and urban areas, including Kabul. An estimated 14,840 children were without treatment during the pandemic as a result of reduced admissions to health centers for the treatment of severe wasting. Results from the latest nutrition survey across Afghanistan showed that 27 of her 34 provinces were above the emergency exhaustion threshold (HNO 2021). One in two children in Afghanistan is not fully vaccinated. Half of the health facilities that provide immunization services report that the conflict and COVID-19 have condensed access to immunizations by more than 30 percent. This caused a rubeola epidemic that affected more than 10,500 children (UNICEF, 2021). Among the South Asian countries, Afghanistan and Pakistan have more severe conditions than the others.

Food Crisis in Nepal

Food security is a key problem for underdeveloped countries like Nepal. Nepal is in the 73rd rank out of 117 food-importing nations in the world in terms of food security. Approximately forty-five of Nepal's seventy-seven districts fail to supply sufficient meals to meet the population's primary needs (Shrestha, 2022). In 2017, nearly 2 million people of Nepal out of a population of 28 million were malnourished. People living in the country's rural, hilly and mountainous areas frequently scuffle to access food, and when food is available, it is often not affordable (Sleet, 2020). In 2019, the country graded 73rd out of 117 qualifying countries on the Global Hunger Index (GHI), a multidimensional approach to the measurement of hunger that looks at the adequacy of national food supply, child undernutrition, and child mortality (NPC, 2019). According to the Ministry of Health (2017), the pervasiveness of severe food insecurity is 12 percent in rural areas and 9 percent in urban areas. Observing at the prevalence of food insecurity in mountainous, hilly, and terai regions, mountainous and hilly regions appear to be additional food insecure than terai regions, with 14 percent of mountainous regions and 9 percent of Terai regions.

According to Pandey and Fusao (2020), about 56 percent of entire women and 76 percent of Dalit women were in food insecurity conditions. Similarly, ethnic, marginal, and endangered ethnic communities are strongly influenced by the food insecurity situation. Among them, Dalit, indigenous and marginalized females were maximumly probable to be food insecure, even after accounting for factors such as education and wealth. They were 82 percent Muslims, percent Brahmin/Chhetri, percent Terai Indigenous, and percent Hill Indigenous people are more vulnerable to food insecurity. The highest prevalence of food insecurity as measured by undernourishment is in Karnali, accounting for 4.7 percent of households, followed by Madesh Pradesh (3.8%), Gandaki (2.7%), and Sudurpachhim (2.5%). In fact, more households are food insecure during the pandemic than they were five years ago. In December 2020, 17 percent of households consumed insufficient food, compared with 15 percent in December 2016 (Nepali Times, 2021). After that period, due to the low production rate of food, flood, and other natural calamities, the conditions of food insecurity are not decreasing but going to increase by which the dependency rate of the country is at the highest point.

Food Crisis in the Regional Level. The maximum pervasiveness of food uncertainty, as calculated by poor nourishment, was found in Karnali followed by Madhesh Pradesh due to geographical structure and unequal distribution of land respectively. Food insecurity during the period of COVID-19 is deeper than in previous years. Most of the districts of Karnali and SudurPachhim and some of the parts of Madhesh Pradesh are in the food-deficit regions of Nepal for centuries. Due to the geographical detachment, lack of development infrastructure, unequal distribution of resources, and low productivity of agricultural land, the food crisis has been deep in Karnali and the SudurPachhim region.

The government's efforts to resolve the Karnali and the SudurPachhim region's food insecurity issues have been unsuccessful to consider the importance of all these factors, and indeed all that has happened in both agriculture and the livelihood system. It does not take seriously the complex changes in broader political, economic, cultural, and social ties between this region and other regions including Tibet, the rest of Nepal, and the border area of India. State involvement is mostly imperfect in providing food aid in severe crisis circumstances. The failure to strategically consider the region's chronic food insecurity, investigate its root causes, and address them systematically, of course, persists (Pathak, et al., 2009).

The Nepal Population and Health Survey (2016) showed that around 4.6 million (15 percent) people and more than 30 districts are food insecure. According to WFP (2021), in the period 2021, the Karnali and Sudurpaschim provinces were the most food-deficit provinces of the country in comparison to the other provinces, and have the highest proportion of food-insecure households, with 24.1 and 21.2 percent respectively. Most of the households of these provinces have been consuming insufficient diet during the pandemic and earthquake period also. Similarly, insufficient food consumption was comparatively high in Madhesh Province which has about 16.8 percent. A report published by WFP (2021) mentioned that about 14.1 percent of households had insufficient food consumption and nearly 1 percent of households had poor nutritional diversity. By comparing the data from April and December 2020 and June 2021, it is found that 23.2, 16.8, and 15.4 percent of households had insufficient diets, respectively. Nepal has a food crisis not only the impacts of COVID-19 but also due to low production and availability of foods. Most of the productive land has barren due to the lack of human power, irrigation facilities, lack of seeds, and fertilizer. Young people of Nepal do not like to involve in the agriculture and farming sector and most of them are either in European countries, America, and Australia or in Arabian or Gulf countries.

Production- Consumption Imbalance. The data from the Ministry of Agriculture Development, 2018 shows that Nepal is independent and self-sufficient in tea, coffee, and poultry eggs. However, the self-sufficiency rate (SSR) of other products like cereals (97.4%), vegetables (65.9%), potatoes (88.8%), milk (79%), sugar (62.6%), and meat (61%) are still high and seems more self-sufficient. There is plenty of room for self-sufficiency in most cereals, fruits, and vegetables but the policies, budget, and activities of the government are not in these directions. In addition, the import dependency (IDR) of certain commodities such as fruit (88.1%), oil (83.5%), fish (82.8%), and legumes (73.4%) is very high and increasing year by year. Achieving self-sufficiency in these commodities is extremely difficult due to the need for inadequate area/herd sizes, low productivity, and longer gestation periods (Pokhrel, 2020). Similarly, according to the Statistical Information on Nepalese Agriculture & the Ministry of Agriculture Development (2017), the production and consumption pattern of food for the existing population of Nepal is unbalanced conditions. The production and consumption gap in Rice is (-873,600) tons, Maize is

(83,830) tons, Wheat is (9713, 72) tons, Millet is (-27,045) tons, Barley is (-292) tons and Buckwheat is (747) tons. The data shows that rice, millet, and barley are in deficit, and maize, wheat, and buckwheat are insufficient situations.

There is a large gap in the production and consumption of rice, millet, and barley which has been creating dependency on the world markets. Data show that in the central and far western regions of Nepal, 37percent of people live under the poverty line compared to the national average of 25percent, and harvests of major crops are normally 25percent lower than the national average. Similarly, production and consumption are also low and contain little animal consumption. Meat and eggs are among the lowest in the world. Chronic maternal and child malnutrition is a serious problem, with about half of the country's children suffering from malnutrition and stunting. The frequency of hunger is the highest, food availability and access are largely dependent on local production, lowest productivity is barely enough to meet the needs (AFSP, 2021) of these regions.

The current food crisis has further complicated food security in the wake of climate change. There is neither enough food storage nor buying opportunities for food during the pandemic. According to a survey conducted by the World Food Program amid the shutdown, employment and income in Nepal have declined by 40percent and food insecurity has increased by 8percent. From this information, we can say that Nepal is in a vulnerable situation due to the food crisis. It is further deepening due to the impacts of pandemics, lockdowns, and food dependency on the countries of the world. The food dependency of Nepal is increasing due to the low production of agricultural products inside the country. Hence, the government should initiate to launch programs to reduce the food crisis in the country. Food costs were high and unstable before the Ukraine conflict, and they are now far higher. The FAO estimates that food prices were 20percent higher at the start of 2022 than they were the previous year and that they have since climbed by 40percent. Before the invasion, Russia and Ukraine jointly were responsible for 27percent of the world's wheat exports and 53percent of the sunflower and seed exports, placing Ukraine as the fourth-largest exporter of corn, wheat, and sunflower oil (Shrestha, 2022). Now it is still in shortage due to the dependency on these countries or the black market in the name of war. The leading consumer organizations of the world say prices for some elementary food items have climbed by at least 20percent in the country. Prices rising of the commodity, and incomes are in stagnant conditions, and many people of Nepal find themselves in a precarious situation (BBC, 2022). Still, there is not sufficient food production to tackle the food crisis in the country and it will upsurge the more food dependency on the neighboring countries which is a big challenge to achieve food sovereignty as mentioned in the constitution of Nepal.

Conclusion

A large number of populations have been food insecure in Nepal due to the geographical structure, low production of food, unequal distribution of land, poverty, and food dependency on the neighboring countries. According to the Nepal Demographic and Health Survey (2016), an aggregate of 4.6 million people is still food-insecure, with 20 percent of homes mildly food-insecure, 22 percent relatively food-insecure, and 10 percent oppressively food-insecure. Overall, homes in pastoral areas where food prices tend to be advanced — are more likely to be food-insecure than people living in civic areas (Subedi, 2020). But the 15th Five-Year Plan states that 21 percent of the people in Nepal still do not have access to sufficient food. Plan further mentioned that only 48.2 percent of households are basically food safe. It further mentioned that, at the end of this plan, the country will need around 5 million 867 thousand tons of processed food to meet the food needs of its population (Khabarhub.com). But up to the

end of this year 2022, the government has no detailed plans to solve the food insecurity in the country. So, to meet the goal of SDG at the end of 2030, the government should prepare some plans and activities to solve the food crisis problems of the country including Karnali, Sudurpachhim, and Madesh Pradesh.

References

- AFSP (2021). *Nepal agriculture and food security project*. <https://www.gafspfund.org/projects/nepal-agriculture-and-food-security-project-afsp>.
- BBC (2022). How the rising cost of living crisis is impacting Nepal. <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-61040604>
- FSIN & Global Network against Food Crises (2021). *Global report on food crises 2021*. Rome
- IFPRI (2021). *Transforming food systems after COVID-19*. <https://gfpr.ifpri.info/2021/04/10/regional-developments-south-asia-2/>
- Khabarhub (2022, August). 7.8 percent population at risk of severe food crisis in Nepal despite sufficient reserve. <https://english.khabarhub.com/2022/17/268230/>
- Laganda, G. (2021). 2021 is going to be a bad year for world hunger. <https://www.un.org/en/food-systems-summit/news/2021-going-be-bad-year-world-hunger>
- Ministry of Health [MoH]. (2017). *Nepal Demographic and Health Survey 2016*. Government of Nepal.
- NPC and WFP (2019). *The food security atlas of Nepal*.
- National Planning Commission [NPC] and World Food Program [WFP]. (2019). *The food security atlas of Nepal*.
- Nepali Times, (2021). *A quarter of Nepalis still hungry during the pandemic*. <https://www.nepalitimes.com/latest/quarter-of-nepalis-still-hungry-during-pandemic/>
- Pandey, S. & Fusao, V. (2020). Food insecurity among women of reproductive age in Nepal: prevalence and correlates. <https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com>.
- Pathak, M., Banskota, T.R., Panthi, K. P. & Sonar, S. (2009). *Socio-spatial dimension of exclusion and inclusion: A research of Karnali region*, Social Inclusion Research Fund/SNV Nepal
- Pokhrel, S.(2020). Food availability and consumption about developing strategies for sustained production and supply in Nepal. *Journal of Agriculture and Forestry University*, 4, 13-28.
- Subedi, S.R. (2020). *Food insecurity increased to 23 percent; Karnali most vulnerable*. <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/food-insecurity-increased-to-23-percent-karnali-most-vulnerable/>
- Shrestha, H.P.(2022). *Ukraine War and Risk of Food Insecurity in Nepal*. <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/ukraine-war-and-risk-of-food-insecurity-in-nepal/>
- Wester, P., Mishra, A., Mukherji, A. & Shrestha, B. (Eds.) (2019). *The Hindu Kush Himalaya Assessment—Mountains, Climate Change, Sustainability and People*. Springer Nature Switzerland AG, Cham.
- WFP (2020). *The impact of covid-19 on households in Nepal, Second round of mVAM Household Livelihoods, Food Security and Vulnerability Survey*. Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development
- FAO (2020). Food insecurity. <http://www.fao.org/3/ca9692en/online/ca9692en.html#chapter->
- Scanlan, S. J. (2003). Food security and comparative sociology: Research, theories, and concepts, *International Journal of Sociology*, 33(3), 88-111 DOI:10.1080/15579336.2003.11770272.
- Sleet, P. (2020). Nepal Faces an Unenviable Situation as COVID-19 Precautions Deal a Blow to Food Security. <https://www.futuredirections.org.au/publication/nepal-faces-an-unenviable-situation-as-covid-19-precautions-deal-a-blow-to-food-security/>
- Nord, M. (2014). *Introduction to item response theory applied to food security measurement: Basic concepts, parameters, and statistics*. Technical Paper, FAO, Rome. <http://www.fao.org/economic/ess/ess-fs/voices/en>