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BUSINESS

Food Fight: Sri Lanka's Battle for Food Security

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Sri Lanka's Deteriorating Food Security

95%
food inflation in
September 2022

4th highest
food price inflation
in the world

Over 1/3rd
of the population
is food insecure

Food waste is around
3,963 tonnes
per day

Sources: Central Bank of Sri Lanka, World Bank, World Food Programme, (2022) & Food and Agriculture Organization (2021).



By Lakshila Wanigasinghe



World Food Day is observed on 16 October to promote awareness and action to ensure regular access to nutritious food for all. This blog examines Sri Lanka's struggle to safeguard food and security amidst the ongoing economic crisis and outlines

steps to tackle the challenge.

Sri Lanka's economic crisis continues to affect the lives and livelihoods of its people, with the burden being highest on the poor and vulnerable. The situation has progressed from dire to worse, with debt problems spiralling down to impact every aspect of the economy and

Sri Lanka's Food Crisis

Global disruptions including COVID-19, the climate crisis and Russia's invasion of Ukraine earlier this year, have impacted food supplies worldwide. However, Sri Lanka's food insecurity is largely a result of the prevailing economic crisis coupled with short-sighted policies enforced by local policymakers. The overnight ban on chemical fertiliser imports has been costly and generated a lower harvest. Although the ban has since been reversed, it continues to have ripple effects on the food system.



The drastic drop in domestic yield has driven policymakers to spend more money importing necessary commodities previously produced locally, including staples like rice. This move has been detrimental at a time when foreign reserves are lacking. Additionally, import controls imposed by the government on certain food items have led to shortages, making these supply sources scarce. These supply shortages have led to increases in the prices of essential foods. With inflation reaching 95% in September, Sri Lanka ranks among the top five countries with the highest food price inflation.

As food becomes scarce and prices continue to rise, more people – the poor in particular – cannot afford proper meals. Adding to the problem are inflationary pressures, the need for higher wages to keep up with inflation and income losses induced by the economic crisis. These factors leave households in a predicament to reduce expenses, including cutting down on non-essential consumption expenditure. A World Food Programme (WFP) survey reveals that 79% of households are adopting food-based coping strategies to deal with the crisis.

This affects both the quality and quantity of food consumed. Families are likely to resort to cheaper and unhealthy alternatives (78% of families) due to the inability to afford high quality, nutritious food. They are also likely to reduce portion sizes (49%) or skip meals entirely (39%), resulting in individuals not meeting their required daily calorie intake. For children, eating less directly impacts growth and contributes to increasing the already high rates of child malnutrition in the country. For adults – considering the rapidly ageing population in Sri Lanka – undernourishment implies severe strains on the healthcare system in the future.

Government Action to Combat

Food Insecurity

The interim Budget proposed to allocate LKR 46,600 million for crisis-related initiatives including providing LKR 10,000 per food-insecure family and an additional monthly allowance of LKR 2,500 for pregnant mothers for four months respectively. A further LKR 400 million is allocated for the Department of Agriculture to provide farmers with seeds/planting materials urgently and LKR 40 billion for fertiliser for paddy cultivation for the 2022/2023 'Maha' season. Additionally, the government recently initiated a National Food Security Programme. The interim Budget also proposed establishing youth agriculture companies, writing off farmers' outstanding loans, etc. While the success of these initiatives is yet to be realised, it will depend entirely on the effectiveness of implementation. However, the pressure for success is high and critical for combating food insecurity.

Overcoming Hunger and Achieving

Food Security

While long-term strategies are needed to counter the underlying causes of food insecurity, ensure sustainable domestic production, swift action must be taken to tackle the challenge of ensuring people do not go hungry at present. Supporting immediate food needs amid the prevailing economic crisis requires a twofold effort: protecting the (1) poor and (2) food insecure community. In this regard, targeted measures to support the poor and near-poor through policy interventions and strengthened social safety nets are vital. The government has allocated funds in this regard; however, successful implementation depends on accurately identifying groups at risk of starvation and providing them with immediate food assistance through subsidised products or cash transfers.

Attention should also be directed towards middle-income earners, who often get left out of aid processes but may be in dire need of support given Sri Lanka's current economic situation. Measures should also be taken to guarantee food availability across all parts of the country, thus ensuring equitable access. Protecting farmers' livelihoods require adequate fertilizer availability at reasonable prices. More efficient use of fertiliser and high-quality seed varieties can play a role in ensuring limited supplies last longer. This will secure a harvest that can support domestic demand next season. The government can also repurpose idle land for food production and encourage small-scale farming.

Given the debt crisis, although import restrictions on certain foods are needed, they are counterproductive. As evident from the global food crisis in 2008, trade restrictions can drive up food prices rather than subsidising them. Moreover, stricter regulations should be in place to ensure consumers are not overcharged for high-demand items, as was evident for milk and fuel earlier this year. Minimising the high levels of food wastage (approximately 100,000 tonnes per day) also plays a crucial role in satisfying immediate food needs. Not stocking up on food, purchasing homegrown products, and consuming leftovers at a later stage/restaurants donating leftovers to the poor are ways households and businesses can contribute to combating food insecurity.

A food crisis during an economic crisis is a catastrophic scenario. Given that over one-third of the population is presently food insecure, it is imperative that Sri Lanka promptly take corrective action. While several measures have been introduced in this regard, they need to be subject to timely revaluations to gauge effectiveness. Given the prevailing resource constraints, it is natural for government support to target the poor and vulnerable so far. However, working towards acquiring international assistance to support immediate food

needs, especially targeting those just above the poverty line and groups traditionally from aid programmes, may also be required. These actions must be coupled with medium- and long-term initiatives that ensure sustainable food production in the future. Moreover, policymakers must be willing to be flexible and change their course of action if needed due to the volatility of the current situation. The consequences of not doing so will leave lasting impacts on the lives and livelihoods of the people.

Link to original blog:

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