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Eradicating Hunger –Treating Symptoms, Reducing Causes



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Hunger. What it means and how it is experienced differs from country to country. World Hunger Day falls on 28 May. If we put ending hunger in perspective with Goal 2 of our Sustainable Development Goals – Zero Hunger – we need to “end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture”. Now that is a tall order, which will involve: ending undernourishment, reducing inequities and revitalising existing food production systems. So, unless we look at system-wide solutions that pay particular attention to contextual differences of food production and distribution, as well as social inequalities, we merely treat the symptom and not the cause.

In Southeast Asia, people experience hunger in its many forms, ranging from the complete lack of food to ‘hidden hunger’ – where food is available but lacks critical nutrients. The eradication of hunger has mixed results with Thailand being listed as having one of the lowest levels of hunger in Asia according to the Global Hunger Index of 2016. The Index attributes this to sev-

eral policies from the 2000s onwards aimed at eradicating hunger, especially in its rural northern regions. In contrast, Timor-Leste has managed to reduce its numbers of hungry but has the highest rates of malnutrition and child stunting in Asia according to UNICEF reports in 2017. Between these two extremes lies a combination of either food or nutritional insecurity, or both to varying degrees, in other Southeast Asian states.

It is important to understand that hunger is an indicator of not only poverty but also of inequities such as child marriage, climate change, lack of women’s empowerment, lack of access to clean water and sanitation facilities, and the lack of education and literacy. While social safety nets are essential in providing both the economic and physical access to food, more needs to be done especially in terms of reducing gender disparities, improving existing infrastructure and increasing female education rates. The prevalence of undernourishment (PoU), an indicator of hunger, can be reduced through access to food. However, indicators such

as the prevalence of underweight children under five (or Cu5) and child stunting rates indicate deeper systemic problems like low female literacy rates, insufficient infra-structural investment and even increasing rural-urban migration patterns. All these can affect access, availability, utilisation and stability of food – the four pillars of food security according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation.

Hunger reduction and eradication requires a system-wide approach. So, while countries like Indonesia, the Philippines and Laos, among others, plan on revitalising rural economies and investing in climate smart agriculture, they should not fail to include women in these developments. There should be greater focus on gender equality. After all, female food producers are responsible for up to 90 per cent of food grown for consumption in homes and they will be the actors that need to be effectively involved in hunger reduction.

And while Timor-Leste, with the help of the World Food Programme, works towards women's health and literacy in efforts to reduce child malnutrition, there should be an equal focus by the state on developing infrastructure including the installation of proper sewerage works and the provision of a clean water supply to ensure healthy bodies that help in the proper utilisation of food, preventing malnourishment.

The private sector is an equally important player in food security. Governments, civil society, and universities should work closely with the private sector to ensure the right to safe and nutritious food without too much focus on the market and profits. And given the prevalence of natural disasters in Southeast Asia, the need to reduce disaster-induced hunger should see greater investments in disaster risk reduction and environmental and resource management.

Hunger in Southeast Asia is a complex problem that needs to be addressed at many levels. At the same time, there is no single regional solution that can reduce numbers of hungry given the different levels of development and social contexts in countries. What is important to understand is that any approach to dealing with hunger requires a relook at existing social, political and economic systems. The urgency of this cannot be overstated as climate change is poised to shrink agriculture-dependent economies significantly including those in Southeast Asia. Due to trade linkages, this will affect all countries in this region, regardless of their own agricultural productivity.

Suggested Readings

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CLIMATE CHANGE, ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY AND NATURAL DISASTERS

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Latin American & Caribbean Climate Week

20–23 August 2018
Montevideo, Uruguay

Joint Conference on Forests and Water 2018

5–9 November 2018
Valdivia, Chile



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29-31 May 2018
Belfast, Northern Ireland

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Frankfurt, Germany



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HEALTH SECURITY



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HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE AND DISASTER RELIEF

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QFFD and QRCS sign \$8 million Libya humanitarian aid pact

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27–29 August 2018

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18–21 October 2018

San Jose, USA

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In a historic election, Malaysia's allegedly corrupt prime minister lost to his 92-year-old former mentor who ran on behalf of a man he put in jail

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12–13 June 2018
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Toronto, Canada

Global Water Security Conference for Agriculture and Natural Resources
3-6 October 2018
Hyderabad, India



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