

Nutrition Security - Dimensions and Challenges in Asia

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Nutrition security emerged as a term in the mid-1990s and has seen several elaborations in terms of its definition. In 1995 IFPRI defined “nutrition security as adequate nutritional status in terms of protein, energy, vitamins, and minerals for all household members at all times”. In 2006, in the publication of its book *Repositioning Nutrition as Central to Development*, the World Bank stated that “nutrition security exists when food security is combined with a sanitary environment, adequate health services, and proper care and feeding practices to ensure a healthy life for all household members.” The Road Map for Scaling-Up Nutrition (SUN) in 2010 took it a step further and states “Nutrition security is achieved when secure access to an appropriately nutritious diet is coupled with a sanitary environment, adequate health services and care, to ensure a healthy and active life for all household members.”

Defining nutrition security stemmed out of the need to underline that food security does not automatically lead to nutrition security. The original definition of food security set forward by FAO at the World Food Summit in 1992 still holds with a slight amendment agreed upon at the World Food Summit in 2009 which saw the addition of “social”; the definition reads as follows “Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active life”.

The concept of food security and nutrition security is hard to link in practice; farmers think of yield and crops while nutritionists think of food and nutrients. In Asia, we see several countries that have been categorized as food secure with still devastating malnutrition problems. Not only do we have malnutrition in food secure countries, we also have particularly in vulnerable populations overweight and obesity in food insecure countries. The Asian Development Bank in its 2013 report on *Food Security in Asia and the Pacific* has already warned that “*Asia and the Pacific’s drive for food security has focused too narrowly on quantity, with a surge in obesity and still high levels of malnutrition in some countries highlighting the need for a new approach*”.

There are many challenges and barriers to achieve nutrition security, ranging from sub-optimal sanitary and health environment to lack of purchasing power and availability of affordable nutritious foods. Urbanization is rapidly advancing in Asia and the food supply chain is under tremendous pressure to provide affordable and nutritious foods for urban areas; yet, a substantial part of Asians who live in urban areas are living in urban slums and are opting for cheap ‘empty’ calories as nutritious foods are too expensive for them. One of the major challenges in achieving nutrition security is how to make nutrient-dense fresh foods as affordable as energy-dense foods.

Current measurements that assess food security are not indicative to nutrition security or insecurity. More efforts are needed to establish matrixes that can capture both, the four dimensions of food security (availability, access, utilization, stability) and their link to the three main determinants of nutrition security (access to food, care and feeding, health and sanitation).