

Theme Study: Sustainable Agriculture and Food Security in Asia and the Pacific (2009)



Concept Note

While rapid economic growth has long defined the Asia and Pacific region, it continues to suffer a shocking number of undernourished and ill-fed persons. Currently, more than 60 percent of the world's undernourished population lives in Asia and the Pacific. In 2005-2006, on average some 16 per cent of the region's population, 542 million people, were going hungry – and in 2007, as a result of sudden price rises, that number is thought to have increased to 582 million –pre economic crisis figures. Thus the food security concerns currently sweeping the Asia-Pacific Region are not a sudden and unexpected crisis: signs have been around for some time now.

The above is partly because most governments have been neglecting agriculture, but also because many people cannot afford the food they need for an active and healthy life. Today, in the midst of a global financial crisis and the extraordinary collapse in job output and trade, many millions more are likely exposed to food insecurity that could have been spared had agriculture not have been overlooked in many countries in the Region.

According to the Theme Study on Sustainable Agriculture and Food Security in Asia and the Pacific 2009, the principal cause of food insecurity is poverty, with many other contributing factors, linked to the balance of supply and demand. The Study first traces the remarkable success in reducing poverty in the Asia-Pacific region noting continued suffering from high levels of food insecurity, and then assesses the extent and impact of food insecurity across the region, identifying hotspots and vulnerable groups.

Once seen as the solution to food insecurity in the Asia and Pacific, the Study reveals that the Green Revolution while generating striking increases in output for many years, stalled with shortcomings suddenly exposed by soaring food prices in 2007 and 2008. The Study thus explores some of the main factors that contribute to the region's food insecurity.

Solutions to food insecurity are at hand, and one of the keys to food security is sustainable agriculture. Farmers in Asia and the Pacific have, in many respects, been very successful. They have increased output and just about kept pace with demand. However, longer-term threats to sustainable agriculture highlighted by the Study are environmental degradation, climate change, along with a series of other threats. Vast areas of cropland, grassland, woodland and forest in Asia and the Pacific have already been lost, and many more are threatened. In South and South-East Asia, around 74 per cent of agricultural lands have been severely affected by erosion, by wind or water or chemical pollution. In the worst cases, particularly in dry-land ecosystems, farmland can turn to desert. Farmers across Asia and the Pacific and elsewhere, must produce food not just efficiently but in ways that respect the environment.

Governments have stepped in, reacting to surges and food prices with measures such as blocking food exports, relaxing import tariffs on food imports to introducing special measures for social protection. The Study argues that some of these responses are counter productive, but there are others which show greater promise, for strengthening food security both in the short and longer terms.

Government intervention aside, the Study also looks at what are people, as individuals, as families and as communities, doing to survive? How are they using community resources and networks? Communities that are food insecure face different kinds of shocks. Some affect everyone simultaneously, such as national economic crises, droughts or other disasters.

These 'covariate' shocks may be too difficult for households or communities to deal with themselves, so they will also need assistance from outside, from the state or institutions of civil society.

The Study calls for an agenda for food security addressing short-term threats to food security imposed by the global financial crisis by improving access to food; addressing medium-term threats via sustainable agriculture; and longer-term measures for adaptation to climate change.

The Study presents significant challenges to policy-makers. But there are regional instruments available to help take progressive and substantive steps in developing sustainable agriculture and food production policy. The purpose of this launch is to jumpstart a call for immediate action in Asia and Pacific countries under the yoke of food insecurity, and discuss how to build resiliency to future crises.