



Speaker Summary Note

Session: South Asia

Speaker: Rohan Rajapakse

Senior Professor, Agricultural Biology, University of Ruhuna, and Acting Vice Chairman and Member, University Grants Commission, Sri Lanka

Title: Leveraging Agriculture, Nutrition, and Health: Some cases from Sri Lanka

The relationship between agriculture and health may seem intuitive and simple: grow more crops and people will have more food and live healthier lives. But because agriculture and health policies are rarely coordinated, the reality is far more complex.

Most of the poor in Sri Lanka are farmers and farm workers, who depend on agriculture for their livelihoods, including the income needed to buy health services. Threats to agriculture become threats to health.

Health and Agriculture and Nutrition Together

The idea of linking food security and nutrition components into agriculture is not new. Effective approaches for incorporating nutrition goals into agriculture and rural development projects were recognized as necessary a decade ago, but effective approaches for doing so in an operationally acceptable way were not available.

Many developing countries are enthusiastic about the possibility of achieving nutrition goals through the agricultural sector. Research, on above, in Sri Lanka have identified certain types of agricultural programmes that were more successful than others in achieving food security and nutrition objectives. These include;

- a. Expansion of cash crop production.
- b. Introduction of hybrid varieties.
- c. Creation of effective and appropriate extension services.
- d. Making available agricultural credit to male and female producers.
- e. Expansion of food crop production.

These programmes were able to reach the lowest income households, which were often the households most at risk nutritionally.

It is clear from available studies that as household income is increased, there is an improvement in both the quality and quantity of the household's diet. Increasing income at the household level, however, is not

sufficient to alleviate malnutrition. Whether increased income translates into improved household and individual nutrition depends on a variety of factors including. How much of the increase is spent on nutritious food, how the increased quantity and quality of food is distributed among family members, and what the health and hygiene levels are of individual family members.

The key to tackling these problems lies in better integration of health and agricultural interventions and policy. For example, irrigation projects that increase yields may unintentionally encourage diseases such as malaria or schistosomiasis. In Sri Lanka, intensification projects that have introduced both irrigation and pig production have created ideal conditions for Japanese encephalitis, whose mosquito vectors breed in ditches and use pigs as alternative hosts.

The purpose of agriculture is not just to grow crops and livestock, but to grow healthy, well-nourished people. Farmers produce a wide range of goods, including one of their ultimate tasks is to produce food of sufficient quantity to feed all. There is growing evidence of increasing malnutrition in Sri Lanka. The rising prices of food are likely to aggravate this situation, especially in households that do not produce food. Although the country does not have serious food shortages malnutrition affects nearly one-third of children and one quarter of women.

Agricultural growth could contribute to reduction of poverty, hunger and malnutrition. Poverty and food insecurity are largely problems in the rural and estate areas in Sri Lanka.

1. The development of Sri Lanka's agriculture requires many thrusts. There has to be much more investment in research and rural infrastructure development.
2. The agricultural extension services that are hardly serving its purpose should be reformed and reconstituted.
3. The problems of marketing of agricultural produce have to be resolved by developing storage and milling capacity, promoting competition and improving transport facilities.
4. There should be more constructive private sector-public sector collaboration. Land policies require to be reformed in the context of current situations to permit land use on the basis of economic returns.
5. Productivity increases in agriculture could play an important role in the reduction of poverty, hunger and malnutrition.

Targeted Consumer price subsidies

Targeted food price subsidies are a popular and common type of intervention aimed at increasing food consumption of poor households. The real incomes of the poor generally results in higher expenditures on food. Subsidy programmes are attractive policy instruments because they are highly visible and allow governments to reach a large number of poor people easily.

Prototype of Nutrition/Agriculture Programmes

- Provide credit to women in rural areas where agricultural activities are developed.
- Target agricultural extension activities to women.
- In Sri Lanka, women are actively involved in many aspects of food crop production (and increasingly in cash crop production). Extension activities geared to women, therefore, could result in increased food production that would benefit household food security, as well as provide an increase in the income of women.

There has been a lack of focus on agricultural biodiversity and on food systems as a whole. Our results suggest that farmer-focused initiatives that are food-systems based can sustainably improve dietary diversity and improve micronutrient levels in the diet of poor and vulnerable populations resulting improved nutrition.