Book Review

World Food Programme (2001), *Enabling Development: Food Assistance in South Asia*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, pp 290+xxvi including Appendix, price IC Rs. 525.

South Asia is home to more chronically food insecure people than any other region in the World. About 294 million people are classified by FAO as undernourished — more than one third of the world wide total.

In the Rome Declaration of the World Food Summit in 1996, Heads of State of all countries of the World ' reaffirmed the right of every one to have access to safe and nutritious food, consistent with the right to adequate food and the fundamental right of every one to be free from hunger. ' They considered it unacceptable that, throughout the World 800 million people did not have enough food to meet their basic nutritional needs. These leaders committed themselves to halving that number by the year 2015. The commitment made by 186 countries at the World Food Summit to reduce the number of undernourished people by 50 percent by the year 2015 requires reducing the number of undernourished people in South Asia to some 150 million in 15 years from now.

Progress towards such a goal in the countries of South Asian Association of Regional Co-operation (SAARC), has generally not been fast enough. If present trends were to continue, over 217 million people in Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka would still be hungry in 2015, many more than the target of some 150 million.

The World Food Programme (WFP), the frontline United Nations organisation fighting hunger, has completed a study entitled Enabling Development : Food Assistance in South Asia. The book offers both short-term and long-term solutions to hunger through effective food - based assistance programmes. The study was launched in all SAARC capital cities in the last week of April 2001, and in the oresence of leading politicians and key decision makers of those countries.

The book, prepared by the WFP Regional Office for South Asia and published by Oxford University Press, is available in local English language book stores. It is based on inputs from eminent authors from all SAARC countries and is the result of an extensive team effort that involved national experts, researchers and advisers form all WFP Country Offices in the region.

This book focuses on the problem of food insecurity in the SAARC countries. The size and depth of this problem has often been described as a 'silent emergency'. It outstrips any other emergency not only in terms of absolute numbers, but also proportrionately. Yet, it has not attracted the requisite amount of public attention. While newspaper headlines give the impression that sub-Saharan Africa is the most food insecure region in the world, a study of some of the key indicators of food insecurity presents,

however core complex picture: it is South Asia that has the highest numbers of chronically and transitory food insecure people.

Divided into five chapters, the book starts with an overview which summarises the main themes of the book in four pages, and concludes with the book's central recommendation that: food should be used to bring malnourished, hungry and vulnerable people to development opportunity. This is of course key message of the Food Aid and Development policy of the WFP.

The First Chapter of the Book focuses on food insecure people and places, and overlays them together so as to locate where the most food insecure people are. The book includes maps that locate 'hot spots' of food insecurity based on critical indicators such as per capita cereal availability, population below the poverty line , female illiteracy, number of underweight children, number of anaemic pregnant women , distribution of flood- prone areas, and areas affected by civil conflict.

Starting with the concept of food security which embraces four dimensions: availability , access, utilisation and vulinerability, this chaprer analyses data in relation to these four dimensions of food security. Based on the FAO methodology, the chapter identifies 294 million as the chronically food insecure people in South Asia , which consists of: i) undernourished people due to lack of required calorie availability per capita per day, ii) 99 million underweight children under five, iii) 30 million pregnant anaemic women who suffer most from 'hidden hunger' , and iv) 63 million transitory food insecure people who are exposed to recurrent natural disasters , among others.

Chapter Two of the Book describes seven food economies of South Asia. In case of the food economy of Nepal, the chapter concludes that for Nepal its future food security is linked to how it meets the redistribution challenge. This chapter mentions that largely because of the green revolution technology the food deficit South Asia has turned into food surplus region, and now continues its food production that exceeds its population growth. But SAARC food economies are diverse. This together with the improper food utilisation there is the problem of food insecurity, among others.

Chapter Three focuses on food-based assistance in South Asia, and points that it has the biggest national food assistance programmes in the world. There are five basic categories of food assistance programmes: targeted public distribution shemes, supplementary feeding programmes for children and pregnant or nursing women, school feeding programme, food -for -work programme, and disaster emergency relief schemes.

Chapter Four discusses about how food assistance can be further strengthened. This is not so much an issue of less or more food assistance. Rather the question revolves around how food assistance programmes become more effective in promoting devlopment opportunities for the food

insecure people in the region. In this context, the chapter highlights for establishing a policy framework for food assistance. For food assistance to be effective, it needs to respond to the multiple dimensions of food insecurity in an integrated and co-ordinated manner. Policies and strategies in four core sectors, namely agriculture, poverty alleviation, nutrition and health, and disaster mitigation, must share the same food security focus to enseure that food assistance programmes achieve the desired impact. The chapter illustrates the types of issues to be covered by food security oriented sector policies. Lastly, as outlined in the Food Aid and Development Policy of the WFP, the chapter details about the five priority areas for food assistance programmes. These five priority areas include: 1) enable young children and expectant and nursing mothers to meet their special nutritional and nutrition-related health needs; 2) enable poor households to invest in human capital through education and training; 3) enable poor families to gain and preserve assets; 4) mitigate the effects of natural disasters, especially in areas vulnerable to recurring crises of this kind; and 5) enable households which depend on degraded natural resources for their food security to make a shift to more sustainable livelihoods.

The last Chapter, Chapter Five, comes with conclusions and recommendations. There are six recommendations as follows:

— Addressing hunger and househole food insecurity through food assistance should become a greater priority for governments in South Asia;
— Address the worst problems first;
— Use food assistance where food makes a difference;
— Food assistance should play a greater role in disaster prevention, preparedness and rehabilitation;
— Food assistance programmes can and should be improved; and
— The role of regional initiatives to resolve shared problems should be explored.

The book mentions that, experience shows that there is a need to involve women not only as target groups, but also as key players. Placing foods in the hands of women enhances the impact of food assistance programmes - children's need are better met, leakage is reduced, and women get control over a valuable and potentially empowering resource. The book candidly mentions that although most governments and institutions acknowledge these facts, implementation lags behind. The book offers both short-term solutions to hunger through effective food-based assistance programmes. It will be valuable for economists, policy makers, government depatments, donor agencies, students and researchers of development issues.

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