



The Raghavan Report

Asia's Food Future:

Disconnect between dietary changes and crop diversity

by Raghavan ('Ragha') Sampathkumar



As discussed previously, countries in Asia are facing the issue of double burden – malnutrition and obesity – at varying levels simultaneously. Matured economies such as Malaysia and Korea are seeing increasing levels of child obesity while India, Indonesia, China and Philippines are still facing huge issues of undernourishment. Nearly a third of all children in South East Asia remain malnourished and the majority of them are in these fast-growing middle-income countries. There is another category at the bottom that requires more serious attention with countries such as

Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos PDR.

While Asia's economic growth is shifting the diets towards more protein (particularly from animal sources) and high value (e.g. horticultural crops), the region remains dependent on trade to meet its demand for feed raw materials. Although steps are taken in these countries by the policy makers to boost domestic production (e.g. corn in Indonesia), many times the efforts have unintended consequences and result in shortages and increased domestic prices. On one hand, this could be good for the farmers, but consumers bear the brunt as food prices inch up. However, similar to the geo-political moves that were discussed in the last column, policies often seem to be made in silos and mostly focused on achieving self-sufficiency through increased domestic production rather than having a holistic view of balancing it with international trade. Boosting domestic production (e.g. corn and soybean for animal feed) proves to be a rather difficult pursuit given that hundreds of millions of farmers in Asia are smallholders with around 1 ha or less on an average and do not have access to inputs including finance and risk management solutions. They remain distant and disconnected from markets and infrastructure such as storage, power and availability of quality inputs still remain big hurdles for them to respond to price signals and increase production. Lack of access to technology, from seed and to agricultural machinery, is yet another roadblock for the cultivators who are stuck with subsistence farming. Due to all the above reasons, grain productivity remains a concern since a vast majority of these smallholder farmers are producing at around a third of the optimum yield. But on the positive side, it reflects the need and the scope for improving productivity and incomes with innovations customised for the local conditions to help improve their livelihoods and nutritional status.

Over the last few decades, Asian diets have become more similar to that of the West and there are serious concerns that a wide array of grains including sorghum, pearl millet, and finger millet are getting marginalised. Although there are isolated efforts in terms of mainstreaming these neglected (orphan) but highly nutritious foods, market dynamics and consumer education must be leveraged to drive crop diversification and rotation by the farmers. Niche market opportunities for these foods can be created based on their specific nutritional characteristics to address respective health issues (e.g. gluten allergy, diabetes or micronutrient deficiencies). With assured markets and stable prices, farmers will not only be able to diversify their cropping patterns, but importantly they can minimise losses due to price volatility of major staples, reduce negative externalities (e.g. soil degradation, pest and disease pressures due to monoculture), and contribute to diet diversity in the region.

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