

# Food Security and Nutrition in Myanmar: Policy Landscape

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## ABSTRACT

*Food security in different regions and states of the country may vary from each other based on their economic development activities, social network, infrastructure development, how it is seen on the development of the regions and states, how budget is allocated to utilize for the activities involved, other aspects etc.*

*Even if enough food exists in absolute terms to feed the whole population, one cannot assume that it is distributed equally. Access to food at the household level must be assessed. This is dependent upon socio-economic factors, which determine the ability of households to either produce their own food or earn enough income to purchase food. Food access also depends on the price of food and its volatility over time, relative to household income.*

*For the agriculture sector, the aim is to increase the productivity and diversity of food stuffs and will focus on nutrient-dense crops, fish and animal-based foods, with an effort to integrate these into mixed farming systems.*

Keywords: Food security, nutrition, incidence of food poverty

## INTRODUCTION

Even though Myanmar is a resource rich country, with sufficient food availability at the national level, uneven distribution of resources and low investments in key sectors have an impact on household food security.

Progress has been made in promoting food and nutrition security in the past few years, but there are still significant gains to be made. It is a key objective of the Government of Myanmar to eliminate hunger in the country and to ensure that all people in all States and Regions have access to sufficient nutritious food to sustain their health, support their work and allow their children to develop to their full cognitive and physical potential.

**Food security:** exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (World Food Summit, 1996). With this widely accepted definition, the following dimensions of food security are necessary things to include:

**Food availability:** The availability of sufficient quantities of food of appropriate quality, supplied through domestic production and/ or imports (including food aid).

**Food accessibility:** Access by individuals to adequate resources (entitlements) for acquiring appropriate foods for a nutritious diet. Entitlements are defined as the set of all commodity

bundles over which a person can establish command given the legal, political, economic and social arrangements of the community in which they live (including traditional rights such as access to common resources).

**Utilization:** Utilization of food through adequate diet, clean water, sanitation and health care to reach a state of nutritional well-being where all physiological needs are met. This brings out the importance of non-food inputs in food security.

**Stability:** To be food secure, a population, household or individual must have access to adequate food at all times. They should not risk losing access to food as a consequence of sudden shocks (e.g. an economic or climatic crisis) or cyclical events (e.g. seasonal food insecurity). The concept of stability can therefore refer to both the availability and access dimensions of food security.

Within the context of this framework, food security in different regions and states of the country may vary from each other based on their economic development activities, social network, infrastructure development, how it is seen on the development of the regions and states, how the budget is allocated to utilize for the activities involved, other aspects etc.

Even if enough food exists in absolute terms to feed the whole population, one cannot assume that it is distributed equally. Access to food at the household level must be assessed. This is dependent upon socio-economic factors, which determine the ability of households to either produce their own food or earn enough income to purchase food. Food access also depends on the price of food and its volatility over time, relative to household income.

For food and nutrition security to exist food must also be utilized properly. This requires a biological-based approach, which looks at the biophysical needs of the body for nutrient intake and absorption. Immediate factors affecting food utilization include dietary intake as well as the prevalence of disease. These immediate factors are, in turn, dependent on underlying factors. Dietary intake is essentially the food that is consumed by the body. This is dependent on food security and a variety of cultural and socio-economic factors at the household level which influence the care practices. Disease can inhibit the body's ability to absorb nutrients. This is largely a factor of the of health environment, care practices related to hygiene, and access to healthcare.

When food is available, accessible and utilized appropriately by all members of the population in a conducive health environment, food and nutrition security is achieved and positive nutritional outcomes can be expected. The following section of this Strategic Review unpacks these three dimensions of food and nutrition security and assesses their impact on nutritional outcomes.

The World Food Program in Myanmar mentioned that several States and Regions suffer from high levels of food insecurity, especially Northern Rakhine, Chin, Kachin and Shan states, as well as Magway Region. The national prevalence of acute malnutrition among children under 5 is nearly 9 %. According to the 2010 IHLCA Survey, more than a quarter of Myanmar people are poor. Although agriculture is mainstay of dominant share of rural population, food poverty in rural area is higher than that of the urban area. This is because of the difference in food availability and economic access to food. Myanmar is also vulnerable to natural disasters, such as cyclones, landslides, earthquakes and droughts (WFP, 2017).

## **Poverty situation, food security and income generation**

In Myanmar, the national average incidence of food poverty (10 %) masks the same important heterogeneity across states/regions, and in roughly the same manner as the national poverty incidence. Eleven of the states/regions experience less than half the national food poverty incidence, while one (Chin state) experiences two and one half times that average (or 25 % poverty incidence).

Poverty indicators from successive rounds of the Integrated Household Living Conditions (“IHLCA”) surveys provide the best available estimates of the incidence and distribution of poverty and food poverty in Myanmar. Here, poverty incidence represents the percentage of the population who are deemed poor, while food poverty incidence represents the percentage of the population who do not have sufficient income to purchase the local food basket at prevailing market prices. The most recent IHLCA indicates an estimated 25.6 % of Myanmar’s households live below the national poverty line. The same survey indicates approximately 10 % live below the official food poverty line. Other reports suggest poverty rates are much higher – on the order of a minimum of 50 %.

The Sustainable Development Goal on "End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture" (SDG 2) recognizes the inter linkages among supporting sustainable agriculture, empowering small farmers, promoting gender equality, ending rural poverty, creating healthy food environments that enable healthy decisions, tackling climate change, and other issues.

Throughout Myanmar’s history, successive governments had set their policies to support the rice sector because of its critical role in food security, and its social and political importance in the country. In 2011, the country opened its doors toward democratic and economic transformation. One of the development goals set by the previous government is to increase rice export while maintaining domestic food security. It is envisaged that increasing rice export will generate the needed income to fuel agricultural development, revive the economy, and alleviate poverty pervading in rural areas. With new democratic government in 2016, the vision for agriculture is set in line with the sustainable development goals, which is an inclusive, sustainable and increasingly productive and resilient agricultural sector, providing access to safe and nutritious food for all the people; rising income for rural population, particularly smallholder farmers and landless people; and modern and innovative domestic and export-oriented agribusiness.

In Myanmar, more than 65 % of households rely on income from the agricultural sector. At the national level and especially for rural households, the most important sources of income are either through production and sale of agricultural commodities or work as daily laborers.

Among those without access to land, casual labor constitutes the most important income source. Nearly half of landless households depend primarily on farm labor as their primary source of income. Importantly, without access to land, many landless households rely almost entirely on casual labor to earn the income necessary to access food from the market. The strong seasonality of agricultural employment, very low wage rates (many around US\$ 3 per day as of February 2017) for that agricultural employment, and seasonal underemployment severely limits annual incomes of landless households.

Microenterprise activities, such as textile-weaving, basket weaving, small-scale trading, and fishing provide some supplementary income; these types of small business activities provide

primary income support for 15 % of landless households. Some of these microenterprises are possible through access to rented or borrowed land. According to the LIFT (Livelihood and Food Security Trust Fund), 10 percent of landless households were able to gain access to land through rental for cash, sharecropping, sharing land with other farmers, or borrowing land for cultivation free of charge (usually from relatives). Finally, some landless households rely at least partially on remittances, or “safety nets” provided by the community, or NGO/CBO, but the relative contribution of these income sources to household income is very poorly documented. The percentage of rural households relying on casual labor appears to be growing. IHLCA reports that 21 % of rural households relied on casual labor in 2009-10, but the percentage of poor rural households relying on casual labor increased from 23 % to 28 % in the preceding five-year period. Strong evidence indicates that these numbers have very likely increased much more. This trend has worrying consequences for household food security as well as the stability of civil society in the near term if there is not concern for food security.

In lowlands and along rivers, fisheries play a role in income generation and offer a source of protein for household nutrition. According to a FAO (2003) study, fisheries (marine, inland and aquaculture) directly employ more than three million people, and some 12 to 15 million people indirectly benefit from this sector. Postharvest fish preparation, including drying, smoking, salting, and fermentation reportedly provides an important income source, particularly for women. For the landless, fishing represents an important alternative employment which does not require large up-front investment. Some evidence say that there is oligopolistic control of fishing licenses, which prevent some landless from accessing this as an income source.

In hilly areas and some upland areas, timber and non-timber forest products also contribute to income generation. Collecting wood (legally or illegally) provides job opportunities particularly in the rural areas. Wood and charcoal represent alternative energy sources in a country with insufficient and limited provision of gas and electric power. According to Htun (2009), total fuel wood consumption in 2005 was around 45 million cubic meters. Charcoal production is also an important income source around the country. For rural people, extracting products such as wild fruits, latex, essential oils, wax, and medicinal wood provide additional income. In deep rural areas, forests also act as shelters for some landless and extreme poor. In urban areas, in Yangon and Mandalay, more than 100 wood export industries provide employment for skilled and unskilled labor.

Major obstacles to food security include extreme poverty, inadequate food distribution, supply disruptions, food waste, government policies that inhibit trade and negatively affect farmers, environmental impact, growing resistance to the use of some agricultural technologies and price volatility. Food security can be improved by honoring comparative advantage, enabling open markets, supporting smallholder farmers, enabling country to realize its food production potential, leveraging technology, improving nutrition, and encouraging agricultural investments.

Important activities to improve household food security include: dissemination of technology related to production, preservation, storage and distribution of food; generation of family income by developing financial institutions; and monitoring food security status to cope with emergencies. Under food quality and food safety sector, enforcing quality control measures for food manufacturers and encouragement of research related to quality control measures for food production were major activities among others to be implemented.

## **Myanmar National Action Plan for Food and Nutrition Security (MNAPFNS) (2015)**

In 2015, the Government of Myanmar, under the guidance of a National Working Committee on Food and Nutrition Security (WCFNS)<sup>1</sup>, conceptualized the Myanmar National Action Plan for Food and Nutrition Security (MNAPFNS). It was developed in response to the recognition that the achievement of dramatic improvements in the status of the food and nutrition situation in Myanmar constitutes one of the key strategies in the drive for the country to achieve middle-income status by 2025. MNAPFNS takes into account global as well as specific national and local situations and challenges with regard to food and nutrition security. It also considers the opportunities that have been identified, the commitments that have made and the initiatives that have been launched to tackle food and nutrition insecurity at multiple levels.

The formulation of the MNAPFNS was built as a response to and around the Five Pillars of the global Zero Hunger Challenge (ZHC), and based on the guiding principles of the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement. The Five pillars include:

- 100% equitable access to affordable, nutritious and affordable food all-year round;
- Stunting and all forms of malnutrition reduced;
- All food systems are sustainable;
- 100% increase in small holder productivity and income; and
- Zero loss or waste of food

In addition, to the above, the SUN country movement closely supports Pillar 2 of MNAPFNS, which focuses on the reduction of stunting and all other forms of undernutrition, while ensuring that nutrition sensitive strategies are mainstreamed across all pillars of MNAPFNS.

Through MNAPFNS, the Government of Myanmar and its partners planned to work together through collective multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder action to ensure that all people enjoy the right to food and adequate nutrition. MNAPFNS is an action plan and guiding tool, with a common result framework that outlines key goals and priority interventions needed to achieve sustained, accelerate reduction in and eradication of food insecurity and undernutrition. In particular, attention to both nutrition specific and nutrition sensitive interventions in health, agriculture, livestock and fisheries and other relevant social sectors were to be scaled-up under MNAPFNS.

This also included the transformation of Myanmar's agriculture sector (which includes crops, livestock, fisheries, forestry) from subsistence to increased production and income generation for farmers, decreased loss and wastage of food, an increase in the percentage of paid workers in the agriculture sector and adequate provision of social safety nets. In addition to nutrition sensitive agriculture, the Government and its partners built measures to tackle malnutrition with proven health-based interventions including support to Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF), micronutrient supplementation, integrated management of acute malnutrition, improved access to health services and adequate hygiene and sanitation. Furthermore, interventions to support behaviour change towards key actions that contribute to improved health and nutrition, including appropriate IYCF and consumption of nutritious food, were to be prioritized. Strategies and actions to strengthen the enabling policy, legal, regulatory and social protection environment will underpin these interventions.

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<sup>1</sup> Led by the Ministry of Planning and Finance as the coordinating ministry with inputs from the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation, and Ministry of Health and sports.

The MNAPFNS considered the existing architecture of national institutions, policy and planning frameworks and built its strategy on past and on-going food and nutrition efforts in the country; and reflected the diverse views of multiple stakeholders drawn from development partners, private sector and civil society. Various Ministries involved, worked to ensure their contribution to the implementation of MNAPFNS by reflecting priority interventions, strategies, indicators and targets into sectoral budgets and specific operational plans.

The MNAPFNS was not designed to be a direct answer to issues concerning governance, administration, decentralization of power and direct participation. Nevertheless, it was recognized that these and other similar issues had strong actual and potential impacts on food and nutrition security. For this reason, MNAPFNS incorporated measures to improve developments in the above areas. In all the five Pillars, the Action Plan sought to build strong support in strengthening the governance, administrative and staffing structures of all relevant institutions at all levels engaged in Food and Nutrition Security. The Action Plan also included a proposal to establish State and Regional Committees on Food and Nutrition Security. In addition, the design of the Action Plan attached great importance to working with civil society and local government agencies like City Development Committees.

Although priority nutrition specific and sensitive interventions were highlighted in the MNAPFNS, the Plan recognized that relevant sectoral Ministries may continue to have their own comprehensive sectoral plans and operational plans, which may include broader interventions related to food and nutrition. However, these sector plans would work to ensure contribution to and alignment with the MNAPFNS timeframe for achievement of its targets and goals, including parameters for prioritization and implementation.

The Myanmar National Action Plan for Food and Nutrition Security is currently being reviewed by the Government in preparation of a Multisectoral Costed Action Plan for Food and Nutrition Security that is being developed.

### **Draft framework for multi-sectoral national plan of action for nutrition (MS NPAN) (2018)**

The approach of the Myanmar Multisectoral National Plan of Action on Nutrition MS-NPAN will be to strengthen Myanmar's systems for a multisectoral response to malnutrition and deliver a prioritized package of essential nutrition services/interventions. The MS-NPAN is being developed within the context of high level political commitment to address malnutrition in Myanmar.

The overall goal of the Myanmar Multisectoral National Plan of Action on Nutrition (MS-NPAN) will be to "Reduce all forms of malnutrition in mothers, children and adolescent girls" with the expectation that this will lead to healthier and more productive lives that contribute to the overall economic and social aspirations of the country.

Multisectoral National Plan of Action on Nutrition (MS-NPAN) covering the five-year period between 2018 and 2022, will be an evidence-based plan to address the high levels of malnutrition in Myanmar and establish the systems and capacity required to assure that achievements are sustained.

For the agriculture sector, the aim is to increase the productivity and diversity of food stuffs will focus on nutrient-dense crops, fish and animal-based foods, with an effort to integrate these into mixed farming systems. This will be achieved through strengthening and upgrading the agricultural sector by improving access to quality inputs, strengthening extension services

including promotion of production and dietary diversity, reducing women's work and labor burden, improving land regulatory framework to enable more flexible and diversified land use, strengthen land tenure, expanding water access at the parcel level to scale-up homestead food production, and supporting farmer's organizations.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation (MoALI) strives to support income generating activities to improve purchasing power, mainly from on-farm activities. This approach includes food-stuff-based agricultural production but also smallholder cash cropping focused on high potential commodities such as coffee, thanaka and other tree/forest products, chillies, onions, ginger, cardamon, elephant foot yam, etc. Major support is given strengthening forest and farmer producer's organizations (FFPO) and linking these to value chain operators and markets. Major interventions to achieve this include improving rural infrastructure, access to household and group credit, gender sensitive and inclusive value chain development, incubation of small scale enterprises, participatory land use planning and crop suitability assessment, primary processing to add value to raw products, and reducing food losses.

Ensuring food safety and improving quality of foods consumed in Myanmar is both a public health concern and prerequisite for accessing international markets. The Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation (MoALI) is responsible for improving food safety of unprocessed food stuffs (collaborating with FDA) by ensuring the quality and safety of seeds and other inputs, encouraging good agriculture, livestock and fishery practices, safe post-harvest handling (to also reduce losses), and primary processing of animal-based foods.

Challenges in current food systems today is to provide adequate, safe, diversified and nutrient-rich foods needed for healthy diets. Food system change is equally essential to addressing nutrition and food insecurity challenges. In Myanmar, the food system needs to become more nutrition-sensitive. There is also increasing emerging evidence about the relationship between climate change, food security and nutrition, including the relationship between extreme weather events, including both rapid-onset and slow-onset disasters, and food security.

Climate change could increase the numbers of undernourished children, especially in the least developed countries. The evidence suggests that the impacts of climate change on food security will be spread unevenly, affecting the populations that are currently most at risk of hunger. Climate-smart actions which support nutrition will entail a focus on diverse, high-quality and healthy diets

Food safety becomes national agenda for considering healthy people and sound environment for the nation. At present, the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation, Ministry of Health and Sports, and Ministry of Commerce are undertaking to promote consumers awareness on food safety and supply safe food to the people. The Ministry has issued GAP Certification on Fruit and Vegetable by following ASEAN GAP guidelines and also followed the practiced on GAHP and GAqP. The Ministry of Health and Sports has issued the Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP) Certification/ HACCP which complies with codex guidelines.

## **CONCLUSION**

Agriculture plays a vital role the development of nation's economy. Food insecurity and malnutrition are very common in Myanmar. In contrast, chronic or long-term food insecurity is typically a result of poverty. The specific causes of chronic food insecurity may include the

unavailability of food due to poor production practices or market failures, and/or the inaccessibility of food due to low income. Ensuring food security - the basic right of people to the food they need - is one of the greatest challenges facing the community.

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