

# perspectives

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POLITICAL ANALYSES AND COMMENTARY

ASIA

## Politics of Food



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## Heinrich Böll Foundation

The Heinrich Böll Foundation is a publicly funded institute that is closely affiliated with the German party Bündnis 90/Die Grünen. From our headquarters in Berlin and 33 overseas offices, we promote green ideas and projects in Germany, as well as in more than 60 countries worldwide. Our work in Asia concentrates on promoting civil society, democratic structures, social participation for all women and men, and global justice. Together with our partners, we work toward conflict prevention, peaceful dispute resolution, and search for solutions in the fight against environmental degradation and the depletion of global resources. To achieve these goals, we rely on disseminating knowledge, creating a deeper understanding between actors in Europe and Asia, and on a global dialogue as a prerequisite for constructive negotiations.

Cover photo

*Not having a table, only chairs prepared for dine-in customers. This is how a woman vendor managed her space in one of high competitive areas for street food vendors nearby Chinatown in Bangkok.*

Photographer: Ampol Chansirisri

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# Contents

- 2**    **Introduction**
- 5**    **Are we junking the forest for poor nutrition?**  
Janice Ser Huay Lee
- 9**    **Contract farming in Myanmar: From expectations to exploitation**  
Nwet Kay Khine
- 12**    **China's overseas agricultural investments: Not what it appears**  
Feifei Cai
- 16**    **The limits of industrial food strategies and alternatives**  
Shefali Sharma and Ginger Fletcher Santillan
- 20**    **Street food in Asia: An industry that is much better than its reputation**  
Florentinus Gregorius Winarno
- 27**    **«In India nationalism is defined by what you eat»**  
An Interview with Veena Shatrugna by Sadia Sohail
- 31**    **Gendered food insecurity: The legal and social foundations for women's food discrimination in Afghanistan**  
Weeda Mehran
- 34**    **Zero political power for zero hunger in Pakistan: How food security is undermined by political power plays**  
Abid Suleri



## Introduction

# A lot of politics lies in eating

What we eat is determined by more than just our preferences. Food choices are shaped by availability, culture and global economic structures. Tradition and wealth can influence what we eat, just as trade and foreign investments can influence our access to food. Due to the high degree of economic interdependence, the purchase of a food product in one country can affect the price development in another, ultimately restricting food choices. In short: Food is a highly political issue. Nowhere is this more true than in Asia.

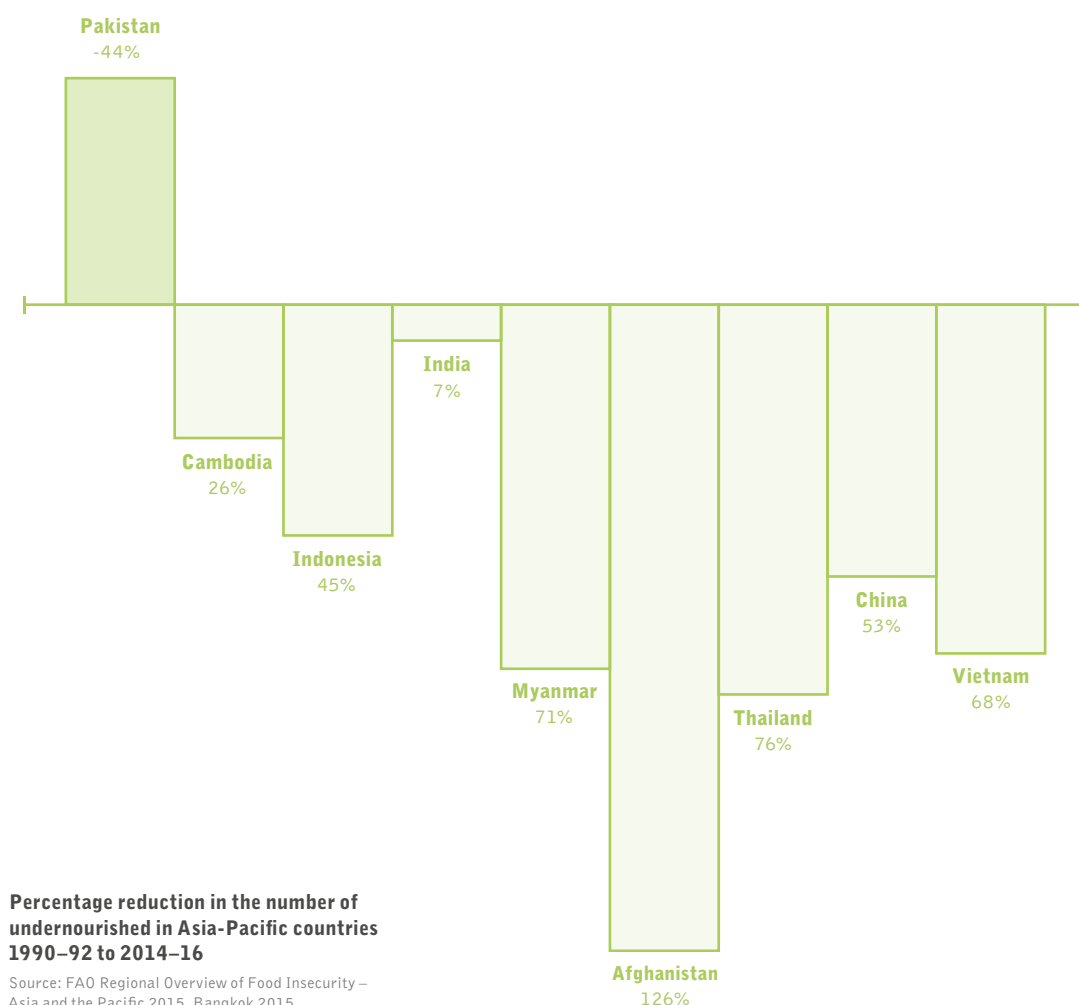
Asia's rapid economic development in the last two decades fundamentally altered the patterns of food consumption and availability for large parts of Asian societies. Despite the growth in wealth and the correlating increase in calorie intake, many governments still have difficulties providing food security to large portions of the population. Impressive growth rates and the rise of metropolises cannot hide the fact that Asia remains home to three-fifths of the world's undernourished people, amounting to 512 million adults and children that consume too few calories. When it comes to the subject of food policies, Asia has two faces. While the rural and agrarian parts of Asia continue to struggle with old, familiar problems, such as the lack of access to food and nutrient deficiency, the richer, urban and more industrialized Asia is confronted with a different form of malnutrition stemming from unhealthy food products. Policy-makers are thus forced to think about how to meet the different nutritional needs of people and what it means for a society when traditional food production and consumption habits are suddenly replaced.

This wide range of topics shows that food politics in Asia has become more than

simply a matter of production and distribution. In effect, politics in Asia often deals with ethical, cultural and environmental disputes between different stakeholders when it comes to questions of food and nutrition. Establishing modern value chains and introducing new food products bears the risk of driving out small-scale farmers, while new eating patterns might conflict with religious beliefs. At the same time, Asia's growing appetite presses increasingly hard against the finite bounds of the planet's natural resources, and in some regions, the consequences of climate change have forced governments to consider alternative approaches to food production. As a result, international actors need to work together to improve food availability and safety, put pressure on decision makers, empower local communities and find solutions for a healthier and self-selected diet for all.

This publication seeks to illustrate some conflicting issues in the field of food and nutrition in Asia. The contributions from across the continent highlight a selection of fields, where political action is needed to ensure that there is enough food on people's plate, which is also healthy and nutritious.

Power over nutrition and people manifests itself on different levels: on a macro-international level, on state policy levels and even on a micro-level within households. A prominent example of how global food consumption influences local livelihoods is palm oil. The appetite for junk food in both developed and emerging countries is fueling the demand for palm oil from Asia. In her article, Janice Ser Huay Lee discusses how the growing appetite for crisps, frozen pizzas and other processed foods affects the nutrition of oil palm plantation workers, who have adapted their diets to the chang-



ing environment, as tropical rainforests have been cleared to make way for palm oil plantations.

In India, the question of food has always been a question of ideology and belief, and this is all the more true since the Hindu-nationalist party BJP has been in power. There are national conflicts over who has the right to decide what others eat. The general illegitimacy of eating meat, not just beef, but also pork and chicken, brings a different angle to what vegetarianism means when it is politicized. Veena Shatrugna argues in an interview that vegetarianism, forced upon India by the ruling class, and the morals associated with this diet are causes of malnutrition among the poor.

This openly political conflict around food is in contrast to what Abid Suleri describes in his article on food security in neighboring Pakistan, where explicit food policies are not popular, as illustrated by the failure of the Zero Hunger Program. He analyses how political power plays have undermined honorable goals to effectively

fight food insecurity. Although the issues of food safety and availability are important concerns for the Pakistani people, they are not issues that draw crowds to the voting booths; as a result, they are only addressed as part of the broader issue of poverty eradication.

Being able to provide safe and sufficient food for your own population is a central question across Asia that is answered differently from state to state. Shefali Sharma and Ginger Fletcher Santillan from the Institute of Agriculture and International Trade Policy (IATP) compare different approaches, with a focus on the big powers, India and China. The two countries emphasize different strategies, but both show a tendency toward more industrial food production, which calls into question the future of small-scale farmers.

Small-scale farmers in Myanmar, where the economy and politics have just recently been liberalized, are witnessing rapid changes driven by international investors. Laws are being drafted to attract foreign

investment, but the benefits are one-sided. Nwet Kay Khine analyses the development of contract farming in Myanmar and how it affects the livelihoods of small-scale farmers.

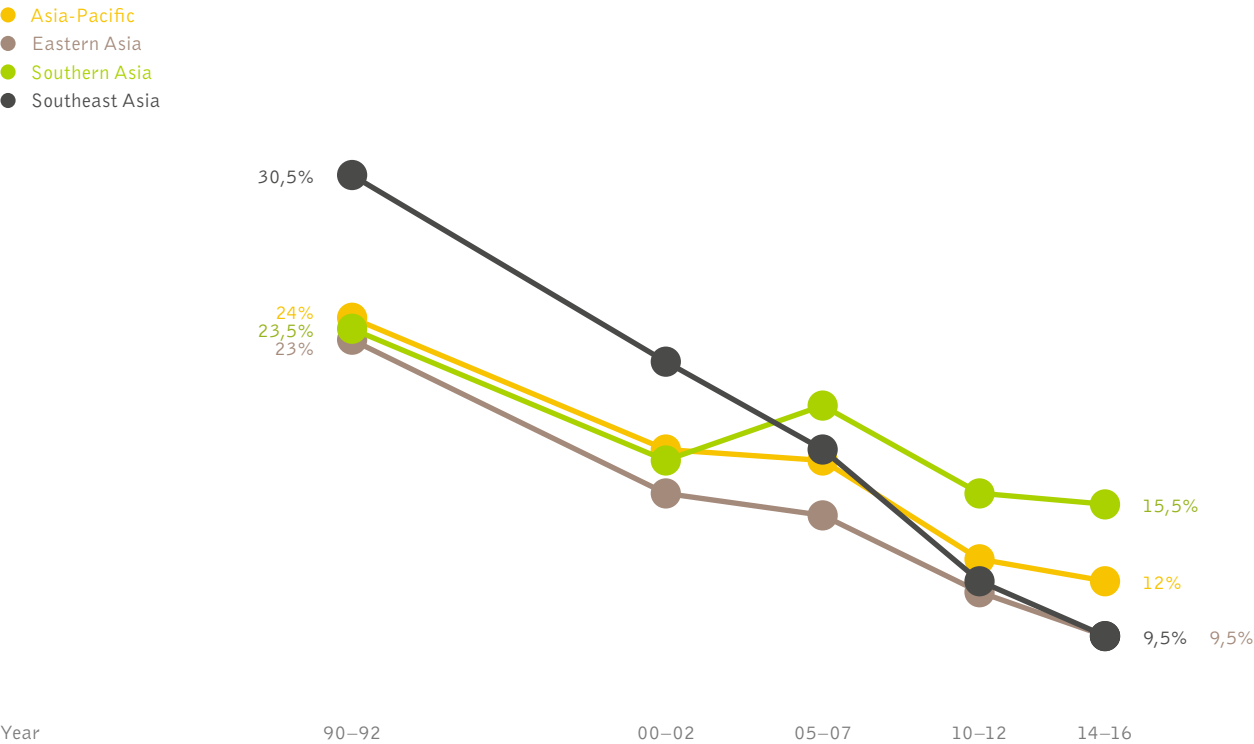
While Myanmar tries to improve food security by letting investors in, its big neighboring country, China, is encouraging companies to invest abroad. Chinese outward agricultural investments have been growing exponentially in the last years, drawing a lot of critical media attention about the consequences for host countries. However, according to Feifei Cai, these concerns are overrated and a more objective assessment of Chinese agricultural investments shows that there can be more opportunities than risks to them. She therefore argues that Chinese investment flows should be more welcomed on an international level.

On the household-level, Weeda Mehran from Afghanistan argues that nutrition is a matter of gender. As one form of violence against women, access to food can be denied, through norms and laws. A revision of the Afghan legal code appears crucial in order to end food discrimination against women.

Gender also plays a role in Asia's street food culture. Florentinus Gregorius Winarno explains that women who generate income by finding a niche in the informal sector are often the suppliers of street food. By contrast, poor hygiene and an insufficiently diverse diet may pose a health risk for women who work all day long in factories. In Cambodia, for example, the unbalanced nutrition of garment factory workers has led to sudden mass faintings, resulting in protests for healthier food that were led by women. Street food may result in a better diet as it is cheap, offers diverse meals, and many female factory workers rely on street food for their daily calorie intake. The photo series that accompanies this article illustrates some implications of food safety and availability. It shows who's eating and who's selling and, thus visualising some food-related power structures that inform everyday life in Asia.

**Katrin Altmeyer**  
 Director of the Asia Department  
 Heinrich Böll Foundation, January 2017

**Prevalence of hunger in Asia and the Pacific by subregion**  
 Source: FAO Regional Overview of Food Insecurity – Asia and the Pacific 2015, Bangkok 2015



# Are we junking the forest for poor nutrition?

Janice Ser Huay Lee

The growing palm oil industry in Southeast Asia has many social and ecological consequences. While the industry boosted the economies in Southeast Asia, local communities are suffering from deforestation and poor nutrition. Only new forms of collaboration can guarantee strategies for meeting all people's needs.

The oil palm is one of the most efficient oil crops in the world, yielding several times the amount produced by other major oil-bearing crops. Its high productivity, competitive price, accessibility for poor households, and versatile uses have driven exponential growth over the past 30 years<sup>1</sup> and secured its place as one of the most important resources in the food industry today. Approximately 80 per cent of globally produced palm oil is used for cooking or the production of processed food such as cookies, potato chips and instant noodles.<sup>2</sup> This widespread consumption of palm oil has fueled its development in tropical Southeast Asia, with Malaysia and Indonesia leading the way in global production.

The amount of land dedicated to oil palm cultivation has grown radically in the last decades: In Malaysia the area increased from 43,000 ha in 1961 to 4.7 million ha in 2014, while in Indonesia the cultivated area has gone from 70,000 ha to 7.4 million ha over the same time period.<sup>3</sup> This rapid expansion has been in part the result of state policies promoting the palm oil industry as a way of economic development. At the local level, smallholder tree crop plantings were used to fight poverty in rural areas and at the national level, governments attracted foreign private investments through market-liberalization to diversify

exports. Undoubtedly, the development of the oil palm industry boosted national and regional economies, and has played an important role in providing employment; however, the manner in which oil palm plantations have been developed and managed has generated a great deal of controversy due to their immense environmental, social and nutritional impacts.

When the industry began taking off, large tracts of tropical rainforests were leased to companies for monoculture oil palm cultivation.<sup>4</sup> The price for this development was the loss of habitats for a wide range of plants and animal species, many of which are endemic to the region, and the loss of critical ecosystem services such as climate and water regulation. In addition, Indonesia and Malaysia are home to large tracts of peatland, which likewise store a high amount of carbon. The process of clearing peatland to make way for cultivation also releases large amounts of greenhouse gases and is one of the main culprits behind the transboundary haze pollution impacting the environment and public health in Southeast Asia.<sup>5</sup>

The social impact of the palm oil industry has been mixed. In Malaysia, the smallholder oil palm sector has been very successful in improving the lives of small farmers and lifting rural people out of poverty. This is the result of carefully crafted state policies, along with institutional and private sector support for the development of the smallholder oil palm sector.<sup>6</sup> In Indonesia, the smallholder sector has been less consistent in its performance and success. Some of the earlier government initiatives that integrated smallholders into joint ventures performed very well and enabled

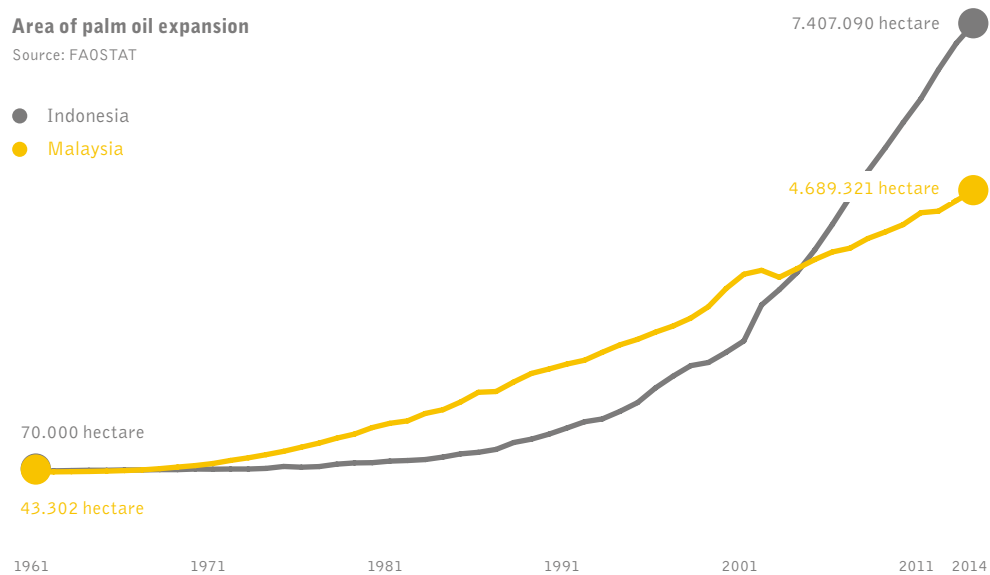
**Dr. Janice Ser Huay Lee** works in the areas of conservation biology, land use change and agriculture. Much of her work focuses on the social and ecological consequences of human activity on the environment. Dr. Lee earned a Master of Science at the National University of Singapore, a PhD from the ETH Zurich in Switzerland, and was a postdoctoral research associate at the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University. Dr. Lee loves to eat traditional Peranakan food, which includes her mother's home-made popiah, mee siam and buah keluak. These dishes have complex flavors and take many hours to prepare. They remind her of home and her family's cultural roots and traditions.

**Area of palm oil expansion**

Source: FAOSTAT

● Indonesia

● Malaysia



them to move out of poverty and afford a better life.<sup>7</sup> Other partnerships with palm oil companies performed terribly and resulted in the exploitation of local communities, leading some households into debt. In some regions where oil palm development was rejected, communities faced punishment, with villages being burnt down and local community members being harassed.<sup>8</sup> The lack of law enforcement, as well as corruption in some of these rural regions, have also increased the vulnerability of local communities, often leading to unjust legal outcomes in favor of the wealthier and more powerful elites.

## Good fat for bad nutrition

Many proponents of the palm oil industry prominently cite the importance of palm oil for food security among poor and vulnerable households due to its nutritional value. Palm oil is an important source of dietary fat. Fat can be categorized into «good» fats (i.e., unsaturated fats) and «bad» fats (i.e., saturated and trans fats). A high intake of bad fats can increase the risk of heart disease, while the intake of good fats can reduce this risk.<sup>9</sup> Of the bad fats, trans fats are the worst. Palm oil is free of trans fats and has a high level of unsaturated fats, making it a good choice even though it also has high levels of saturated fats. Therefore, palm oil may be preferable to replace vegetable oil that contains trans-fats, especially in processed food items where it helps maintain the sensory characteristics of specific food items (e.g., the texture of doughnuts and crispiness of cookies).

So can palm oil adequately substitute trans-fats in the production of industrial, processed food items that are considered «junk food»? And what would this mean for human and natural life in Southeast Asia? Junk food consumption is already on the rise in Asia. Driving factors for the increased consumption include the integration of the Asian market into the global economy, which has brought with it large inflows of foreign direct investment by transnational food and beverage companies; the «super-marketization» of the region, where food is now distributed through supermarkets rather than fresh markets; and the rapid expansion of fast food companies such as McDonalds throughout the region.<sup>10</sup> As a consequence, the global demand for vegetable oil used in junk food production from 2001 to 2014 resulted in the expansion of approximately 163,500 to 413,400 ha of oil palm plantations.<sup>11</sup> When projected to 2050, the global demand for vegetable oil just to produce junk food would entail an expansion of approximately 0.5 to 1.3 million ha of oil palm to be planted. Much of this oil palm expansion will occur at the expense of tropical rainforests, unless strict land-use regulations and market initiatives are implemented to avoid tropical deforestation.

## Losing local agriculture

It is particularly egregious if deforestation takes place for the sake of junk food. The expansion of palm oil for the production of industrial, processed food has impacts not only for the final consumers but can also



pose a threat to the food security of producers and communities. While some households profited from the palm oil boom and could increase their levels of food security, other households were not able to do so. In fact, the acquisition of land resources by companies has led in some cases to a reduction of land for local agriculture and the displacement of local communities from their traditional way of life. In the Philippines, for instance, traditional livelihoods in Palawan were destroyed, most communities experienced land grabbing without the replacement of their livelihoods and wild palms, an important source of starch during times of emergency (e.g., drought-induced crop failures), were cleared to make way for oil palm cultivation. Pests, such as insects and rats, associated with oil palm development also affected local agriculture, resulting in the loss of productive coconut groves that sustained local livelihoods. Moreover, communities located near forests tend to have a more diverse diet due to a wide range of food items harvested from the forests.<sup>12</sup> As forests are increasingly converted to monoculture oil palm plantations, local agriculture and a diverse set of cultivated plants are lost, forcing local communities and smallholders to depend on unhealthy, purchased industrial food. This leads to a less diverse diet and a reduction in micronutrients, ultimately making local communities more likely to suffer from malnutrition.

Food insecurity is also an issue among laborers on the plantations. There have been cases where laborers were forced to work an extended number of hours without sufficient rest, and wages were denied or overdue.<sup>13</sup> Such exploitation of human labor has definite impacts on their food security as well as health and nutrition.

To balance food security needs, detailed consultations with local communities should be conducted to ensure that free and prior-informed consent is given, and that oil palm developments are beneficial to all stakeholders. An example of an in-depth community consultation was carried out in Liberia, where a large-scale oil palm concession was proposed in the rural landscape.<sup>14</sup> Local communities appreciated the social and physical infrastructure benefits that oil palm development would bring to the region but expressed interest in retaining closed forests, which are a source of bush meat important to local diets. These forests were also habitats for medicinal plants used by local communities and act as an impor-

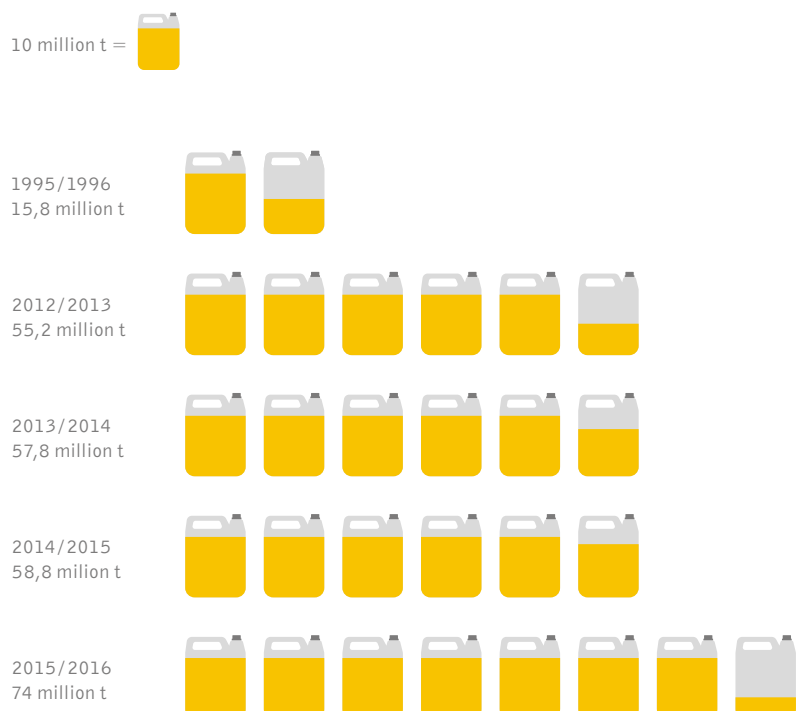
tant wind break to protect their crops. The land set aside for local agriculture was insufficient and too distant for local communities, so instead, buffer zones surrounding the oil palm concession were suggested to enable local communities to practice food and cash crop cultivation on communally held land. Such an interactive planning process at the beginning of a development project can be highly beneficial to mitigate both the environmental and social impacts of oil palm cultivation and should be conducted to ensure local food security.

## Improving the end use of palm oil

Despite the negative environmental and social impacts of the palm oil industry, there is an undeniably high demand for palm oil at a global scale. Recent bans on the use of trans fat in processed foods are likely to fuel further demand since palm oil is a suitable and affordable alternative. It is predicted that by 2050 the demand for palm oil will increase from 74 to 156 million tons a year<sup>15</sup>, based on a scenario where soybean oil consumption remains constant. The increased consumption of food items high in sugars, salts and fats will potentially lead to a rise in

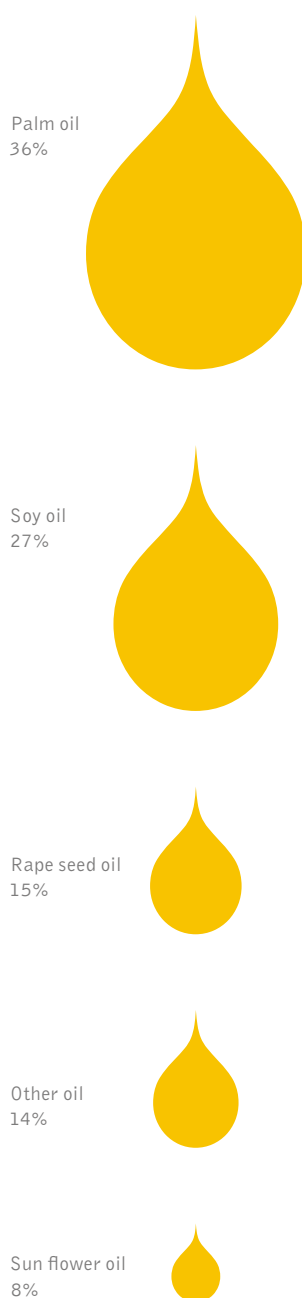
### World consumption of palm oil in million tons

Source: fapri - food and agriculture policy research institute, 2014: US and World Agriculture Outlook. Ames, ia: fapri



### World market share of vegetable oils 2012/2014

Source: USDA (United States Department of Agriculture), 2015



non-communicable diseases in developing Asian countries. Therefore, there is a need to improve the end use of palm oil for more nutritious food items that do not contribute to poor health, and to ensure that the production of palm oil by local farmers does not come at the cost of their own food security. Finding an alternative to palm oil would be challenging in Asia, considering its low cost and how accessible it is for poor rural and urban households, so the focus should be placed on improving production and management. The Roundtable of Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), a multi-stakeholder organization that certifies sustainable palm oil production, takes into consideration environmental and social criteria for the development of oil palm plantations but has yet to include explicit criteria to ensure food security for local producers and plantation laborers. The regulation of processed food consumption, as well as sound land use policies, require new forms of collaboration among ecologists, nutritionists and agronomists to develop strategies for meeting people's nutritional needs with healthier foods that do not entail further conversion of tropical forests. A higher consumption of RSPO-certified products increases the demand for sustainably produced palm oil and will encourage more producers to follow RSPO guidelines. Nevertheless, the RSPO has come under criticism for poor monitoring over the palm oil industry's activities. A useful addition would therefore be to involve civil society actors to work with communities to preemptively identify cultivatable tracts of land that would have minimal environmental and societal impacts. This could strengthen the communities' negotiating position before an oil palm company begins plantation development. The high-yielding nature of the oil palm will continue to make it a choice crop for vegetable oil production in many tropical countries, making the need even greater to ensure that the method of production does not come at the expense of the environment and local livelihoods. Good governance and adherence to rigorous environmental and social impact assessments are necessary to improve future oil palm development in the tropics. Palming the planet for poor nutrition needs to be changed for better use of resources as well as better nutrition of people. ■■■

- <sup>1</sup> USDA-FAS, «Indonesia: Palm oil production growth to continue»: Commodity Intelligence Report, March 19, 2009. Available at: <http://www.pecad.fas.usda.gov/highlights/2009/03/indonesia/>
- <sup>2</sup> USDA-FAS, «Indonesia: Rising Global Demand Fuels Palm Oil Expansion»: Commodity Intelligence Report, October 8, 2010. Available at: <http://www.pecad.fas.usda.gov/highlights/2010/10/Indonesia/>
- <sup>3</sup> FAOSTAT Online Statistical Service, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2015.
- <sup>4</sup> Sheil, Douglas, et al., «The impacts and opportunities of oil palm in Southeast Asia: What do we know and what do we need to know?»: CIFO 2009, Bogor, Indonesia.
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- <sup>6</sup> Vermeulen, Sonja, and Nathalie Goad, «Towards better practice in smallholder palm oil production»: International Institute for Environment and Development, 2006.
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- <sup>10</sup> Baker, P., and S. Friel, «Processed foods and the nutrition transition: evidence from Asia»: Obesity Reviews 15(7), p. 564-77, 2014.
- <sup>11</sup> Lee, Janice Ser Huay, Lian Pin Koh, and David S. Wilcove, «Junking tropical forests for junk foods?»: Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment in press, 2016.
- <sup>12</sup> Ickowitz, Amy, et al., «Dietary quality and tree cover in Africa»: Global Environmental Change 24, p. 287-294, 2014.
- <sup>13</sup> Al-Mahmood, S. Z., «Palm-Oil Migrant Workers Tell of Abuses on Malaysian Plantations»: The Wall Street Journal, 2015.
- <sup>14</sup> Evans, Ruth, and Geoffrey Griffiths, «Palm oil, land rights and ecosystem services in Gbarpolu County, Liberia»: Walker Institute for Climate System Research, University of Reading, 2013.
- <sup>15</sup> Corley, R. H. V., «How much palm oil do we need?»: Environmental Science & Policy 12(2), p. 134-139, 2009.

# Contract farming in Myanmar: From expectations to exploitation

Nwet Kay Khine

With Myanmar's new investment bill, foreign direct investments in the agricultural sector are booming and business conglomerates are interested in expanding their agricultural production through contract farming. Yet, in the absence of effective mechanisms for poverty reduction and adequate land tenure security, the fruits of contract farming have often been harvested solely by companies.

Since Myanmar's independence, the state has always been the ultimate land owner, with the power to expropriate land from farmers and grant non-transferrable tillage rights to them. According to Myanmar law, the acquisition of land is legitimate if the government decides that it is needed for the public interest. In return, the former land owners must be fully compensated for the losses. The sheer power that the state has over land rights has led to numerous cases of land grabbing.

In the late 1990s, the government started promoting an elite-driven agricultural growth model by reallocating land to mostly private investors. Without updating agricultural land maps, or conducting a census, policymakers were reckless enough to ignore the fact that little vacant land actually existed. More than 5.2 million acres<sup>1</sup> of what the military government called «waste land» was awarded to private agribusiness companies.<sup>2</sup> As it turned out, this «waste land» was in fact communal land shared by small farmers and families of ethnic minorities. Due to their practice of communal land ownership, these groups have never been accustomed to using land certificates and many of their cultivated areas were not

officially registered. As a result, the state assigned land to companies that had been in use by local farmers for decades. The implementation of large-scale agricultural projects as big as 50,000 acres led to the eviction of thousands of farmers from their hereditary lands.<sup>3</sup>

## Misusing contract farming for land grabbing

Often this kind of land grabbing came in the guise of contract farming. Since 2005, the government of Myanmar has put a lot of effort into encouraging investors from China, Thailand, Bangladesh, and Kuwait to invest in contract farms. The Thais for example have a formal agreement to farm 120,000 acres along the Thai-Myanmar border.<sup>4</sup> Yet, these business deals can hardly be classified as contract farming, which is defined as an agreement between buyers and farmers to establish conditions about the production and marketing of an agricultural product. Typically, the farmer agrees to provide, at a certain time, specified quantities of an agricultural product that meet the quality standards of the purchase. In turn, the buyer commits to purchase the product and, in some cases, to contributing to the production process through the supply of farm inputs, land preparation, or the provision of technical assistance. Ideally, both parties to the contract would benefit: Farmers are guaranteed a market outlet and enjoy reduced price uncertainty, while purchasing firms benefit from having a guaranteed supply of agricultural products that meet their specifications. In Myanmar, however, such a win-win situation for farm-

**Nwet Kay Khine** holds Master Degrees in Media, Journalism and Globalization from the Universities of Aarhus and Hamburg. In 2015 she co-authored the book «The Commons of Myanmar». She is a former scholarship fellow of the Heinrich Böll Foundation and worked on many different development projects in Myanmar. As a native of Mon State in Myanmar she prefers traditional Mon food. Her favourite dish is steamed curried fish wrapped in banana leaves.

ers and companies has been the exception rather than the rule. Instead, the term contract farming has often been used to legitimize the expropriation of land from farmers. Only in a few cases have companies offered any sort of compensation, as set out by Myanmar's law, but this was either to improve their public image or to appease the anger of the original land owners. When the Max Myanmar Group of Companies was accused of exploiting farmers, the company explained that it had offered a compensation fee of 20,000 Kyats per acre to 50 farmers who owned 391.63 acres of land.<sup>5</sup> It is hard to spell justice when an acre of land in Yangon's proximity was compensated at less than 20 US Dollars in 2009. Other companies just completely ignored calls to adequately provide compensation. Farmers had no choice other than to accept their fate and take whatever little they were offered in return for their losses. Thus, contract farming only paid off for companies and not for farmers.

Until U Thein Sein came into power in 2011, it was simply not possible for farmers to reclaim their property rights, as voices of discontent were severely suppressed under the military government. As soon as Myanmar became more politically open, people were finally free to express their deep dissatisfaction. Complaints of land grabbing became louder as new social and economic reforms allowed farmers to present cases of forceful land confiscation. Tensions from long-standing grievances peaked, and farmer-groups and land rights advocates tried to seek justice through official channels. The parliament even formed an investigative committee in 2012 to look at the cases of land confiscation.

## Land conflicts may continue despite new laws

Despite these negative experiences, the concept of contract farming is still at the top of the Myanmar's political agenda. The government has been closely working with international institutions like the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) to formulate a policy framework to increase foreign direct investments through contract farming. In September 2016, the government approved a bill on the Myanmar Investment Law<sup>6</sup> to provide investors with the possibility of extending the initial maximum land lease

period of 50 years by two ten-year periods. Furthermore, foreign investors can directly approach farmers for joint agricultural and manufacturing activities in order to gain access to their lands. The foreign business community welcomed this, as rules over land acquisition now have become clearer. The new law also allows farmers to use their land certificates to take up mortgages, and to sell or transfer land as inheritance. This is a major step toward helping farmers secure land ownership. Farmers can now use their land as collateral, as long as the land use abides by the government's prescription.

Although this new legal framework paved the way for real contract farming in Myanmar, it seems likely that the land conflicts will continue. The Myanmar Investment Law might promote foreign investments, but it lacks a mechanism to oversee the justice and fairness of the contracts agreed to between farmers and companies. The current legal structure still has too many loopholes that ultimately undermine the interest of the farmers and raise doubts as to whether balanced negotiation powers between both contract parties can be established. The existing land laws do not adequately recognize the customary land rights of farmers who lack proper titles or communal land ownership, which disproportionately impacts ethnic minorities practicing shifting cultivation.

As Si Thu from the local land rights advocacy organization, Land in Our Hand, puts it: «Land grabbing is no longer happening by clearing land with bulldozers and gun-carrying soldiers, as it happened in the past. Instead, farmers have fallen into the land-price-trap.» Many farmers now use their land titles as collateral for loans from ethnic Chinese brokers. Poor farmers are especially susceptible to becoming chronically indebted due to high-interest loans, and often end up selling their land titles for cash, condemning them to become yet another landless farmer. This is a problem prevalent in countries with a derelict agrarian economy, where peasants are just barely «hanging on,» such as in Myanmar. Some businessmen know this and exploit the situation. Kevin Woods, a researcher from Berkeley University, explains that «poor farmers are so vulnerable to selling their land title, especially when there are no rules or regulations on whether or not farmers can sell their title (under duress.) There are no regulations in place to prevent this in Myanmar. This is a very scary situation.»

With prevailing inequalities, the farmers who benefit from contract farming are those who have already accumulated a higher level of financial capacity, while the rest are prone to more structural vulnerability with higher indebtedness. A semi-feudal system has gradually developed out of this debt trap in areas including Myanmar's Dry Zone and Shan State. According to a recent study by Michigan University, Myanmar has a landless population ranging between 30 per cent and 50 per cent. This number is likely to increase if the current agricultural business model continues to develop.

## Making contract farming a success story in Myanmar

The success of contract farming has so far been limited. Due to repeated disasters, price volatility and climate change, farmers were not able to meet the quality, quantity, or the timing of the crops, as set out in the contract. Also, the obligations from the company side, including the provision of technical inputs, fertilizers and quality seeds were often not fulfilled either. Nevertheless, properly-operating contract farming schemes have a lot to offer without necessarily putting farmers at risk of land dispossession.

One of the few encouraging examples showing the potential of contract farming was the founding of the Myanmar Agribusiness Public Corporation (MAPCO) in 2012. The company aims to sustain a long-term business relationship with farmers by providing both technical and financial input. MAPCO also guarantees the purchase of a certain amount of rice from the farmers at a fair price. As a result, transaction costs for both sides were effectively reduced. Moreover, the contractual security fostered the development of small-scale contract farming in the form of a co-partnership among rural non-governmental organizations (NGOs), farmers and business companies. This shows that with the right marketing and financial strategy, as well as guaranteed fair purchasing prices, companies can contribute to a more sustainable livelihood of small-scale farmers.

Yet, contract farming can only fully become a success story in all of Myanmar if the government reverses policies that have resulted in low productivity and chronic rural indebtedness. This requires macro-economic stability, adequate infrastructure

to reach potential small-scale farmers and a law that finally recognizes communal land ownership, as it is practiced by farmers of ethnic minorities. In addition, limited access to quality research and extension support is also one of top factors contributing to the underperformance of Myanmar's agriculture. Previous governments gave no more than just lip-service to promoting agricultural education. While Thailand has been developing agricultural universities and schools in nearly every province in the last four decades, Myanmar has only established one agricultural university since its independence in 1948.

When the National League for Democracy (NLD) government opens a wider door to agribusiness companies in contract farming, as it is currently doing, it must similarly implement such fundamental reforms, in order to create an enabling environment for farmers. In short, as long as structural vulnerability is not tackled by politics, Myanmar farmers will not benefit and contract farming will remain an empty promise. ■■■

<sup>1</sup> One acre equals 0.4047 hectare, i.e. 2.5 acre roughly one hectare.

<sup>2</sup> McCarthy, S., «Land tenure security and policy tension in Myanmar»: Analysis from the East-West Center, No. 127, 2016. Available at: <http://www.eastwestcenter.org/system/tidf/private/api127.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=35865>

<sup>3</sup> Baker, T.A., «Lessons for the Potential Use of Contract Farming with Small Land Holding Farmers in Myanmar»: Vahu Development Institute, p.4. (2), 2011; Wikileaks, «Contract Farming in Burma» Created 12 January 2009, Origin: Embassy Rangoon, Classification: Confidential. Available at: [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09RANGOON25\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09RANGOON25_a.html)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Max Myanmar Holdings Ltd, «Land Compensation in Agriculture Sector», 2013. Available at: <http://www.maxmyanmargroup.com/index.php/news-room/news-release/111-land-compensation-in-agriculture-sector>

<sup>6</sup> Myanmar Investment Law (Draft), 2016. Available at: [http://www.dica.gov.mm/sites/dica.gov.mm/files/document-files/myanmar\\_investment\\_law\\_draft\\_as\\_of\\_060716\\_translated\\_by\\_kcy\\_14\\_july\\_2016.pdf](http://www.dica.gov.mm/sites/dica.gov.mm/files/document-files/myanmar_investment_law_draft_as_of_060716_translated_by_kcy_14_july_2016.pdf)



# China's overseas agricultural investments: Not what it appears

Feifei Cai

China's «Going Out» strategy has led to the rise of accusations concerning land grabs and destabilizing other countries for the sake of China's own food security. However, a careful consideration of the effects of Chinese agricultural investments shows that mostly host countries benefit from these investments. By contrast, Chinese companies often struggle with bureaucratic hurdles, minimizing potential profits. Instead of expressing constant critique, the international community should therefore help China reduce its investment risks.

China's foreign policy has been given many different names, depending on the perspective and the media coverage. China has been described as a development partner, a colonizer and an economic competitor in its approach towards foreign countries.<sup>1</sup> Lately, their growing overseas agricultural investments have moved to the center of public attention, particularly in regard to China's role in Africa. The intensive media coverage about Chinese investments in Africa on the one side, and the growing domestic demand for food products in China on the other, has made many observers question the real purpose of such a seemingly «national» scheme. China has been accused of grabbing African land and resources to feed its own people. However, in reality, the influence derived from outward agricultural investments has been exaggerated. The aims and interests of China's outgoing strategy in the agricultural sector are much more complex and diverse than suspected. When talking about Chinese agricultural investments, it is, therefore, important to put certain assumptions

about China into perspective in order to lend objectivity to the public debate.

Although the debate about Chinese «land grabbing» focuses on Africa, it is not the biggest recipient of Chinese agricultural investments overseas. In fact, in 2014 the largest share flowed into Asia, accounting for 60.3 per cent of total Chinese overseas agricultural investment, followed by Europe with 14.5 per cent of the total. Africa accounts for only 8.8 per cent of their agricultural investments abroad, placing them in third place.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Chinese companies do not simply acquire land from the state; instead, their primary investment strategy is to establish subsidiary branches or merge with local successful companies in host countries. Data shows that an increasing number of Chinese companies are in search of partnerships abroad. From 2013 to 2014, the number of mergers and acquisitions (M&A) deals increased by 86.9 per cent. In 2014 alone, 415 Chinese investment agencies founded 505 agricultural companies overseas and carried out 43 agricultural M&A deals with a total value of USD 3.56 billion.<sup>3</sup>

Even though this shows that Chinese agricultural companies are very active abroad, the business conditions to operate in foreign countries remain difficult. Especially in developing countries, where corruption can be high and local markets are often small and thus limit buying power, the costs for Chinese companies can be considerable. Furthermore, business goals are very heterogenic, and there are in fact many different strategic motivations for Chinese agricultural companies to invest abroad. While some overseas agricultural investments are still driven by state inter-

**Feifei Cai** is a researcher who works for the Chinese NGO Social Resources Institution (SRI). She is in charge of the field Responsible Investment at SRI and is focusing on the impacts of Chinese land-based investments in Southeast Asia and Africa. She also organizes a network on sustainable food and the agriculture system in China and advocates these topics on platforms like the G20 and BRICS. Her favourite food is fresh seafood. Feifei Cai was born and grown up in a small town along the Chinese coast where seafood is the main source of nutrition. Every time she eats seafood it reminds her of home.

ventions, other companies invest abroad to wholly integrate their supply chain by realizing M&A deals in the agricultural sector. Recently, huge deals went to developed countries, where advanced technologies and markets helped improve the Chinese companies' control over the food supply chain and strengthen their pricing power. However, the trend shows that China's agricultural M&A deals are increasing in developing countries, where rich natural resources and growing markets could be utilized by Chinese companies to integrate the supply chain from downstream to upstream.<sup>4</sup>

## Internal promotion and external crisis drove investments

One of the driving forces for China's rapid expansion in outward agricultural investments can be found in the government's new «Going Out» policy. In 2008, the Chinese government specified that it wants to «encourage domestic companies to go out and build a stable and reliable imported food security system, which helps strengthen the country's capacity to ensure domestic food security.» This policy needs to be understood as a continuation of China's «Opening Up» policy from 2000; however, with a different focus. While the «Opening Up» policy was a rather inward directed strategy to promote economic, technological and cultural exchanges between China and other countries and to facilitate market access for foreign companies, the current «Going Out» policy in turn is an outward directed strategy that tries to help Chinese companies settle down abroad and operate multinationally. It was in 2008 that the central government started to form an official working mechanism and roll out specific policies to support companies' agricultural investment overseas. At the same time, the Chinese Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) signed cooperation agreements with the China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China to give financial support to Chinese companies. The government and financial institutions worked hand in hand to encourage local companies to invest abroad by providing low-interest loans, simplifying administrative and approval processes and reforming foreign exchange policies.

Another reason that triggered China's increasing outward agricultural investments was the worldwide food price crisis in 2007 and 2008. In the preceding 10 years, the storage of grain in the world had decreased by one third, putting pressure on grain prices. Also, tensions between food supply and demand had caused the food price to increase substantially, resulting in the largest hunger crisis ever recorded in history.<sup>5</sup> These dramatic events led to a rethinking of the Chinese food policy. The central government put «food security», which it considers as the base for a nation's stability, at the heart of its strategies. Prompted by impending food crises and limited domestic natural resources, the government shifted its food policy from importing food to meet production shortages to directly investing in agricultural companies abroad. China's No.1 Central Document<sup>6</sup> from 2014 outlines this approach by pointing out that China wants to «explore the establishment of funds for international agricultural trade and investment.» This idea is further elaborated upon in a policy paper from 2015 about the «One Belt One Road» Initiative, which suggests expanding mutual investment and deepening cooperation between agriculture, forestry, husbandry, fishery, agricultural machinery and agricultural processing. This shows that the Chinese government is willing to protect domestic food security by promoting outward agricultural investments.

China's new strategy has already taken effect. The annual amount of outward agricultural investments fluctuated around USD 200 million between 2003 and 2008; by 2009, it had grown by 99.5 per cent to USD 342.79 million. Since then, it has maintained an average annual growth rate of 53.3 per cent. In 2012, the growth rate peaked at 83.9 per cent and then fell back to 24.1 per cent in 2013.

## Mixed impacts on food security

This rapid development indicates that the Chinese government sees outward agricultural investments as key to achieving food security. In this regard, an official from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs once remarked that providing food security in Africa and reducing the continent's dependence on the global food supply would stabilize the demand and price of global markets, which indirectly contributes to China's food

security.<sup>7</sup> But in reality, the impacts of these overseas investments are mixed and it is still too early to tell whether this goal will be achieved.

Firstly, Chinese companies face regulatory constraints when transferring agricultural products from host countries to China. For example, companies only enjoy a reduced import tariff if they receive the so called quotas of tax reduction. Depending on the food product a company is producing, it needs to satisfy different organizational criteria. A sugar company, for instance, needs to be state-owned and is required to have a certain daily processing capacity and a certain minimum revenue of over RMB 450 million in order to qualify for a tariff reduction. On the other hand, agricultural companies that do not obtain the tariff quota have to pay higher tax rates for imports. This increases the costs and risks for a company, leaving little profit when products are being imported. Besides heavy taxes and fees, Chinese companies also face other challenges, including long and complicated approval procedures, inspection and quarantine procedures and seed management regulations. Long-distance transport and storage requirements also extensively increase the cost of certain agricultural products. Hence, there are unequally distributed trade barriers for Chinese agricultural companies, generating competitive disadvantages due to bureaucratic and fiscal obligations. Because of these obstacles, companies' willingness to invest in the agricultural sector abroad and transfer products back to China is limited.

Secondly, despite a series of policies encouraging overseas agricultural investment, there is no real evidence this really has an impact on the food security situation in China.<sup>8</sup> According to a report released by the International Institute of Sustainable Development (IISD), out of 54 «confirmed» Chinese agricultural investment projects, only four projects are actually in operation and produce grains sold to China.<sup>9</sup> The link between agricultural investments and food security thus seems to be rather insignificant. The soaring demand from Chinese consumers still continues to be met by buying food products from foreign countries.

However, on the contrary side, Chinese agricultural investments have helped improve the food situation in host countries. Investments in staple grain production, for example, have led to a general increase in the food supply in the host countries. The

reason for this is that many Chinese companies prefer to sell their products on the local market, as they face many challenges when they want to transfer their products to China. Also, sometimes agreements with governments in the host countries oblige the companies to sell their agricultural goods on local markets.<sup>10</sup>

The situation is different when investments go to non-grain crops. Such investments result in the shrinking of the plantation area for staples and consequently, the food supply in the host country decreases. Taking China's agricultural investments in Laos as an example, the arrival of Chinese companies transformed the plantation structure in south Laos significantly. While the plantation area of vegetables/bean, starchy vegetables, sugarcanes, tobacco and tea grew, the plantation area of the staple upland rice decreased from 122,116 hectares to 106,682 hectares.<sup>11</sup>

## Opportunities from investments should be seized

Based on these first findings, it is still too early to draw a final conclusion about the effects of Chinese outward agricultural investments. It still remains to be seen how they will influence the food situation in China, host countries and in the world. What already is certain today, is that China's outward agricultural investments are expected to expand even further, especially in light of the implementation of the One Belt One Road Initiative. Despite these prospects, Chinese companies are still at the initial stage of «going out,» without adequate awareness, methods and experiences to handle the challenges of different political contexts, market risks as well as social and environmental requirements from stakeholders. Negative social and environmental consequences can arise from Chinese investments when effective laws, policies and safeguards system are not in place in the host countries.

Although many western media and scholars are quick to condemn Chinese agricultural investments as a nationally driven policy to secure China enough food products, a close examination of the numbers and scale of actually implemented projects reveals that there is a big gap between announced and realized agricultural investments abroad. Furthermore, intensive media coverage about land grabbing in

Africa will not only lead to misunderstandings, but also prevent the public from pushing forward on other important issues such as higher environmental and social compliance standards that companies need to meet when investing in foreign agricultural sectors. Opportunities arising from Chinese investments need to be seized, in order to make them beneficial for local society and communities.<sup>12</sup>

The Chinese government and NGOs are already paying more attention to making China's outward agricultural investments more responsible and sensitive to local peculiarities through extensive research. Wider international support for China's «going out» process could therefore pave the way for improvements with regard to regulations and more sustainable business activities. Due to their important role in understanding the reality on the ground, Chinese NGOs are expected to play a bigger part in monitoring companies and advocating for responsible investment.

It is clear that China's key challenge will be to make outward agricultural investments more responsible. Building trust through improved cooperation mechanisms among government, companies, communities and NGOs should be the solution. For this to happen, common efforts from all stakeholders are needed to communicate with each other based on evidence, respect and mutual understanding. ■■■

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Zhao Li, «China's Agriculture «Going out» Strategy Target on Foreign Countries»: Tengxun News. Chinese version available on <http://edu.qq.com/a/20160421/057047.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Lester R. Brown, «Full Planet, Empty Plates: The New Geopolitics of Food Scarcity»: Shanghai Technology Education Pressing, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China published the No.1 Document of Central Government every year. The topics of these documents always focus on China's most important issues, which need to be solved urgently. Since this document play programmatic and guiding role to lead Chinese government's job every year, it attracts a lot of different stakeholders' attentions.

<sup>7</sup> Gao Wei, Mengchun, Zhao Caiyun, «To Ensure China's Food Security from the perspective of China-Africa Cooperation»: Economics Relevance Research, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Deborah Bräutigam, Zhang Haisen, «Green Dreams: Myth and Reality in China's Agricultural Investment in Africa»: Third World Quarterly. Vol. 34, No. 9, 2013.

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# The limits of industrial food strategies and alternatives

Shefali Sharma and Ginger Fletcher Santillan

Industrial food strategies are challenging environmental limits and are pushing small-scale farmers out of the market. New food policies are needed in order to address the growing demand for food. While countries like India and China are basing their politics on large-scale industries, local alternatives exist and may lead the way for new strategies.

**Shefali Sharma** is director of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy's (IATP) Agricultural Commodities and Globalization Initiatives, which work on sustainable food, farm and trade systems. She has a Master of Philosophy in Development Studies from the Institute of Development Studies in Sussex. One special dish that Ms. Sharma loves is called *allu ka parantha* (potato stuffed fried bread). Every time she visits her parents in India, her mother makes it on the first morning.

**Ginger Fletcher Santillan** is from California where she graduated from Humboldt State University with a degree in International Studies. After graduating, she lived and worked in various Latin American countries including Ecuador, Colombia, and Mexico. Recently in 2016 she has been a meat industry research intern for the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. Ms. Fletcher's favorite Asian dish is pad see ew from Thailand. She loves the flat rice noodles and broccoli in this dish. When she was a child, her mom used to take her to the Thai restaurant down the street from their house in Santa Barbara, California.

By 2025, the total population of Asia and the Pacific region will reach about 4.4 billion—this is more than a third of the world's current population<sup>1</sup>, and it will mean a greater demand on agriculture and strain on natural resources. The Green Revolution, an agricultural strategy that has been hailed as having solved Asia's impending food crisis in the 1960s and 1970s, is now criticized for creating a vast number of ecological and equity problems. Industrial agriculture has led to the depletion of water tables, soil salinization and numerous other problems for long term food production.

There is also much talk about the growing Asian middle class and their dramatic change in dietary preferences. On the one hand, urban Asians are increasing their intake of meat, dairy and eggs, as well as sugars and fats. This nutrition trend has public health, environmental and economic consequences. On the other hand, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization, twelve Asian countries belonged to the «low-income, food deficit countries» as recently as 2015.<sup>2</sup> This list includes for example India, which for the first time also became a net exporter of food. A food security strategy that fulfills the dire needs of the poor and ensures access to the dietary pref-

erences of the relatively rich continues to be an unmet challenge, with significant trade-offs for Asians as well as the rest of the world.

Of course food policies are different across Asia, but sometimes they share common components. For instance, some countries' strategies prioritize increasing food production through industrialized methods, where transnational corporations and their investments play an increasingly important role. China and India are paradigmatic of this food strategy. It is worth taking a closer look at them, since both are trying to meet a growing demand through an expansion in industrialized food production and face many common challenges linked to this approach.

## China's challenge of feeding the new urban middle class

China has made remarkable progress in boosting national economic development and agricultural production. This has led to a transition in nutrition, which takes place at different speeds in China. While the urban population is changing its nutritional trends and is undergoing a westernization of food patterns due to higher consumer incomes, rural China is still lagging behind, and parts of its population continue to suffer from inadequate nutrition.

A big challenge to China's national food strategy is posed by a growing urban population and its big appetite for meat and dairy products. By 2050, China will add an additional 292 million people to urban areas<sup>3</sup>. In 1980, Chinese meat consumption was approximately 11 kg per person; today it is approximately 59 kg per person and by 2020,



it is projected to be approximately 65 kg per person<sup>4</sup>. This nutritional transition is leading to adverse health consequences, as the rates of diabetes and cardiovascular disease increase. From 1982 to 2002, the percentage of people suffering from obesity had already increased by 414 per cent<sup>5</sup>.

When the nutrition institute of China's Health Ministry recently published a recommendation to reduce Chinese citizens' meat consumption by 50 per cent, it received considerable international attention. It is questionable if the country's rising middle class will base their diets on governmental guidelines and cut down on meat consumption. Eating meat has historically always been associated with the notion of wealth and progress. Moreover, China's agricultural and economic policies are actively supporting meat production, both through increasing domestic capacity and by acquiring infrastructure, technology and firms from abroad that can ensure imports of meat, feed and food processing. Examples of this can be seen in Chinese-based companies investing in farms and ports in different parts of the world. Over the last two decades, and with the help of public and private funds, a powerful group of companies has emerged with vested interests along the supply chain, encouraging expansion of the meat sector, marking a major change in China's food security strategy<sup>6</sup>. China is moving away from a policy of food self-sufficiency towards a policy that relies increasingly on imports. Since 2005, it has been importing over half of the world's traded soybeans, and in recent years, increased its imports of corn. The government also approved the buyout of the U.S.'s largest pork producer—Smithfield Foods—by Chinese-based transnational Shuanghui Company. This makes China the biggest global pork producer—pork being the Chinese meat of choice.

While Chinese state enterprises and foreign and domestic companies benefit from this approach, the strategy has come with numerous costs—including massive agricultural pollution, antibiotic resistance, and the deadly avian flu.

## Indian small farmers' struggle with big business

Although still very low by global standards, including China, India's meat consumption is also on the rise, with poultry consumption leading the way. Rising incomes,

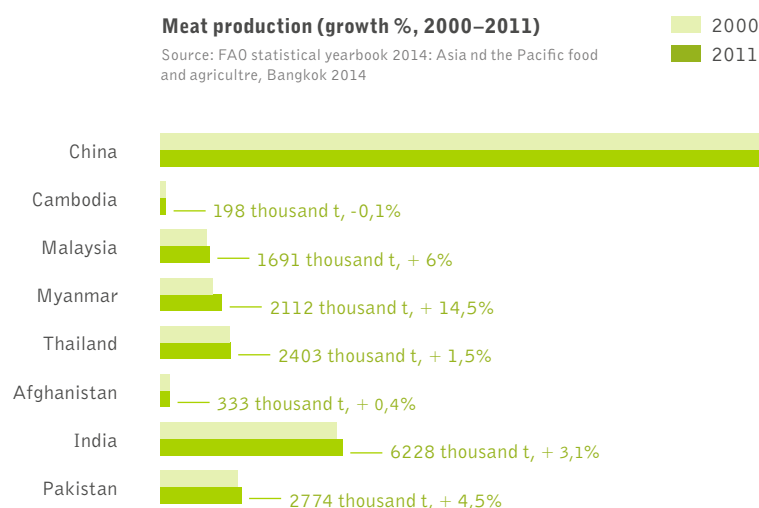
urbanization, fast food restaurants' marketing campaigns, and the emergence of supermarket chains contribute to these shifts in diets. India's fast food industry is projected to double in size between 2013 and 2016 to 1.12 billion US Dollars, thanks in part to the largest youth population on earth<sup>7</sup>. These changes will have a dramatic impact on the country's small scale farmers, processors, fresh markets and street vendors, which currently still dominate the food system. Supermarket chains tend to favor industrially produced meat, vegetables and dairy products from transnational companies that can consistently supply large volumes and meet their exacting standards. Smaller players will simply be unable to integrate themselves into this value chain.

There is a similar development in the dairy sector. Indian milk consumption has doubled since the 1970s and the country has become the world's largest milk producer<sup>8</sup>. Small-scale, independent farmers in the informal sector still produce about 70 to 85 per cent of the milk, but government policies have been encouraging a shift towards large-scale cooperatives and private dairies. As elsewhere in the world, small producers suffer from milk price volatility. This is likely to result in a highly concentrated dairy sector in India (mimicking the global dairy market), with a few large companies dominating the market and price.

## Transformative food strategies do exist

While much emphasis has been placed both globally and regionally on the «need» to produce more industrialized food and increase exports (hence increase Gross Domestic Product) to ensure food security, little effort has been made to comprehensively address culturally appropriate nutrition, distribution of existing food supplies, equity, and human rights and environmental degradation. However, alternative, people-led strategies that focus more on small-scale farmers and de-centralized food systems do exist. They stand a far better chance to empower the most food insecure.

The System of Rice Intensification (SRI), which is widely used in Cambodia and India, is an important component of such an alternative food strategy. It is an agro-ecological innovation in rice cultivation and allows farmers to increase their rice production and incomes through a shift to



a sustainable management of plants, water, soil and nutrients. The introduction of SRI gives small-scale farmers an alternative to expensive external inputs like agrochemicals. SRI promotes farmer to farmer knowledge sharing, the use of local seeds, and the efficient and productive management of available water resources. Furthermore, the soil is improved through the use of green manure, and results are formidable: In Cambodia farmers experienced a 30 to 150 per cent increase in rice yields in 2011<sup>9</sup>. In India, the average grain productivity with SRI was 38.87 per cent more than that of the conventional method. For a six-member farm family, this translates to 69 additional days of food security<sup>10</sup>. By implementing SRI strategies, rice farmers across Cambodia and India have benefited from improved access to food, better health and increased income.

Another successful food security strategy is the Homestead Food Production method. In Bangladesh, garden-based homestead food production is seen as an important strategy to improving nutrition among women and children. In 1990, the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Helen Keller International (HKI) started a pilot program with a 1000 Bangladeshi households to explore existing gardening practices and the feasibility of promoting low-cost vegetable gardens and nutritional education. The pilot program demonstrated that with technical assistance and support, households in Bangladesh can produce fruits and vegetables throughout the year. Moreover, the combination of home gardening, nutritional education and gender aspects can have a very positive impact on vegetable consumption. In conjunc-

tion with the government and other NGOs, HKI's program (which now also includes small-scale poultry-raising and egg production) has expanded to 900,000 households across Bangladesh, Nepal and Cambodia. Importantly, the participation in the home gardening program and the income it generates has also helped to empower women<sup>11</sup>.

## More food sovereignty as a solution to growing food demand

Food activists rightfully challenge the «production centric» narrative of global food policymakers. SRI and homestead food production are just two successful examples, refuting that more industrial production is the key solution to addressing growing food demand in Asia. Also, an abundance of food can still result in malnutrition and starvation, as long as policies continue to ignore inequality and injustice and fail to strengthen distribution systems.

A critical element of a food security strategy must address the critical and growing inequality between the urban middle class and the rural poor in Asia. While no «one size fits all» food security strategy can apply to a region as diverse as Asia, it is clear that some of the most transformative examples of addressing food security entail creating greater food sovereignty—resulting in ecological integrity, better health and nutrition and empowerment of small producers. The Indian Right to Food Movement for instance, has pushed to integrate the procurement of coarse grains (millets, maize), most often produced by small and poor

— 79,216 thousand t, + 3,2%

farmers, as part of the new Indian Food Security Act. More income for small producers means greater food security in rural communities and less pressure to migrate to urban areas.

In terms of meat, nutrition and growing demand—much more needs to be done to educate the wealthier population about the ecological, social and public health costs of industrial meat production. Moreover, the clear public health risks of over-consuming meat and processed foods must be better understood. Supporting small-scale, humane production of livestock and poultry, rather than replacing it with the failed Western model of industrial meat production, would be one clear way to support also food security among rural producers and meet the higher demand for meat. It is important to acknowledge that this meat demand is not inevitable and that in part, it has been created by clever corporate marketing and bad policy. ■■■

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# Street food in Asia: An industry that is much better than its reputation

Florentinus Gregorius Winarno

From ancient Greece to Pompeii, from China to Turkey and beyond, street food has a long and colorful history. Today, around 2.5 billion people eat street food every day. Especially in Asia, street food has become an urban mainstay and is part of the local food scene in large cities and small towns alike.

Many Asians buy the ready-to-eat foods and beverages on their way to work or during their lunch breaks. Consumers come from every social class and businessmen are often seen eating their lunches next to construction workers from the countryside. The benefits of street food seem to be apparent to everybody: It is cheap, easily accessible, often nutritious, and offers an endless culinary variety of traditional dishes for every taste.

Yet, street food enterprises are often not welcomed by local authorities. Their activities are seen as a hindrance to «modernization.» Hawkers selling food and beverages are considered to be part of the informal sector and thus benefit from competitive advantages. Unlike licensed eating establishments, they have considerably lower operating costs. Finally, officials scrutinize street food vendors for having poor hygiene practices and for contributing to the spread of diseases. In spite of these concerns, street food in Asia is much better than its reputation. The significance of the street food industry for Asian societies has been ignored for too long by politics. In effect, street food bears positive social, economic and nutritional aspects, which need to be recognized by local authorities and governments.

## A driver of social inclusion and economic development

In times of urbanization, street food micro-industries play a crucial role in the social inclusion and participation of vulnerable groups in big cities. Urban population growth has stimulated a rise in the number of hawkers in metropolises throughout the world. Since street food enterprises are generally small in size and require only basic facilities and skills for the preparation of food, just about anybody with a small amount of capital can set up a food-stall.

The potential gains in income are appealing for newcomers to the cities. Many migrant workers who are in search of employment obtain their first income from selling foods and beverages on the street. Women, who play a great role in preparing, marketing and selling street foods, have also benefited from the sector. These micro-industries offer important employment opportunities to many women, enabling them to make a living of their own. The expansion of the street food sector is also being favored by a change in eating patterns. Due to the migration from rural areas and foreign countries and the resulting living conditions, many working people need to eat outside their homes. As a result, the demand for relatively inexpensive, tasty ready-to-eat food has increased as people have less time to prepare meals. The street food industry is therefore an important first job-provider for many people and prevents vulnerable social groups from slipping into poverty.

By offering business opportunities, the sale of street food can make a sizeable contribution to the economy of a develop-

### Prof. Florentinus Gregorius

**Winarno** is an expert on nutrition and food technology. He finished his PhD in Food Technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1970, and chaired the FAO's Codex Alimentarius Commission from 1991 to 1995. He is also acknowledged as Indonesia's Father of Food Science and Technology. Prof. Winarno champions Indonesian dishes that are served with the traditional soy product tempeh. Tempeh is made by a natural culturing and controlled fermentation process that binds soybeans into a cake form. In a country like Indonesia, where animal products are considered expensive, tempeh is a perfect substitute, since it is high in protein and vitamin B12.

ing country. The impact of the street food industry on the economic development of a country has long been neglected and underestimated. The reason for this is that the street food industry is seen as a part of the informal sector, which typically describes loosely organized and often non-enumerated economic activities. This makes it hard to collect solid statistical data. Yet, from an economic perspective, the division between the informal and formal sectors is not always clear. Suppliers and consumers may «cross sectors» to exchange goods and individuals may be active in both formal and informal economic endeavors.

## Eradicating malnutrition through street food

Street food is not only appreciated for the role it plays in the cultural and social heritage of societies, it also has become an essential pillar in the provision of food to the population. In fact, street food is crucial when it comes to maintaining the necessary nutrition status for large parts of the population. Those with little or no income depend almost exclusively on food supplied by street food vendors. For many, the food-stalls are the least expensive and most accessible means of obtaining a nutritionally balanced meal outside their homes. Thus street food can be a key element in the improvement of food security worldwide and in Asia in particular.

Governments and public health authorities nevertheless remain skeptical of street food and fear that an unregulated street food industry might lead to a backlash in tourism. Officials are especially concerned

about the risk of food poisoning outbreaks, which is often linked to the microbiological quality of the water used to prepare food and drinks. Other sources generally seen as contributing to microbial contamination are the preparation areas, cooking and serving utensils, raw materials, undercooked and improperly stored food and the personal hygiene of vendors. While health concerns about food contamination linked to street food might be legitimate in some cases, the number of documented food poisoning cases stemming from street food has been limited. In fact, the incidence of such is surprisingly low, with a study from 2012 showing rates comparable to normal restaurants.<sup>1</sup> Epidemiological studies suggesting that street food contributes to a significant number of food poisoning cases are inadequate due to deficiencies in knowledge about important parameters in the food chain and host pathogen interactions. It is rather more likely that the health risk of food is not only determined by the concentration of various additives and other contaminants in a food product, but also by cumulative daily intake of certain contaminants or additives throughout a consumer's diet.

Against this background, politics should move away from putting the street food industry under general suspicion, and start informing consumers and hawkers about the benefits of a well-balanced street food diet in order to fight malnutrition in Asia. Providing access to safe water supplies for street food stalls would be a first important measure to promote food safety. For instance, authorities could oblige the street food industry to harvest rain water, which if treated properly can serve as a fresh potable



water supply and has a better microbiological quality than water collected from local family wells. Such interventions would ensure safe food practices and improve people's nutrition. Besides improving the environmental conditions, authorities could also focus on educating the food handlers in hygienic standards, since the lack of knowledge among hawkers is often the core problem of malnutrition. Moreover, the adoption of good agriculture practices through hazard analysis would significantly reduce risk in the street food consumption.

## Political recognition is needed

It is clear that street food can be paramount when it comes to food security. Given that millions of people depend on this source of nutrition, street food will certainly continue to evolve and tempt passers-bys to stop for a snack or a drink. Unfortunately, the political mills are grinding rather slowly. Only in the late 1990s did the United Nations (UN) and other organizations begin to recognize that street vendors had been an under-

used method of delivering fortified foods to populations. In 2007, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) recommended considering methods to add nutrients and supplements to street foods that are commonly consumed by a particular culture<sup>2</sup>. Although these are first signs of a rethinking about street food, these recommendations are not sufficient and have not been echoed by all developing countries. To enable official recognition and control of the street food industry as integral part of the food supply, appropriate regulations should be prepared and incorporated into existing food regulations. Above all, active collaboration of all stakeholders, including consumer associations, toward the strengthening and proper enforcement of public health policies to ensure safe practices and a safer and healthier society is needed. ■■■

<sup>1</sup> Rahman et al., «Food Safety Knowledge Attitude and hygiene practices among the street food vendors in Northern Kuching city, Sarawak»: Borneo Science 31; September 2012.

<sup>2</sup> FAO, «Promises and Challenges of the informal food sector»: FAO 2007.

*Lunch is another peak hour for street food vendors in Thailand. It is not easy to secure good locations nearby the offices, which are crowded with working people and competitions among vendors are high. A group of blue collar engineering workers are trying to save time by quickly eating their meals.*





*A mobile food vendor with a variety of choices makes it convenient for instant buying. Thai street food vendors are required to register for a one-year license with the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration but there are a huge number of unregistered peddlers.*



*With intensive experience as Head Chef in a number of five-star hotels in Thailand and worldwide, «Uncle Chom» is accustomed to wearing the white uniform while cooking. In fact, he has turned himself to serve street people for many years.*





*Mohammad Ali Road in Mumbai, on an Eid Day: Vermicelli (top) and Kebabs (bottom) are specialties for the festive day. During Ramzan (Ramadan), the area is Mumbai's street food hotspot, teeming with restaurants and stands. But it is not just the Muslims who come here: People from all of Mumbai's communities savour these delicacies.*







Fort Area in Mumbai, during lunch hour: People descend from their offices to grab a bite. Fort is one of the oldest areas of Mumbai, today a business district. Besides enjoying street food, hundreds of thousands of office-going Mumbaikars receive their daily home-cooked lunch through the Dabbawallahs, known for their reliability of service, as shown in the critically acclaimed Bollywood movie «The Lunchbox».



Khau Galli, Zaveri Bazaar, Mumbai. Khau Gallis, literally «Food Street», have sprung up in many commercial areas of Mumbai and other cities. Zaveri Bazaar is a silver trade market, one of the oldest in town. Papads, a crispy wafer made from lentil, rice or sorghum flour, made for a quick snack. Their production and sale requires little equipment and capital; thus it is often women or children who sell them.

Photographer: Nikhil Roshan  
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*Wala Noor wali, works in his ancestral tea shop in Qissa Khwani bazar in Peshawar, Pakistan. Historically, Qissa Khwani was known for its tea shops, where traders from different places used to sit and tell stories, that is how it got the name Qissa Khwani meaning place where people tell stories. It is also reputed for its green tea and specific kettles.*

Photographer: Hassan Turi  
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*Textile workers in Cambodia buy street foods during their lunch break. The mass fainting of factory workers across the country, sparked a debate in Cambodia if the nutrition is too unbalanced for hourly long work.*

Photographer: Heng Monorom  
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# «In India nationalism is defined by what you eat»

An Interview with Veena Shatrugna by Sadia Sohail

*India has experienced enormous economic growth in the last years. Yet, many people still suffer from hunger and malnutrition due to misguided food policies and imposed ideologies. Veena Shatrugna talks about the politics of nutrition in India and how elitist and upper caste ideas about the «right» nutrition contributed to malnutrition among the poor.*

In 2015, the Global Hunger Index Report ranked India 20th amongst leading countries with a serious hunger situation. Although the government implemented numerous food policies in the last decades, India still has one of the highest malnutrition rates in Asia. What is going wrong?

India is a society divided by caste and class, with clear-cut stratifications. This social division can also be seen in the nutrition of Indians. India's high malnutrition rate has been produced through the genius of the elite, who handout guidelines and popular knowledge about food and nutrition that do not correspond to the living conditions of the poor. The poor, however, depend on the state for their basic needs. The crucial question, therefore, is «Who plans for whom?» The Indian bureaucrats and top nutritionists are all from a certain caste and class; they have never looked at the lives of the poor and Dalits. Instead, the government subtly communicates to the poor «If your stomach is full, you should be grateful.» This is very ingenious, because your stomach could be full with plain rice or chapattis, but you could still feel weak and listless.

How does malnutrition manifest itself in India?

The core problem is that our diet is largely based on cereals. In the absence of good quality proteins, vitamins and minerals from eggs, fruits, vegetables, nuts, and meats, cereals get converted into fats. After all, the human body requires a wide range of nutrients to develop proper organs and tissues such as nerves, blood and muscles. The lack of these protective foods in diets results in a paucity of important nutrients. This is the reason why the poor often suffer from a calorie and protein deficiency, and why we in India are prone to chronic diseases like diabetes. We have become fat-thin people. We are thin but our body tissue is all fat. The consequences of this cereal-diet are devastating. It affects the ability of children to put on height during their growing years. Up to 30 per cent of the adult population and 40 per cent of children are too short and underweight.

**Veena Shatrugna** is a medical doctor by profession and the former deputy director of India's National Institute of Nutrition in Hyderabad. For three and a half decades, she has worked on nutrition and health issues, especially those impacting women and children. Dr. Shatrugna's research on hunger and food politics in India has put things in perspective for her; after seeing how little people have to eat, she does not occupy herself with what she gets to eat or what her favorite dish could be.

**Sadia Sohail** works as the Coordinator of the resource governance programme at Heinrich Böll Foundation's India office in New Delhi. She has a masters degree in environmental science and has worked extensively on environmental governance and regulatory aspects of waste management especially e-waste and municipal solid waste in India. Sadia is a typical foodie and loves to gorge on Indian street food.

Amartya Sen once said «No famine has ever taken place in the history of the world in a functioning democracy.» Why did the Indian democracy not succeed at eradicating hunger?

It depends on what a democracy prioritizes. In a democracy where you cannot see under-nutrition, you do not prioritize it. Economists can calculate the mortality rate of a country, but they see nothing significant, when there is rampant hunger, disease and under-nutrition. There are economists like Arvind Panagariya, the vice-chairman of NITI Aayog [government's economic think-tank] saying that Indians are genetically short and that this has nothing to do with malnutrition<sup>1</sup>. This is absurd and these kinds of debates keep India from addressing the core issues. Today, half the country is under drought, and bureaucrats play this down with figures to show that it is not so bad. You may not see children starving to death, but you have people walking with anemia, with multiple nutrient deficiencies, people who are underweight and stunted. Democracy does not privilege them; instead, democracy privileges the rich, when power plants and malls are financed. We have to ask, whose democracy are we talking about, who can really exercise democratic rights in this country? Amartya Sen does not talk about that.

What role does the government play in this?

Instead of altering the official diet recommendations and diversifying the availability of food, the government invests solely in the production and distribution of cereals. The Public Distribution System (PDS) deals exclusively with the provision of wheat and rice. However, even these cereals do not reach the poorest in adequate amounts, and thus do not give much room for improving quality of life. Then there is the issue of the government banning beef in many states. In some states, even eggs have been taken out of the mid-day meals provided to schoolchildren. In this way, the foods that would provide people with quality proteins, such as poultry, eggs and meat, have become illegitimate. Beef, for example, is seen as undesirable, although it is the cheapest form of protein that common people in India can afford. The government promotes a certain food policy for ideological reasons. It is privileging a vegetarian lifestyle because those in power have access and control over most democratic institutions. Cow protection has been enshrined in the constitution to assuage the upper caste Brahmins. Due to the hegemonic vegetarian cultures of the upper castes, it is believed that any meat is impure and killing a cow is akin to killing your mother! As a result, people are pushed to being vegetarians. This leads to a situation where calories are derived only from cereals because the poor cannot afford other quality vegetarian food, such as fruits, nuts, vegetables, milk and milk products.

Are most Indians really vegetarians?

The belief that all Indians are vegetarians is a popular stereotype. In reality, only the Brahmins, Jains and Vaishyas [upper castes] are true vegetarians. In the North East, in Kerala, many castes in the South, in West Bengal, and among most Dalits, beef is eaten. So, we have a lot of regional differences, depending on the availability or the extent of urbanization. As you come to the cities, there are only two to three kinds of meat available, mostly chicken and mutton because Muslims will not eat pork and certain upper caste Hindus will not eat beef. I would estimate that between 80 and 85 per cent of India's population are non-vegetarian. Yet, India wants the world to believe that it is a

vegetarian country, because today India is defining nationalism by what you eat. This is a very dangerous development!

Prime Minister Modi has spoken out against cow-defending fundamentalists by calling them «miscreants». Are religious beliefs getting out of hand in India?

We are going through a very difficult phase, where being patriotic means not eating beef. Beef has become such a frightening issue that today you cannot even have mutton in your fridge because people may suspect it to be beef. A Muslim was recently lynched in Dadri [near Delhi] by a Hindu mob because he was accused of killing a cow. States like Maharashtra and Haryana have banned all buffalo meat, bull meat, and of course cow meat. The dominant Hindutva mindset is creating havoc and affecting not just eating habits, but also livelihoods. The lives and eating cultures of the meat eating population are under the scanner in India. Their very existence has become illegitimate. It is nothing but a brute hegemonic culture of the upper caste at play.

If politics does not succeed at giving the people the food they need; do you think that economic growth will do the job?

I doubt it. Economic growth is measured in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), but GDP does not translate into food. Using a simple economic criterion and expecting it to relate directly to food and hunger does not work. Also, minimum wages in India are still among the worst in the world and do not allow people to purchase the food they need. In fact, the minimum wage in India is tied to the number of calories that a family of three needs per day. Hence, a family will receive just enough money to buy the food that will provide them with sufficient calories. Most of the time, this food is rice. This is pathetic, because in the end, families receiving the minimum wage are bound to only having rice. Logically, the consequences of such a diet are devastating. Even if your income rises, the ability to buy quality food is limited if you live in a remote area, where people cannot grow food. We have a huge migrating and landless population that cannot grow their own food, and consequently, they are forced to depend on the Public Distribution System.

Infants are particularly vulnerable to malnutrition. Feeding and care, which are typically seen as women's duties, has significant implications for the health of children. Is India's high child malnutrition also linked to nutritional discrimination in the households?

There is no evidence that women in India face nutritional discrimination. In poor households, both men and women are badly off when it comes to nutrition. Yet it is true that the effects of malnutrition are more profound for women because their iron requirements for the formation of blood are higher. Women menstruate every month and they have babies. Over 50 per cent of women suffer from anemia. When they are pregnant, this figure even climbs up by 60 to 90 per cent. Blood formation needs a whole range of nutrients, so menstruation, pregnancy and lactation take a toll on them. Often Indian practitioners are too busy to diagnose anemia that comes from the lack of quality foods, and send the women back with a prescription of iron tablets. Moreover, a woman's nutrition during pregnancy lays the basis for the health of her children in later years. This is called fetal programming. A fetus that is used to poor nutrition in the womb is unable to handle excess cereals in later life, because the liver is unable to metabolize carbs, and the pancreas is unable to secrete adequate

insulin. So, not having enough good food is the biggest problem that Indian families face.

What measures can you think of to resolve this problem and give the population the nutrition they need?

The foremost important step would be to start de-ideologizing food, and lay down wages that allow families to eat well. Since the rule of the Hindu nationalist party BJP, nutrition has become a much-politicized issue. The interpretations of being «Indian» are going haywire and that serves the cause of political goons to establish a hegemonic eating culture in the name of nationalism. This has nothing to do with nutrition and nothing to do with hunger. The state needs to stop imposing a straightjacketed dietary pattern based on certain religious beliefs. Everybody should be able to afford food, and feel free to eat whatever they want without being stigmatized. This is the basis that could lay the ground for an honest discussion regarding food and nutrition for Indians. ■■■

<sup>1</sup> Arvind Panagariya, «Does India Really Suffer from Worse Child Malnutrition Than Sub-Saharan Africa?»: Economic and Political Weekly (EPW) 48, 18, May 4, 2013.

#### Nutrition status in India

Source: Rapid Survey on Children, Ministry of Women and Child development India 2014



**18,6%**

Children under 3 years  
who have low birth weight  
{less than 2500 grams}



**38,7%**

Children under  
5 years who are  
stunted



**44,7%**

Girls aged 15–18 with BMI  
less than 18.5 (low weight)

BMI formula: Weight / Height <sup>2</sup>  
BMI under 18,5 is considered  
underweight.

#### Prevalance of anemia in India, in per cent

Source: National Family Health Survey-3., Ministry of Health and Family Welfare India 2006



**69,5%**

Children 6–59  
months old



**55,3%**

Women 15–49  
years old

# Gendered food insecurity: The legal and social foundations for women's food discrimination in Afghanistan

Weeda Mehran

Afghanistan has been described as the world's most dangerous country for women. Many civil society organizations working on women's rights claim that violence against women (VAW) is on the rise in the country. VAW takes many forms, and has complex and deep roots in the patriarchal culture of the Afghan society. One form of VAW is denying them access to food. This discrimination can be derived from patriarchal norms and the legal system.

Poverty is one of the major issues Afghanistan is struggling with. More than one third of the Afghan population lives below the national poverty line.<sup>1</sup> This has direct effects on the diets of most Afghan households, and often some family members suffer from nutrition deficiency. In particular, the most vulnerable groups, such as women and children, are more likely to be exposed to malnutrition. Poverty is gendered and women are more likely than men to be poor. Malnutrition is prevalent among Afghan women. Approximately 21 per cent of Afghan women have a low body mass index (BMI), 48 per cent suffer from an iron deficiency, and a staggering 75 per cent suffer from an iodine deficiency.<sup>2</sup> In effect, women's malnutrition has serious implications for the health of their children. In Afghanistan, 55 per cent of children under the age of 5 do not get sufficient nutrition to develop physically and mentally, leading to an extraordinary high child mortality rate of 45 per cent.<sup>3</sup> The primary reason for all this is gender inequality, which is institutionalized in Afghanistan.

## Access to food is a mean of social power

Gender inequality can be both a cause and a result of food insecurity. Just as women's access to education and health care has been limited by patriarchal norms and structures, so has women's access to nutrition and food been limited. Inequalities in access to food and women's limited decision-making power at the household level can influence women's role in society. Food and nutrition can be used as a basic form of controlling women's autonomy. For example, it limits women's appearance outside of the household. If a husband does not agree to his wife working outside the house, a woman's decision to go against this can simply mean starvation for her or her children as a form of punishment, since the husband is usually in charge of family expenditures and food purchasing.

Gender segregation and division of labor at the household level can infringe upon women's access to food. In a patriarchal society such as Afghanistan, men's primary role is as a breadwinner, while women's role is traditionally limited to household labor. As such, men are more likely to be in charge of major and even every-day household finances. It is common practice in some parts of the country, especially in the periphery and in rural areas, for women to ask for money from the head of the household for the daily purchase of food, or request men to buy various food items (particularly among families where women are not allowed to go shopping). While male members of the household are responsible for purchasing food, women are in charge of cooking. Traditionally many

**Dr. Weeda Mehran** is a human rights activist and has worked at a number of national and international organizations in Afghanistan, including Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission and Integrity Watch Afghanistan. Dr. Mehran obtained her PhD degree from the Department of Politics and International Studies at the University of Cambridge, and her work focuses on the Islamic radicalization of young people.



families, even in urban areas, serve meals in separate rooms for women and men. This is particularly common in larger households where three generations live under the same roof. The rationale for this is to make women feel more comfortable while eating and allow children to freely play around without upsetting the male members of the household, who can eat in peace and quiet.

Furthermore, male members of the household are more likely to get better food, or a bigger portion of it. This discrimination is especially a problem among households with limited nutritional resources. It is not only perpetrated by men, but also by women, to the extent that mothers feed their sons better than their daughters when resources are limited. Men often engage in labor intensive jobs such as farming, construction, and armed forces. Hence, food discrimination at the household level is justified based on needs, wherein men get the priority.

## Gender inequalities are legally manifested

Women's predicament in the family is to a great extent institutionalized through the laws of the country. The Civil Code of 1977, which is still in effect, contains many discriminatory articles that clearly put women at a disadvantage. By subjugating women to men's authority and requiring them to submit to their will, women are, in effect, treated as legal minors.<sup>4</sup>

These legal inequalities are manifested even more in Sharia law. Following the sharia rule of nafaqa, a man is obliged to support his wife with food, clothing and shelter as soon as the marriage is consummated. This is derived from the Quran (4:34), which states that «Men are protectors and maintainers of women because God give one more than the other, and because they support them from their means.» A husband can be jailed for not providing nafaqa and the Civil Code<sup>5</sup> of Afghanistan as well as the Shiite Personal Status Law<sup>6</sup> include the provision that nafaqa is a husband's responsibility.

These strict gender responsibilities enshrined in Sharia law and the legal code of the country have led to systematic discrimination against women. A woman is subjugated to a man's authority for the provision of her food, and a man can easily justify limiting a woman's educational and

workforce participation. These laws have largely been an interpretation of women's «inferiority» to men, as women are considered «weak» and unable to provide for themselves. Consequently, a husband or a male figure in the family is responsible for providing them with basic material needs in life. In turn, women and men are socialized to internalize such gender practices. In fact, men can suffer from such gendered roles as well. For example, research conducted by the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) found that many Afghan men feel that they are unable to live up to the expectations that society sets upon them.

## More legal and social reforms are necessary

Since 2001, significant efforts have been made to address legal discrimination against women. Afghanistan's Constitution makes provisions that allow for adopting laws that ensure equality. In fact, Article 7 of the Afghan Constitution states «The state shall observe the United Nations (UN) Charter, inter-state agreements, as well as international treaties to which Afghanistan has joined, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.» Ratification of the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 2003 was a major step in this direction. However, bringing family laws on par with the Constitution is a challenging matter, particularly when family laws are based on Sharia law. In this regard, Article 3 of the Constitution clearly makes the provision that «No law shall contravene the tenets and provisions of the holy religion of Islam in Afghanistan.» As a consequence, many religious groups in the country can easily reject a Civil Code that is based on gender equality principles and perceived to violate Sharia law.

To address systematic discrimination against women, the legal code of the country needs to be revised. Evidently, the implementation of progressive reform policies to ensure women's rights will be a very challenging task that needs to be addressed through a comprehensive strategic plan. For example, in 2013, hundreds of women affiliated with radical Islamic groups in Kabul carried out a demonstration against the Law on Elimination of violence against women. They viewed the law as a «plot by the West to strip Muslim women of their Islamic dig-

nity.»<sup>7</sup> Hence, progressive reforms in family law will not be possible without the lobbying of members of parliament and religious leaders and direct engagement of civil society organizations at the local level.

Yet, challenging discriminatory legal codes alone will not be sufficient, due to the lack of law enforcement. To address women's access to food and the broader underlying factors associated with food discrimination, namely gender inequality, longer-term policies need to be put in place. These policies need to allow for women's education and labor force participation. Educational programs should address discriminatory practices at the family level. Gender studies should be incorporated into the school curriculum so that young boys and girls get formal training and exposure to the issue from an early age. These are first important steps so that violence against women in any form including food discrimination can be eradicated in Afghanistan. ■■■

<sup>1</sup> UNDP, «About Afghanistan». Available at: <http://www.af.undp.org/content/afghanistan/en/home/countryinfo.html>

<sup>2</sup> Levitt, Emily, Kees Kostermans, Luc Laviolette, and Nkosinathi Mbuya, «Malnutrition in Afghanistan: Scale, Scope, Causes, and Potential Response»: The World Bank. 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Musawah, «Home Truths: A global Report on Equality in the Muslim Family», 2009. Available at: [http://www.musawah.org/sites/default/files/Home%20Truths-EN\\_0.pdf](http://www.musawah.org/sites/default/files/Home%20Truths-EN_0.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Civil Law of the Republic of Afghanistan (Civil Code) – Official Gazette No. 353, published 1977/01/05 (1355/10/15 A.P.)

<sup>6</sup> Shiite Personal Status Law, Official Gazette No. 988, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Osman, Borhan, «Beyond Jihad and Traditionalism: Afghanistan's New Generation of Islamic activists»: Afghanistan Analyst Network, 2015.

## Dining with the Taliban

Sharing one of my culinary experiences: One of the main dishes that almost every Afghan likes is Qabuli. It is rice cooked with meat and served with raisins, fried carrots and almonds on top. It used to be one of my favorite dishes, of which I have a memory. In 1998, I was working as an interpreter with Medicine sans Frontiers (Doctors without Borders) in Afghanistan. I got the job after the Taliban took over the city and closed down all the schools for girls. I was one of the few lucky women in the whole city who could work outside and had a job in the health sector, the only sector in which the Taliban allowed women to work. In the summer of 1998, with the MSF team, we travelled to the province of Ghor to carry out a health and nutrition survey among Afghan families. The Taliban administrator for the district, Tulak, invited the MSF team for lunch at one of the very few restaurants in the small local bazaar, which consisted of two rows of mud stores. Turning down the invitation would not have been taken well, especially since the team needed protection in order to be able to carry out its work. So we decided to go. I was one of the only two women on the team; the other woman was an anthropologist. The pious Taliban, who did not talk to women, let alone dine with them, guided the two of us to the smaller room behind the main salon where all men were seated on the floor for lunch. Our food was sent to the room, where the two of us were sitting in one corner, like two prisoners, whispering in soft voices lest the men in the main room heard us. It was Qabuli. I thought, at least, the Taliban got one thing right! Alas, it had an overdose of oil. Oil was literally dripping from each grain of rice. We each reluctantly ate a spoonful. Not eating the food can be considered an insult and we did not want to insult the Taliban, who had already shown a leap of faith by inviting two women for lunch. So, we started to encourage each other to keep eating, but to no avail. Hence, I came up with the idea of emptying half of the big plate of rice into a plastic bag and taking it with us. We found a plastic bag in the room, but as luck would have it, it had a hole in it. Nonetheless, I emptied most of the rice into the bag. I had to carry the bag under my burqa, as my foreign colleague was not required to wear a burqa and couldn't be seen with a plastic bag filled with Qabuli. As we left the restaurant, I was carrying the Qabuli bag, knowing that the rice was falling from the hole. By the time I got to the MSF cars, I had left behind a meandering trail of Qabuli from the restaurant to the white Pajero cars parked at the beginning of the bazaar. I also had a big, visible oil stain on my burqa. We burst into laughter once we got into the car. Anytime I see Qabuli now, I am reminded of my dining experience with the Taliban.

Weeda Mehran

# Zero political power for zero hunger in Pakistan: How food security is undermined by political power plays

Abid Suleri

An essential prerequisite to achieving food security is making sure that food is available. Although many developing countries produce enough food to feed their people, macro-policies and political interests determine people's access to food. Food insecurity, therefore, is often linked to matters of political power.

Pakistan is paradigmatic for the dreadful relationship between food insecurity and politics. Almost half of the population in Pakistan is considered to be food insecure and lives in multidimensional poverty.<sup>1</sup> This year's Global Hunger Index<sup>2</sup> reported that 22 per cent of the population is undernourished and that 45 per cent of children under five exhibit stunted growth, placing the hunger situation at a «serious» level. Food production, however, is not the problem. The agricultural sector plays a major role in the Pakistani economy, sustaining the livelihoods of 42 per cent of the population. It produces Pakistan's major export commodities such as cotton, rice and fruits. In 2015, Pakistan was the world's eighth largest producer of wheat and fourth largest producer of milk; yet, the percentage of the population experiencing food insecurity is increasing. The main reason for this is that the socio-economic access to food and the hygiene of foodstuffs are on a sharp decline in Pakistan.

Although numerous programs by various political governments have been adopted to fight food insecurity, they have had very little effect on the living conditions of the Pakistani people. Either the programs have been too ambitious, trying to simultaneously overcome food- and poverty-related problems on different levels, or they

were never concretely implemented. Often the political will of the government was lacking because other issues were of greater importance to stay in power. The fate of the then promising Zero Hunger Program (ZHP) shows how noble objectives are sacrificed at the altar of political power-plays, disappointing people's hope to end hunger.

## A program with eager goals under bad political circumstances

In 2012, Prime Minister Gillani announced that he wanted to implement a major ZHP, which was explicitly dedicated to fight food insecurity. The program comprised numerous measures such as mid-day school initiatives, conditional cash and food transfers to the most vulnerable households, stimulus programs to expand farm outputs and market access, and the rationalization of market prices of food commodities. It also designed special nutritious diets for breast-feeding mothers, pregnant women, and children under five. Furthermore, it intended to establish a National Food Security Council equipped with high executive powers to assist in preparing a national food security strategy.

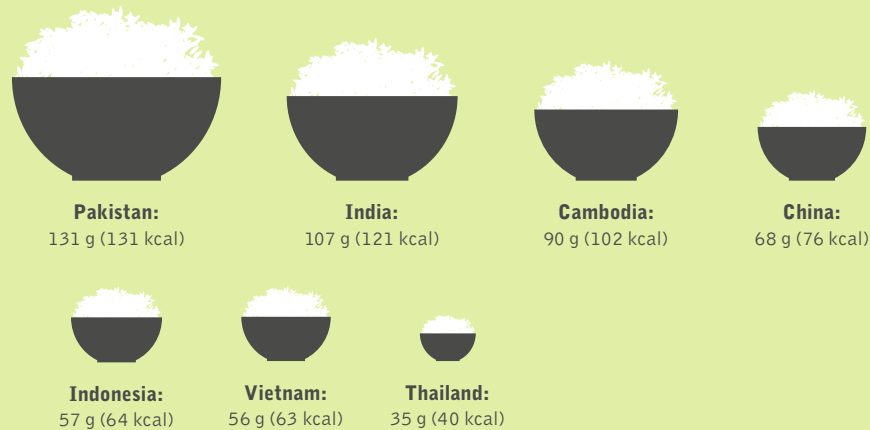
These eager goals had the potential to make the ZHP a flagship food security program in Pakistan; however, the successful implementation of such programs generally depends on the political circumstances. In this case, shortly after presenting the program to the public, Prime Minister Gillani was removed by the Supreme Court of Pakistan. Even though the subsequent

**Dr. Abid Suleri** is a social policy analyst and executive director of the Sustainable Development Institute in Pakistan. He is also a member of various official bodies, such as the Economic Advisory Council of the Pakistani government and the National Advisory Committee. Dr. Suleri holds a PhD in Food Security from the Natural Resources Institute at the University of Greenwich. His favorite dish is daal (lentil) with chawal (boiled rice) because it is a specialty cooked by his mother. Traditionally, two types of lentils, split black gram and split chick peas, are cooked together and served with plain rice. He associates this dish with the rich aroma of freshly cropped basmati rice and black gram.

**Depth of the food deficit\* 2011–2013** (kcal/cap/day)

Source: FAO statistical yearbook 2014: Asia and the Pacific food and agriculture, Bangkok 2014

\* The depth of the food deficit indicates how many calories would be needed to lift the undernourished from their status, everything else being constant. The average intensity of food deprivation of the undernourished is multiplied by the number of undernourished to provide an estimate of the total food deficit in the country, which is then normalized by the total population.

Source: [www.indexmundi.com](http://www.indexmundi.com)

Prime Minister was also from the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and shared sympathy for the ZHP, other issues were more pressing at the time. In the end, the high fiscal deficit of Pakistan made the allocation of funds to the ZHP in the 2012 to 2013 fiscal year impossible.

When the Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) emerged as the majority party in the elections that followed in May 2013, the public debt level had become so crucial that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was called in for help. In order to convince the IMF of the need for further financial aid, the government sold old wine in new skins to the IMF. It presented the Benazir Income Support Program (BISP), a former program of the PPP from 2008, as a flagship social safety net that needed funding. Compared to the ZHP, the BISP envisages not only hunger and food problems, but also other socio-economic issues. For example, it tries to increase the living conditions of the poor through cash grants to women-headed households below a certain poverty threshold. Due to the broader approach to food insecurity, the BISP was viewed as a higher political asset than the ZHP and the PML-N therefore decided to apply with this program at the IMF. In a nutshell, establishing a social safety net to make a stronger case for external financial facility became the national political priority.

A further pitfall for the ZHP was the difficulty of coordinating and integrating it

into other already existing programs. For example, the ZHP and the BISP had common features and could have been converged to some degree, but such integration would have created a bureaucratic tussle for funds between two departments, the BISP and Ministry of National Food Security. Against this background, there was no appetite among the civilian bureaucracy to present ZHP to the new political bosses.

## Is food insecurity no political issue in Pakistan?

Despite the fact that half of the population in Pakistan is food insecure, decision makers in the Federal Ministry of National Food Security and Research (a rebranding of the former Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Livestock (MINFAL)) always insisted that food insecurity was not an issue. Most of these decision makers quote the recent bumper crop of wheat and rice as evidence that Pakistan is not a food insecure country. To their understanding, hunger is merely a production issue that is to be addressed through increased output. This is true to a certain extent, but an increase in production is a means, not an end in itself to solving food insecurity. They ignore the fact that physically available food does not automatically guarantee food security.

Even though the public knows that too little is being done politically to change the

food situation in Pakistan, unlike with other issues, no real resistance has emerged from the people. It is not that Pakistanis do not exercise their democratic right to demonstrate. In fact, protests as a mean of political expression are quite common. In the past, there have been protests against power outages in different parts of Pakistan, protests against the law and order situation, and protests against the lack of water supply in different parts of Karachi. Interestingly, however, public protests against hunger and food insecurity are very rare. The general elections also showed that the PPP could not make any political capital out of this issue. Voters were simply not attracted by the party's anti-hunger programs. Instead, Pakistan's public attributes a greater importance to issues like poverty, corruption, the power crisis, illiteracy and extremism. Thus, PML-N's promise to end power outages was one of the main reasons for its victory in the election.<sup>3</sup>

This is an indication that people in Pakistan do not trust politics anymore to effectively fight hunger and instead focus on other issues. The failure of the ZHP was just more proof that relying on the government to fight hunger was fruitless. As a consequence, instead of demanding food commodities, people demand uninterrupted electricity, employment and educational opportunities in order to sustain their live-

lihoods and to earn enough to meet their food requirements on their own.

In fact, the Pakistani people are still sensitive about food insecurity and hunger; they are quite aware of the factors that would enhance their access to food. However, the many disappointments that resulted from fruitless hunger programs have led to a shift in responsibility. Today, the population trusts civil society more than public institutions to alleviate hunger. The needs of chronically food insecure people are largely met by domestic philanthropy, charity, and food distributions at local shrines. These forms of support create a bridge between the food haves and have-nots. As long as hunger programs like the ZHP do not come into fruition, this bridge is essential for social peace in Pakistan. ■■■

<sup>1</sup> World Food Program, Sustainable Development Policy Institute et al., «Food Insecurity in Pakistan», 2009 available at: [http://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/ena/wfp225636.pdf?\\_ga=1.150790334.922576915.1475180281](http://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/ena/wfp225636.pdf?_ga=1.150790334.922576915.1475180281)

<sup>2</sup> Welthungerhilfe, International Food Policy Research et al., «Global Hunger Index 2016», October 2016. Available at: <file:///C:/Users/FabianH/Downloads/130918.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> See for example: DAWN, «Protest against power outage turn violent», June 20, 2015. Available at: <http://www.dawn.com/news/1189268>; DAWN, «Rallies against power outage», June 9, 2015 Available at: <http://www.dawn.com/news/1263721>



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#### Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung e.V.

Asia Department  
Schumannstraße 8  
10117 Berlin

**P** 0049 (0)30 28534 361 / 362  
**E** [asiaperspectives@boell.de](mailto:asiaperspectives@boell.de)  
**W** [www.boell.de/asia](http://www.boell.de/asia)

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Qutub Institutional Area  
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8, Xinzhong Xijie, Gongti Beilu  
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100027 Beijing, China

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**W** [www.cn.boell.org](http://www.cn.boell.org)

#### Yangon Office

No. 45/A, Kan Lane 3  
Kan Road  
Kamayut Township  
Yangon, Myanmar

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#### Bangkok Office

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Klongton Neua, Wattana  
Bangkok 10110, Thailand

**P** 0066 266259601  
**E** [office@th.boell.org](mailto:office@th.boell.org)  
**W** [www.boell-southeastasia.org](http://www.boell-southeastasia.org)

#### Islamabad Office

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Fazal-ul-Haq Road, G-6, Blue Area  
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**P** 0092 51 2271545  
**E** [pk-info@pk.boell.org](mailto:pk-info@pk.boell.org)  
**W** [www.pk.boell.org](http://www.pk.boell.org)

#### Phnom Penh Office

#8, Street 476  
Toul Tompoung I  
Chamkarmorn, P.O. Box 1436  
Phnom Penh, Cambodia

**P** 00855 23210535  
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**T** 0093 707 107 773  
**E** [info@af.boell.org](mailto:info@af.boell.org)  
**W** [www.af.boell.org](http://www.af.boell.org)

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## Afghan Appetizer

### Crispy pakoras with a fresh dip

serves 4 | vegetarian

#### For the pakoras:

350 g seasonal vegetables  
250 g chickpea flour  
1/2 tsp. turmeric powder  
1/2 tsp. chili powder  
1 tsp. garam masala  
1 l vegetable oil for deep-frying  
280 ml water  
salt

#### For the mint-coriander dip:

1 bunch mint  
1/2 bunch coriander  
2 garlic cloves  
1/2 tsp. chili powder  
50 g yogurt, 10 % fat  
Salt

#### Pakoras:

Cut vegetables into bite-sized chunks.  
In a bowl, mix the chickpea flour together with the spices and add 280 ml water, stirring throughout. Heat up 1 l of vegetable oil in a pan. The oil has the perfect temperature when a little piece of batter immediately starts to deep-fry on contact.  
Cover the vegetable chunks in the chickpea batter and deep-fry them for about 4 - 5 minutes or until golden brown.

#### Mint-coriander dip:

Coarsely chop the mint and coriander and place in a kitchen blender. Add peeled garlic and the chili powder and finely blend together into a fine mixture. Now add the yogurt and blend again until the mass is creamy. Season with salt.  
Serve the mint-coriander dip together with the pakoras.

Photo and recipe courtesy by [ueberdentellerrandkochen.de](http://ueberdentellerrandkochen.de)

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