

FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION CRISIS IN SRI LANKA

SEP, 2022



OVERVIEW

Sri Lanka is struggling with the worst economic crisis that it has ever experienced since its independence in 1948. The country is no longer able to pay import bills for food, fuel, gas, and other essential goods necessary for the day-to-day life of citizens, and repaying the massive foreign debts is a far-off dream. Prices of most food items have been on a steady rise since the last quarter of 2021 and reached a record high in August 2022, with the **year-on-year food inflation rate at nearly 94 percent**,¹ further limiting the purchasing power of households.

FOOD INSECURITY AND HUNGER CRISIS

According to the World Food Programme, **6.3 million people, or over 30 percent of Sri Lanka's population, are "food insecure" and require humanitarian assistance. Of these, around 5.3 million people are either reducing meals or skipping meals, and at least 65,600 people are severely food insecure.** This situation is likely to worsen as the crisis unfolds in the island nation due to higher inflation, loss of livelihood, weak purchasing power, and an acute shortage of essential items like food, medicine, cooking gas, and fuel. Without external assistance, the food security situation is expected to deteriorate further, particularly during October 2022 to February 2023 lean season, driven by a poor harvest of staple foods like rice, and the ongoing economic crisis.

The prices for staple food such as rice and vegetables have doubled. Cooking gas is both expensive and in short, supply, making it difficult for many to keep kitchen fires burning. WFP said skyrocketing food costs are making it harder for the population to meet their food needs. **About 6.7 million people are not consuming an adequate diet and 5.3 million people are reducing the number of meals partaken during the day while more than 60 percent of families are eating less, cheaper, and less nutritious food.** The situation has further worsened as the Government has scaled down its nutrition programs, such as school meals and fortified food for mothers and malnourished children, due to severe financial constraints.

According to FAO, the agricultural sector which employs 30 percent of Sri Lankans, requires interventions to improve production capacity to ultimately boost the resilience of the agricultural sector, reduce import requirements amid shortages of foreign currency reserves and avert the rise in hunger.

Family is stressed, neighbours are stressed, society is stressed, we lost our peaceful environment suddenly, we can't afford our lives now, and we are so disappointed about ourselves now. No proper food for us, no proper clothing, no proper way to our children's education, had no trips for many months now, no way to be relax, at least our day time napping was reduced to do home chore, this crisis made our lives difficult. Not only to us but also to people who we know and don't know.

(Rural FGD Batticaloa, Women,

¹ <https://ceylontoday.lk/2022/09/13/sls-food-crisis-likely-to-worsen-fao-wfp-report/>

Further, incomes have plummeted in the last three months, and about **two in five households reported that their income had been cut in half**. To cope with the lack of food, **5 million people are using crisis or emergency livelihood coping strategies** that are likely to impact their medium-to long-term capacity for income-generating activities and food security.

According to WFP, **70% of Sri Lankan children were stunted** even before the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis erupted. That means their height was lower than their age and **around 15% were wasted, and 17% of children under 5 are stunted**, which means they were too thin for their height. With this crisis, the nutritional situation is expected to further worsen in the coming days.

The UN estimates that half of Sri Lankan children already require emergency assistance. According to a study by Save the Children in June 2022, **59% of families reported not being able to meet all their food needs fully**. In addition, two in three respondents noted that their households had to rely on less preferred or less expensive foods at least once a week before the survey. The report stated: "Over half of all children had to eat less preferred food and children had to reduce their quantity of food intake. About one in ten children had reduced their frequency of food intake (twice or less)."

SIGNIFICANT DECLINE IN HARVESTS

Two consecutive seasons of poor harvests led to a nearly 50 percent drop in production coupled with reduced imports of food grains due to foreign exchange constraints, according to the joint FAO/WFP Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission (CFSAM) report.

The problem was compounded after an abrupt switch to organic farming ordered by the Government last year shrank local harvests – about half of last year's rice crop was lost. The chemical fertilizer ban has since been lifted, but the shortages have made food scarcer. The report stated that **the upcoming Maha season is at risk of a 50 percent reduction in paddy planting areas**. There is also an unlikely recovery of the fisheries and livestock sectors if farmers do not gain access to seeds, fertilizer, fuel, and financial assistance.

"Due to the increased price of paddy and fertilizer we are unable to access them for our cultivation because we can't afford it. The seed paddy has tripled in price and the fertilizer has gone up to an unimaginable amount. So we decided to sit back and do fishing and other activities to earn money."

(Rural FGD Gampaha, Women,

Although Sri Lanka is a fertile tropical land with the potential for the cultivation and processing of a variety of crops, issues such as productivity and profitability hamper the growth of the sector. **80% of Sri Lanka's land is in dry and intermediate zones, which face frequent water shortages**. Farmers suffer without sufficient fuel quotas to operate water pumps to supply uninterrupted water to their farms and paddy fields. Vegetable farmers are not provided with a special quota to obtain fuel, while paddy farmers are given a limited fuel quota during harvesting, which is not sufficient to transport their yields. Paddy rice production, the main food staple, is forecast at 3 million mt in 2022, the lowest level since the 2017 drought-affected harvest, mostly due to low yields following reduced fertilizers, according to the joint statement released by CFSAM.

The report further states that the **production of maize, mostly used as animal feed, is about 40 percent below the past five-year average**, with negative effects on poultry and livestock production. Likewise, the production of vegetables, fruit, and export-oriented crops, such as tea, rubber, coconut, and spices, is well below average, causing a significant decline in households' income and export revenues. The total cereal import requirement in 2022 is estimated at 2.2 million mt. In the first six months of 2022, more than 930,000 mt of cereals were imported, leaving an outstanding import requirement of 1.27 million mt. Given the persisting macroeconomic challenges, there is a high risk that the remaining import requirement will not be met².

² The Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission (CFSAM) report by FAO & WFP