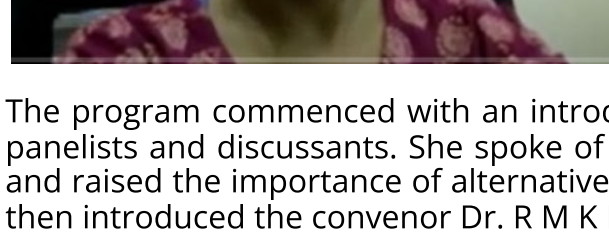


# CEPA 66th Open Forum Report

This report outlines the proceedings of CEPA's 66th Open Forum titled 'Ensuring Adequate and Healthy Food Amidst an Economic Crisis in Sri Lanka' which took place on the 29th of June, 2022. The virtual open forum explored various facets of the food crisis in Sri Lanka, and also discussed plausible short-term, mid-term and long-term recommendations.



## Overview



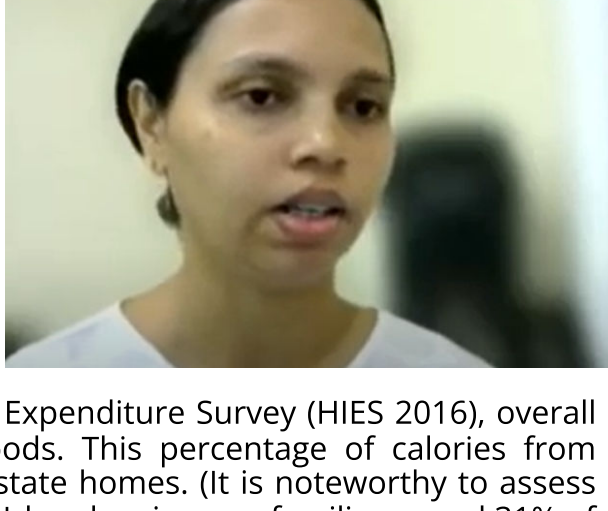
CEPA Senior Research Professional **Dr Gayathri Lokuge** made the introductory remarks, and the speakers included Thilani Kaushalya (Senior Research Professional CEPA), Ms Dilka Peiris (Project Director SUN PF), and Dr Pradeepa Koralegedara (Senior Lecturer, University of Peradeniya). Discussants included Dr Susie Perera from the Ministry of Health, and Prof Buddhi Marambe from the University of Peradeniya. Dr. R. M. K. Ratnayake Vice-Chancellor SANASA Campus, and a former Secretary of the Ministry of Trade and Cooperatives and a founder member of CEPA moderated.

The program commenced with an introduction by Gayathri Lokuge of CEPA, who introduced the panelists and discussants. She spoke of the importance of a multi-sector approach to this issue and raised the importance of alternatives action plans that should be a part of the discourse. She then introduced the convenor Dr. R. M. K. Ratnayake.



**Dr Ratnayake, Vice-Chancellor SANASA Campus, and a former Secretary of the Ministry of Trade** made his introductory remarks, pointing out the timeliness of this program. He briefly took the audience through the Nutrition and Poverty sphere and the evolution in thinking over the years. He reiterated that this is not the first time that Sri Lanka is facing a food and nutrition issue. He took the audience through the situation Sri Lanka encountered after the 2nd World War; thereafter the issues in 1972. The famine situation and the intervention of USAID. So, in short, a history of the nutrition and health evolution in Sri Lanka.

The first presenter, **Thilani Kaushalya Senior Research Professional CEPA** spoke on the challenges of obtaining a nutritious diet in the face of the current economic crisis. She spoke of the social groups which are vulnerable to food security and increase in prices of essential food and non-food items. Interestingly, she noted that according to 2019 data - Sri Lankans are consuming 90 calories more than required, but the lower income groups are consuming 334 calories less than the required.



According to a study using data from the Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES 2016), overall 22% of our calorie intake comes from imported goods. This percentage of calories from imported goods is approximately 30% in urban and estate homes. (It is noteworthy to assess what exactly Sri Lanka imports in terms of food here.) Urban low-income families spend 31% of their food budget on processed foods, compared to 15% in rural areas.

She also covered how global and local factors have contributed to rising food prices, increasing foreign loans, reduction in income taxes, import restrictions in chemical fertilizers were a few local factors

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While the global pandemic, increasing global fuel prices, increasing global food prices and food import restriction in foreign countries have contributed towards this inflation.

From year 2021 May- 2020 May food inflation rose up to 57%. And low income earners are highly affected by it as they spend 60% on food for their total income. While high income earners only spend 60% from their total income.



**Dr Pradeepa Koralegedara, Senior Lecturer, Department of Agricultural Economics & Business Management Faculty of Agriculture, University of Peradeniya** thereafter spoke on the subject of " Food crisis, coping strategies and need for social safety net programs" in the country. She spoke of the three pillars of food security, namely the availability, access and utilization.

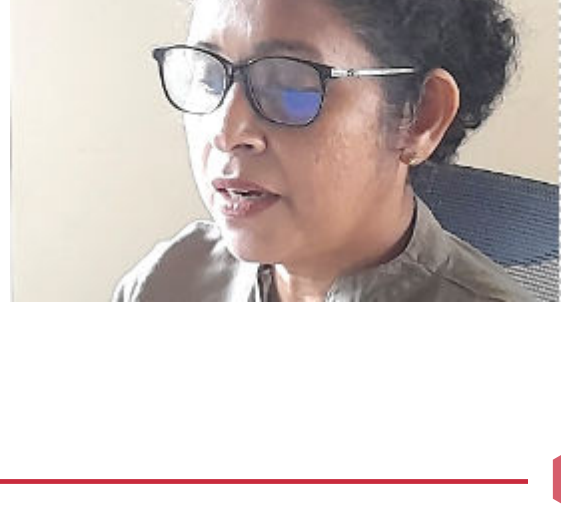
Her presentation was based on a study conducted to assess the effect of food price increases on food affordability in Sri Lanka. The study assessed the impact of economic crisis on the diet cost (compared to the food diet cost in April 2022 against the diet cost in May 2019) [OKAY]. It also identified the proportion of people who need assistance to access a nutritious diet. For this exercise, the **Cost of the Diet** software developed by Save the Children was used - she mentioned.

According to her study the change in monthly cost on staple nutrition diet increased to 71% . As a result 40% of the lower income people could not afford it in 2022 compared to 2019 as only 10% were not able to afford a staple nutrition diet.

Dr Pradeepa Koralegedara presented an in-depth analysis of the effects of the soaring prices on diet costs and the inadequacy of existing safety net. 86% of HHs affected by the situation and have taken some mitigating action. She noted that interventions on food and nutrition security are necessary. It is known that people resort to different coping methods, including utilising a part of the non-food expenditure allocation in household budgets to cover the food cost, short-term borrowing, and changing the diet such as reducing the quantity and quality of the diet. These coping strategies can adversely affect certain demographics becoming vulnerable to nutrition insecurity, especially adolescent girls and lactating women.

Dr Koralegedara added that such vulnerability can be reduced with effective safety net systems, which are adequate in size, targets the correct people, supports in the best form (i.e. the cash transfer or direct food transfer), and is free from implementation inefficiencies.

Thereafter **Dilka Peiris, Project Director Scaling Up Nutrition People's Forum of Sri Lanka** spoke on the subject of the Multisectoral approach for working together in the nutritional sphere. Ms Peiris spoke of the multisectoral approach to facing the current challenge that Sri Lanka is facing. Among the many nutritional issues that she mentioned, Under five nutrition issues were mentioned, we as a country have a triple burden of malnutrition, stagnant status of undernutrition, NCDs and micronutrient deficiencies. The main message was that the successful elimination of malnutrition required a multifactorial, multisectoral, and multi stakeholder response.

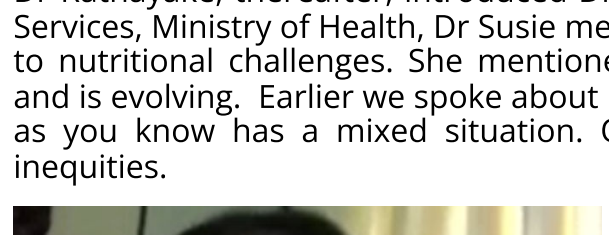


She spoke of the connectedness of food, nutrition and health. She Asked the audience if they are familiar with the term ' the 'poshana getaluwa or 'nutrition problem'. In her presentation, some of the long-term solutions discussed included the following. Specifically, increasing food production (crop, livestock, poultry, fisheries) and importing only those we do not have a comparative advantage in producing locally

Dr Ratnayake in his evaluation appreciated Dilka's insight. He drew attention to her presentation which spoke about underlying causes which in turn results from multiple factors, deliberate collaborations among various actors - she shed light on the current status of the multi sector action plan, the role of the - national nutrition council.

Dr Ratnayake mentioned using the earlier methods should be discontinued, he drew attention to the new WHO guidelines, and the studies done by the physiology department of the University of Colombo, which does a comparative analysis of the global standards.

Dr Ratnayake, thereafter, introduced Dr Susie H Perera, Deputy Director General Public Health Services, Ministry of Health, Dr Susie mentioned that Sri Lanka presents a mixed' case in relation to nutritional challenges. She mentioned that the discourse about malnutrition has changed and is evolving. Earlier we spoke about under nutrition, then about height and weight, Sri Lanka as you know has a mixed situation. Our averages don't mean everybody, there are many inequities.



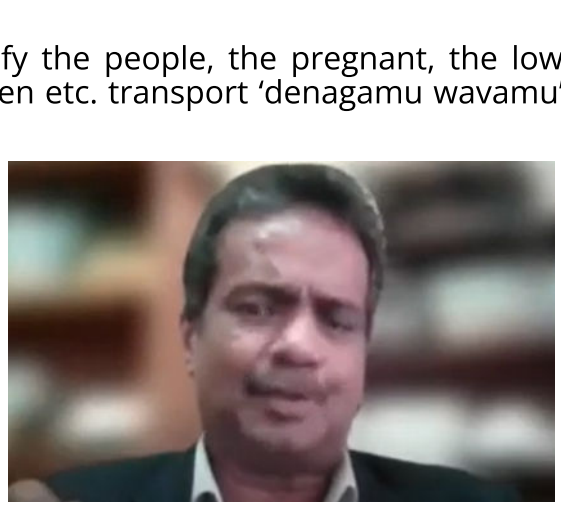
**Dr Susie Perera** said that the pregnant mothers programs must be targeted as well as school programs. She reiterated the need for multi sectoral actors to step up their work. She also queried as to why the voice of civil society is still lacking when responding to decisions made by the government. She mentioned that all the work that is happening in term of relief work need to go to the correct people. However, she reiterated the difficulty in assessment as well as distribution due to low accessibility due to the fuel crisis.

As mentioned in the earlier presentations we need to deal with these limited resources; and 86% of families have been impacted in the way they consume food. The quantity as well as quality has dropped. Are people aware of substitutes, alternatives, and awareness of people on micronutrients. Sri Lanka has a calcium deficiency issue. The quantity and quality wise parameters of food must be met. Our food consumption has changed. Dr Susie referred to this as a life cycle problem. Finding alternatives is necessary. But do our people know what is required?

In home gardening think what is required? Is it chillie plants and tomatoes or anything else? So we need to check what the advice we need she further stated. Do we think of what can be grown that can be used for our meals.

When the health ministry is planning, we need to identify the people, the pregnant, the low income etc. Dr Susie mentioned how to send how to screen etc. transport 'denagamu wavamu' is.

**Prof Buddhi Marambe**, Senior Professor Department of Crop Science, Faculty of Agriculture University of Peradeniya in his evaluation, thanked the presenters for their insight and mentioned that we as country are reaping what we saw. We as a country have erred. As for policy decisions and implementation, he noted that while we have a large number of policies, implementation is poor. Sri Lanka also has had overnight policy decisions leaving a trail of destruction.



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Some discussion points included the inquiry into the possibility of WB/ADB loan savings to be rerouted for food security? The importance of school and home gardens, etc. He mentioned that what is required is not for all to plant tomatoes and chillies but to plant something that will help in main food consumption.

He also mentioned that we need to revisit the Climate Change, sphere. As for Sri Lanka all the advice needed the govt has been given from the academia. Agriculture faculties in all 8 universities have advice on their insight. Farm the lands that have not been used; choose what you must eat - 7 foods Capacity, remember to minimize waste. 'I am not saying eliminate the middleman, but we need to optimize the Supply chain' he further added. IT is necessary to optimize the supply chain by using middlemen effectively.

Prof Marambe further stated that we need to preserve seasonal crops mentioned the need to create a market. What happened to the overarching agricultural policy? It's sad that we do not have a national policy. The discussants queried the role, of departments and ministries where there is a lot of talk about food crops and crops as animal feed. The lack Susie spoke of the importance of something like eggs. Emergency response needs to be multi sectoral. Bureaucracy difficult to work with we cannot go on with subsidies

*The discussants cited seven causes behind the recent increase in food prices, namely: 1) adverse world market conditions; 2) depreciation of the currency; 3) imposition of food import restrictions; 4) removal of price ceilings on essential food items; 5) the sudden move to organic agriculture and increase in world fertiliser prices; 6) adverse weather; and 7) food hoarding. She noted that although the symptoms are present for a potential food crisis, it is not possible to be conclusive due to the absence of national-level data.*

*The discussants focused on how best to create effective safety net systems during crises by learning from international experiences. He asserted that the policy environment should be conducive for effective safety net programmes to be implemented, and multiple pathways created to protect the vulnerable. They also stated that international and regional trade negotiations should be leveraged to facilitate an adequate supply of food to the country during emergencies.*

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## Overall Recommendations from presenters and discussants

### Short-term:

- Food wastage and post-harvest losses need to be reduced
- Introducing food ration programs
- It is very important to scale up multi sectoral approaches, and multi stakeholder engagement to address the food and nutrition insecurity issues.
- Cultivate existing farmlands ensuring required inputs for cultivation are provided.
- Cultivate nutritious and high calorie crops for home gardening for example cultivate cassava, sweet potatoes, vegetables. (not exactly chilli and tomatoes!!)
- Use existing donor funding to purchase chemical fertilizer
- Making food distribution systems efficient
- Urgent attention is required to continue existing social safety net-programs (Samurdhi Program, School meal program, Triposha program, Monthly allowance for disabled, Elderly allowance, Poshana malls for pregnant women).
- Provide chemical fertilizer for subsidized price for farmers to encourage them and bring them back to farming and medium to long term the subsidy can be removed gradually.
- Provide inputs (especially chemical fertilizer) for maize cultivation as well—for poultry and animal feed.
- Prioritize fuel distribution for farmers for timely land preparation

### Mid-term:

- Revamp the national nutrition council
- Strengthen the food supply chain and distribution channels to link the village and town for efficient food supply.

### Long-term:

- Increase food production in the country (Crop, livestock, poultry, fisheries)
- Import essential food items which we cannot produce and which we do not have comparative advantage in producing
- Ensure the multi sector nutrition action plan is properly implemented.
- Long term macro-economic stability is needed



[Click here to watch the Open Forum](#)

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