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Food Security in Shambles: An Impact from Sri Lanka National Economic Crisis¹

Abel Josafat Manullang²

Abstract

Sri Lanka, a state in the South Asia region, is now in the middle of a national economic crisis. The crisis has been mainly attributed to the state's mounting foreign debts along with its inefficient management of the national economy. Apart from the obvious impact the crisis has over the domestic stability of the state, another impact worth noting is one on the state's food security. The paper aims to provide analysis in answering the questions of how the national economic crisis affects the food security issue and what government policy was responsible for exacerbating the issue. With the use of a qualitative method of analysis, the concept of food security would also be present to better understand the issue. Later, it is explained how the crisis along with the economic state of Sri Lanka inhibits the government's role to tackle the issue, hence worsening public opinion and the overall food crisis. For the government's policy that exacerbated the issue, the past decision back in 2021 to ban the import of chemical fertilizers is believed to be it.

Keywords: Sri Lanka; food security; national crisis; food crisis; Sri Lanka debt crisis.

Introduction

When the international community's attention is focused on the growing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, another problem has taken a new turn in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka, a state in South Asia, is in the middle of a growing national economic crisis. The crisis was caused by the state's mounting foreign debt and dwindling foreign exchange reserves that led to the country's decreasing spending capacity in international trade. With little foreign exchange, it has become harder for Sri Lanka to import goods for its domestic demand or even to procure resources to maintain its industries. The ongoing crisis has severely affected the national economy, so much so that the country finally will take its 17th loan from the IMF in hope to alleviate the crisis. The impact and overall handling by the government over the issue have caused domestic upheavals. People have taken to the street to voice their disappointment over the government's performance, many even call for the resignation of the current president, Gotabaya Rajapaksa (Ramakumar, 2022).

The spotlight over the issue has been given to the mistakes done by the Sri Lankan government in managing their national economy to the overall worsening of Sri Lanka's national economy. Aside

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from the aforementioned issues, food security or even food in general is also a noteworthy variable in the overall scheme of the problem. Being an essential good for the people and an object of commodity, food has also been heavily affected by the crisis. Domestically, the huge price increases of food and its scarcity have been one of the demands the people of Sri Lanka have for their government (Elliott, 2022). The crisis also impairs Sri Lanka's overall food production that also reduces its capacity to sell it, hence worsening the national economic crisis as well.

Noting the issue's recent developments and growth, the writer seeks to elaborate and provide an analysis of the food crisis in Sri Lanka. The paper uses a qualitative method that would analyze secondary data obtained from previous analyses and news coverage considering the novel nature of the issue. Along with the qualitative analysis of secondary data, the concept of food security will also be used to support the following analysis. With that information laid out, the paper will seek to explain the concept of food security, the contribution from the national economic crisis and the government's footprint in the growing deterioration of food security.

The concept of food security

Referring to the United Nations Development Programme report of 1994, food security can be understood as a condition where people are ensured to have both physical and economic access to basic food (Baylis et al., 2014). This particular definition of food security really fits in with the overall idea of human security. Apart from the focus on the fulfillment of the people's access to it, food security has also grown to include the sustainability of the means used in the production process. Moreover, it also sheds light on the importance of a paradigm that would guide how the food previously produced would be sufficiently distributed among the people (Schanbacher, 2010). Noting the various developments food security has been through, it can now be considered as not only a part of human security but also a part of the sustainable development that is concerned with how food is produced and its impact toward the people and environment (Alcock, 2009).

Despite its difference from its national counterpart, food security still plays an important role for the states. In the past, food security has been an omnipresent variable in numerous international dynamics. For example, Indonesia once garnered support from India back when it was still in the midst of its struggle for independence. Back then, when India was faced with a domestic hunger problem, Indonesia, by the initiative from its foreign minister, took this opportunity to send in rice to help the country (Zara, 2020). By making use of the food insecurity issue then, Indonesia secured India's support that would be useful later on its diplomatic path for independence. A more contemporary example of the importance of food security would be how food is now perceived both

as a commodity, hence a means to gain income in international trade, and essential goods that sustain the domestic lives within a state.

How the national crisis contributes to the problem

Considering how the huge depletion of foreign exchange is at the heart of the crisis, it is no surprise that its impact is also felt in other aspects. One of which is the state's capability to engage in international trade. Sri Lanka is one of the states that rely on import to fulfill its domestic demand, especially for food and other resources to mobilize its industries. The declining spending capacity results in the failure of the state to meet the domestic demand for goods. This failure would lead to the decrease of food supply within the state, something that would trigger a price increase as a response to the decreasing supply of goods. The price increase and declining supply have been perceived as the direct impact of the national economic crisis on food security. Another impact from the food shortage and price increase that also worsen the food crisis would be the food hoarding among the people (Kumarasinghe, 2021). The sharp price increase and many food hoardings have led the government to seize countless food supplies and start rationing them as a means to keep the price from another sharp increase. Concerns have been raised over the sustainability of how long the attempt may last. It is the same concern that pushes the people to demand for a more effective and holistic measure, both to tackle the food issue and the entire national economic crisis.

Aside from being one of the main actors that has been involved in the overall worsening of the crisis, the government of Sri Lanka is also one of the biggest affected actors. The crisis development has led the people of Sri Lanka to take it to the street where they voice their wishes for the government to resign as the crisis grows bigger. At times, the demonstration done by the people could escalate to violence between the people and the authorities (Al Jazeera, 2022). The huge accumulation of public distrust has certainly further impaired the government's capacity to perform effectively. A clear example of the public distrust consequences would be the resignations of governmental figures, from the cabinet members to even the prime minister himself, Mahinda Rajapaksa (Handunnetti, 2022). The apparent collapse of the government institution would surely hinder future effective means, combining the huge distrust and dissatisfaction of the people along with the current state of the government. Despite the seeming decline the government is currently facing, they are still present in the overall dynamic of the domestic condition. This would lead them to insist on functioning by responding to the growing crisis, something that is also made difficult by the current state they are in and the bad relation they have with their people. The condition would also lead them to resort to drastic measures and then they may obtain a suitable condition they can work with. The drastic

measures the government has resorted to are the implementation of curfew, rationing food and giving emergency power to the military. As a result of the drastic measure and negative implication it brings, the public distrust over their government would continue to deteriorate, hence providing more hindrance in the long run. This dilemma between the government's attempt at addressing proper response to the crisis and the consequence of deteriorating public distrust is also a consequence from the crisis that would make difficult attempts to address the food crisis.

The government's part in the looming crisis

Apart from the direct impact from the national economic crisis, the government apparently has its own share of direct impact on the food crisis. Back in April 2021, the government of Sri Lanka issued a new program of green revolution by banning the import of chemical fertilizer. The move shocked many within the country as chemical fertilizer has been an important component in helping farmers increase their crops (Wipulasena & Mashal, 2021). The government stated how the program was aimed to improve the food security of the nation by ensuring the quality of the food produced. Attention was also given to the environment over how the use of chemical fertilizer actually would do more harm and the time posed to be unsustainable in the long run. On the other hand, many viewed the initiative as an attempt by the government to cut spending of foreign exchange, something that has proved to be fatal in the coming future. Unfortunately, the execution of the program fell short of its intended effect. The sudden shift caught many farmers unprepared as they could not make their own compost. This issue was dealt with by obtaining organic fertilizers from India, something the farmers welcomed. Unfortunately, it met another problem during its distribution and its overall governmental handling (WION, 2021).

Despite the good end the policy may serve, the formulation appeared to be devoid of any sufficient analysis of the state's agricultural sector. Many farmers, from those who prioritizes in tea to rice cultivation, are dependent on the use of chemical fertilizer and pesticides as a part of their overall activity. With the ban in effect then, it resulted in farmers not being able to use their chemical fertilizer sufficiently or even none at all. This sudden absence of chemical fertilizer would result in a sharp decrease of crops yield. Many had disagreed with the decision to ban the chemical fertilizer, from experts to the farmers on the field. One of them was Herman Gunaratne, a tea expert in Sri Lanka, who highlighted the danger of banning chemical fertilizers. He mentioned how the move would risk a sharp decline that may reach 50% in tea production, something that cannot be compensated with the idea of having organic tea as a new commodity (South China Morning Post, 2021). The sudden decline of yields would then lead to another decrease in the amount of food supplied for the domestic

market and those that were meant to be sold in international trade. The former would exacerbate the food shortage in Sri Lanka while the latter would further worsen the national economic crisis by decreasing the amount of foreign exchange obtained through international trade. In the end, the government ended up lifting some of the bans to allow some of the fertilizers and pesticides. Unfortunately, the damage has been done as crops yield decrease and food shortage grows rampant (Jayasinghe, 2021).

Conclusion

How food security has been a huge demand the people have for their government accentuates the fact of the importance of the concept. The huge impact the crisis has had on the state's food security, in both economic (the sharp price increase of food) and physical access (shortage of food along with the rampant food hoarding), surely highlights the importance of tackling the national economic crisis. To tackle the food crisis Sri Lanka is in, it would need a holistic approach considering the interconnectedness the issue has with the national economic crisis. Countless resources would be needed to combat the hindrances to food security, from those provided among the people to the overall impact resulting from the national economic crisis. Looking at the low amount of foreign exchange the state has, the only resort available would be to get financial loans from other countries or an international institution such as the IMF, an international entity Sri Lanka is no stranger to. Unfortunately, to resort to such means would result in increasing the already mounting foreign debt. It is in this condition that the government of Sri Lanka must make up their mind on how best to deal with the issues, from the food crisis to the overall national economic crisis, with the available means and resources at hand.

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