

Food and fuel crises hit poorest families the hardest in Nepal



Nepal/2009/Sokol

A Nepali girl child eats small fistfuls of rice while other children watch in Sawa Khola Village. Due to drought and food price increases, a large portion of Nepal's population is now vulnerable to malnutrition.

By Sam Taylor and Sarah Crowe

MUGU DISTRICT, Nepal, – Sitting in the smoke-blackened main room of her tiny house on a steep, parched hillside in Sawa Khola village, Nawa Dumchi Bikar is a worried woman.

With five children, a husband and a mother-in-law to feed, Ms. Bikar – 36 but seemingly much older – faces food stocks that are running low. The stunted spring wheat crop in the family's fields will be dismal due to drought. High food prices are another worry. Her family will struggle for nourishment this summer. "It hurts my heart that we cannot provide the things my children need," she says. Every parent wants to give their children a better life, and we cannot these days, which makes us feel awful."

Poorest of the poor

In the isolated Himalayan district of Mugu in northern Nepal – where more than a quarter of young children are acutely or severely malnourished – the land can provide food for six months of the year under the best of circumstances.

Nearly half of all children under the age of five in Nepal are underweight, and many more than that are undernourished in Mugu. Three years of continued drought have eroded families' already limited ability to provide for themselves in this district on the border with China's Tibetan Autonomous Region. With an average life expectancy of just 44 years, Mugu is the poorest region in one of the poorest countries in South Asia. Largely disconnected from the rest of Nepal, it is far off the lucrative tourist trail and has few income-generating possibilities other than agriculture.

The far-away crisis in the global financial markets doesn't mean much to villagers like Ms. Bikar and her family. What they see on the ground, however, is that many people have had to take low-paid work for larger landowners to pay for food they can no longer afford.



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In April, bags of rice are unloaded from a World Food Programme helicopter in Mugu district, northern Nepal, where three years of drought coupled with increased food prices have created a food crisis.

Then there is the rise in fuel prices. Many essentials need to be flown in to Mugu by air. Increased air-freight costs over the past 18 months have passed on to customers at local shops, who are buying less as a result.

Greater risk of malnutrition

"To earn enough money for two kg of rice, we have to do two days' work, but the rice is just enough for the family for one day," says Ms. Bikar.

Food prices have fallen around the world from 2008 peaks, but in Mugu, staple food costs continue to rise. The Bikar family and millions of other Nepalis affected by higher food prices have been forced to cut back on the quality, quantity and variety of what they eat. As a result, malnutrition is likely to go up.

"We used to have two meals a day. Now we just have one," says Ms. Bikar's husband, Kusha Lal Bikar. "We used to be able to afford meat or fish three times a month. Now all we eat is rice, beans, locally collected greens and occasionally roti [flat wheat bread]."

Food for work scheme

Add to this situation the three years of failed crops, and it becomes clear why the World Food Programme (WFP) is now feeding around 75 per cent of Mugu district's 44,000 people through a food-for-work scheme. Locals exchange 40 days of labour on community infrastructure projects for 160 kg of rice and 20 kg of lentils – enough food for an average family for around two and a half months.

In a recent food security report, WFP said that one in three rural Nepalis are selling belongings, and thereby significantly reducing their ability to cope with future price shocks. The Bikar family is no exception. "We have sold two of our bulls and most of my rings and necklaces," says Ms. Bikar. "The only assets we have left are this house and three small bulls, which are not working well because we can't get them good fodder."

Nutrition pilot programme

To tackle the alarming levels of malnutrition among young children in Mugu district and wide swathes of Nepal, UNICEF has piloted a programme to address the problem at a village level.



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A Nepali woman sifts grains of coarse rice by hand in Ghamghadi, located in Nepal's remote and rugged Mugu district.

In partnership with Action Contre la Faim and a local non-governmental organization, UNICEF has established a Nutrition Rehabilitation Unit and two outpatient therapeutic programmes in Mugu district. Outreach teams have been going into remote areas of the district, showing local health volunteers a simplified way to identify the children most at risk.

"Now it is internationally accepted to use a simple measurement of the mid-upper arm for both assessment and admission to nutrition programmes," says UNICEF Nepal Nutrition Specialist Pragya Mathema. "This measurement will immediately indicate that the child is severely malnourished and needs treatment."

Once identified, malnourished children are sent to the treatment centres, where they receive a combination of fortified milk and peanut-based, ready-to-use therapeutic food. The programme will also improve child feeding practices by passing on messages about correct weaning and feeding procedures for infants.

Effects on schooling, too

Education also suffers as prices hikes affect families. Three of Ms. Bikar's five children – two girls and a boy – are of school age. But only the boy attends the local school, as the parents cannot afford uniforms or exercise books. "Of course we would like to send the girls to school," says their mother, "but we have no hope of being able to manage the cost, and prices keep on rising."