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Institute of Public Policy and Administration

FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION IN KYRGYZSTAN: PROBLEMS AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

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CURRENT SITUATION AND TRENDS

In general, food security of Kyrgyzstan has gradually strengthened in recent years. *Food availability* was growing, and provision indicators for some basic products have increased in relation to the consumption rate. The average calorie intake reached 120% of the standard, and the average protein intake increased by 30% compared to 2000. Agriculture and the food industry of the country play a key role in providing Kyrgyzstan with food. However, the growth rates of agriculture lag far behind the growth rate of the entire economy of the country; this led to a decline in the share of agriculture in GDP to 11.6% in 2018. The main factor of this decline is the low productivity of the sector due to insufficient investment in fixed assets (total around 1% of total investments in the country's economy), low use of modern technologies, knowledge, know-how and production concentration in the small peasant farms and household sector. Against this background, the success of the bean farmers stands out; innovations in the choice of crops and access to export markets have dramatically improved welfare in the Talas region, where beans are concentrated. An important source of food is also imports, constituting more than 20% of domestic food production. Recent changes in foreign trade policy (entry into the EAEU), as well as macroeconomic factors affecting imports, can significantly influence on food availability.

Economic food affordability is improving due to overall economic growth and poverty reduction (from 38.0% of the population in 2012 to 25.6% in 2017), remittances from labor migrants, and low inflation (less than 2% on average during 2016-2018). Social benefits play an important role for vulnerable groups of population; despite the fact that the average benefit for low-income families with children almost doubled over 2013-2017, it comprises only 26% of the food component of the subsistence minimum.

Contradictory trends are observed in the *use of food*. On the one hand, the lag in growth in children under the age of 5 years is reduced across the board in the country, but at the same time the prevalence is higher in some regions (for example, the Jalal-Abad region). On the other hand, the prevalence of overweight and obesity in adults and children is increasing, including by increasing the consumption of ultra-processed, energy-intensive, cheap and affordable foods high in fat, salt and sugar, and the prevalence of anemia among women in the reproductive age is scarcely reducing. There is also an acute problem of increasing cases of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) caused by unhealthy diets and lifestyles. Mortality from NCDs accounts for more than 80% of cases in the structure of the country's mortality.

In recent years, it has been possible to maintain *the stability of the food situation*, although it remains vulnerable to various economic and climatic shocks.

STATE POLICY IN THE FIELD OF FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION

The state policy in the field of food security intensified after the international crisis of 2008, accompanied by a rise in food prices. In particular, a new Law on Food Security was adopted, social protection measures for vulnerable groups of population were strengthened, the “Financing of Agriculture” loan-subsidizing program for producers was introduced, and significant reforms were made in the agri-food trade policy. At the same time, funding allocated for government programs in agriculture and nutrition is very limited; cumulative expenditures for these purposes amount to no more than 2% of total state budget expenditures.

In 2015, the Government Program for Food Security and Nutrition and the Action Plan for its implementation for 2015-2017 were adopted. This program was first built on a modern vision of food security and nutrition problems; it was adopted after extensive consultation with all stakeholders. However, the implementation of the Program revealed significant problems: the uncovered need to finance many activities, the declarative nature of some policy measures, the lack of capacity to implement an integrated state program, and the role of the private sector and civil society was not determined. Of the 177 activities of the program, only 63 were fully implemented and 37 were not implemented at all. Currently, a new Food Security and Nutrition Program for 2019–2023 has been developed. Its main areas are increasing the availability of food for domestic consumption and its affordability, improving the structure of food, ensuring food safety and building an effective food security management system.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- To ensure the *priority status* of food security and nutrition policy measures necessary to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular, SDG 2 “No Hunger” by 2030.
- To *achieve internal coherence and inter-sectoral integration* of government policies in the agriculture and processing industry, as well as in the field of social protection, education, health, foreign trade, exchange rate, investment, etc.; to pay the necessary attention to both the economic issues of food security, and those aspects related to social development, gender equality, environmental protection.
- To *increase government funding* for the implementation of the priority measures of the Program on Food Security and Nutrition for 2019-2023. To establish an integrated financial resource tracking methodology and resource mobilization strategy for direct, inter-sectoral and nutrition-sensitive measures.
- To concentrate policy measures in the areas where *government intervention is absolutely critical*. In addressing the remaining issues, to use solutions based on the broad involvement of the private sector and civil society organizations.
- To promote *increased agricultural productivity* by supporting the use of high-quality means of production and new technologies, as well as knowledge dissemination systems, attracting investment in the sector, bringing skilled personnel to the industry, and improving farmers' access to market information.
- To combine the *promotion of export-oriented commercial agriculture with the support of small farmers*, including the poorest rural households ensuring food security and reducing poverty of a large part of the country's population.
- To *increase the resilience of the food situation* in the country to the effects of both short-term (fluctuations in world prices) and long-term shocks (climate change), using both technological measures (for example, introducing more productive crops resistant to climate change), trade and macroeconomic policies (controlling inflation, maintaining competition, etc.), as well as adaptive social protection measures.
- To ensure the *conservation, restoration, as well as rational and sustainable management of natural resources* (arable land, pastures, water and irrigation systems, forests, etc.).
- To implement and maintain appropriate systems to *ensure and control food security at all stages of food production and sales*, while adhering to the principles of Codex Alimentarius.
- To empower consumers by *improving the quality and availability of food and health information* through a food labeling system.
- To form new approaches to *adequate and healthy nutrition* among the population, implement educational and awareness programs for the population and the private sector to promote healthy diets and nutrition practices based on food diversity and exclusive breastfeeding for children up to 6 months, to support producers of food enriched with microelements, to regulate promotional activities in order to limit the consumption of foods high in salt, sugar and saturated fats, especially among products advertised for children and adolescents.
- In order to improve the *quality of nutrition*, continue and expand the implementation of state programs on ensuring access to clean water, sanitation and health care.
- To continue the *reform of the social protection system* towards providing the necessary support to vulnerable groups of population through cash benefits, social services and their flexible combination with agricultural production measures.
- To continue work on further *improvement of the system of monitoring and assessing* the state of food security and nutrition in the country.
- To revive *the Council on Food Security and Nutrition and create a Secretariat with it* to ensure coordination and management of a multi-sectoral approach to food security and nutrition in the Kyrgyz Republic.

This policy brief is based on the outcomes of the Development Dialogue on Food Security and Nutrition in Kyrgyzstan, hosted jointly by the United Nations system and the University of Central Asia in November 2018 and complements the policy brief of the Working Group on Agriculture and Rural Development, Food Security and Nutrition of the Development Partners Coordination Council (DPCC) “Food Security and Nutrition in the Kyrgyz Republic: Recommendations for Policy Development” (2018).