

Experts call for comprehensive right-to-food law

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The two-day regional consultation on 'Food-related Legislation in South Asia' concluded in Kathmandu today.

Representatives from Nepal, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka shared findings in the Regional Synthesis Report on food-related legislation in each of the countries.

Four categories of food insecurity factors were discussed at the conclave, including production/productivity, consumption/distribution, environment, and cooperation, along with solutions that are in line with national, regional, and international goals. The food security experts and policymakers from the five South Asian countries said the governments must enact a specialised and comprehensive law on right to food immediately in order to battle the region's prevailing and chronic hunger because of which more than 304 people go to bed hungry every day.

They added that although each country has more than two dozen to hundreds of legal provisions relevant to food security, none of them directly address the people's rights to food.

Gagan Thapa, member of Committee on Natural Resources and Means of the now-dissolved Constituent Assembly of Nepal, Buddika Pathirana, Member of Parliament of Sri Lanka, Chitra Lekha Yadav, deputy speaker of Nepal's dissolved House of Representatives, Somsak Pipoppinyo, Nepal country representative of Food and Agriculture Organisation, Dinesh Chandra Devkota, former vice-chairman of the National Planning Commission of Nepal, and Hari Roka, committee member of Nat-

ural Resources, Financial Rights and Revenue Sharing of Nepal's dissolved CA, also joined in the discussion.

"South Asian governments are investing a lot in terms of direct and indirect investment in food and agriculture. Many laws, rules, regulations, policies, and administrative measures have been introduced, but they are not coherent and comprehensive," said Bangladesh's Information Minister and Chairperson of All Party Parliamentary Group on Food, Agriculture and Rural Development, Hasanul Haq Inu.

Lilian Mercado, deputy regional director of Oxfam Asia, noted that South Asia has experienced the second fastest rate of economic growth in the world, enjoying an annual growth rate of six per cent on average in the last two decades. Yet, poverty has become worse as inequality has risen and become more severe.

"Studies showed it could grow at the steady rate of around 5.5 per cent in the next 25 years. But factors such as climate change, rising inequality, food price hike, population growth, rapid urbanisation as well as competition for natural resources can hamper or reverse the progress. It reflects a need for South Asian governments to transform their political pledges on food security into immediate action," she said.

"All those laws the region had in the past, though now outdated, were very good in those times, many are still working well now. They're good and effective on paper because they are either not implemented or fully enforced," said Ratnakar Adhikari of South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment (SAWTEE), Oxfam's research partner in South Asia.