

Securing Food amidst COVID-19 Pandemic

Summary Report

A webinar on “Securing Food amidst COVID-19 Pandemic” was organized by Master in International Cooperation and Development (MICD) under Mid-Western University (MWU) on 18 May 2020. This was the second virtual forum of the MICD-MWU webinar series in COVID-19 Pandemic. There were more than 100 attendees including academicians, MWU officials, faculty members, experts, practitioners, and graduate students. The invited experts shared their ideas, knowledge and experiences in the various aspects of food security during COVID-19 Pandemic and responded to the queries of the participants. The webinar included opening session, panel discussion session, and question and answer session.

Delivering his opening remarks, Vice-Chancellor Prof. Dr. Singh explained that food crisis caused by the pandemic has two dimensions- supply and demand. He shared the key finding of WFP report on food security in Karnali province of Nepal published in June 2019. Accordingly, there is 37% of food deficiency in mountain areas of Karnali and 29% of food deficiency in hill areas of Karnali. Elaborating gloomy yesteryears he portrayed uncertain future by putting the question in the floor as- “what will happen to Karnali with regard to food security during the COVID-19?”

Panel Discussion Segment I: Context/Scenario

At the outset, moderating the webinar MICD Academic Head Prof. Dinesh Bhujju stated that COVID-19 is not just a health problem now, it is rather interrelated with social, economic and environmental issues. Citing some statistics, he threw a question to the panel discussion as-“how do we guarantee food security in this pandemic?”

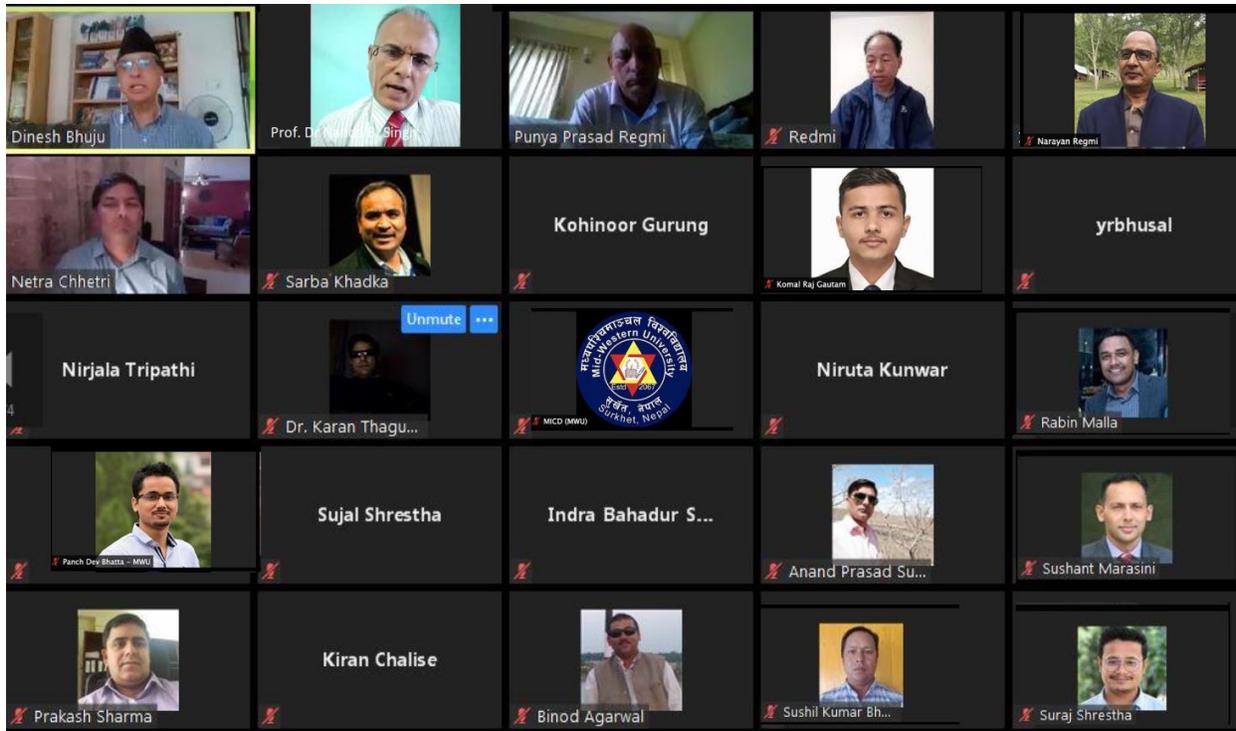
Discussing the global context of food security during COVID-19, Prof. Netra Chhetri, Professor at Arizona State University, said that there was less food production happening in the contemporary world because of delink between labor force and capital. He said, the cumulative effect of climate change, labor shortage, technology crunch plus COVID-19 pandemic will force millions of people suffered from extreme hunger in upcoming days. He summarized the risks for the global food supply: Labor shortage, Restrictions on food export, Climate change, and Priorities on other problems.

The panelist Dr. Sarba Raj Khadka, Chair of Food-First Information and Action Network, discussed South Asian scenario of food security during the COVID-19. Saying South Asia will witness low economic growth rate, he shared World Bank projection of the region will mark 1.8 to 2.8% or even less economic growth rate in 2020. This will certainly have repercussions in the livelihood of South Asian people. Tourism dependent countries like Maldives and Nepal will face crippling situation in upcoming days. Dr Khadka said the COVID-19 knocked South Asian door in the time of wheat harvesting and paddy sowing season that might reduce the production and cause food crisis for the longer period.

Briefing the context of Karnali province, Prof. Dr. Punya Regmi, Vice-Chair of Planning Commission of Karnali, mentioned the province witnessed 8.225% GDP growth rate in the FY 2075/76 i.e. the highest growth rate among seven provinces of Nepal, which could be because of the federal set-up that gave people to access the government. He said, the planning commission has projected 3.45% of economic growth rate in the ongoing fiscal year because of COVID-19 pandemic. Prof. Regmi updated food storage survey conducted by planning commission after the outbreak of COVID-19 in 10 districts of Karnali.

Panel Discussion Segment II: Addressing the Problem

In this segment, the moderator Prof. Bhujju planted the question in the floor to lead the discussion as “how do we address the present situation at the local level or farmer level?”



In line with the question, Prof. Chhetri provided a couple of suggestions to address the current situation at the local and farmer level are: Investment in science based solution combined with community led solutions, Ensure good social safety nets i.e. strong enough to cope with pandemic, Supporting the most vulnerable populations via safety net programs, Attain competence innovations: Agriculture innovations must not only improve the existing farming practices but should compete with other investment opportunities. This is important that people will see future in agriculture, Agriculture should be linked or tied up with the social and economic policy of the state which will help to lift the farmers out of poverty, and Farmers are demoralized in the society. Prestige and value of farmers are lacking, enhance these value.

Dr. Khadka discussed the silver lining in the present crisis as the countries are moving towards self-reliant because of COVID-19 pandemic. His suggestions to address the problem at the local level were: Ensure adequate social safety net measures, to increase production the agriculture innovation and R&D are necessary (where MWU has a great role), Achieve farmer centered policies and programs. As people are returning back to village because of pandemic, it is suggested to better utilize their knowledge and skills acquired in urban settings and foreign land.

Prof. Regmi pointed the need of increased production of local crops and harvest rather than depending on imported fortified rice. The province has huge production potentialities of its traditional nutritious food such as black rice, *Marsi* rice, buckwheat, barley, *Kodo* millet, bean and so on. He suggested promulgating the appropriate plans, policies and programs for the promotion of local food production. Other general suggestions that Prof. Regmi provided were: Focus on research and development: In this regard, MWU should launch Institute of Mountain Agriculture and the provincial government must allocate budget, Develop land use plan in the province, Policy required to graduate small farmers to medium farmers, Special packages are necessary for poor farmers.

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