

View Point

Junk Food and Food Insecurity in Developing Countries

Dipika Neupane
Institute of Medicine , Maharajgunj Medical Campus
Kathmandu Nepal
dipikaneupane28@gmail.com

Abstract

Rapid population growth and urbanization is increasing challenges to maintain food security. In this context, large multinational companies are coming forward to supply food to the whole world. They are supplying junk food items that have attractive packaging and good taste with very low nutritive value. These foods are getting popular due to time factor, taste factor and appealing advertisements. Specially, school aged children are getting addicted to these foods which is hampering their growth and development and are being vulnerable to non-communicable diseases. In developing countries, this has added double burden of disease creating new challenge to the health system. This increasing popularity is due to globalization and market liberalization in food marketing. To control its consumption, huge capital expenditure in food marketing and false advertisement should be restricted. Meanwhile, effective health promotion activities will help to create awareness about dietary needs among general population.

Key words: food insecurity; junk food; disease burden, globalization, developing countries

Introduction

Food is what we eat to keep ourselves healthy and from which we satisfy our dietary needs. The world summit of 1996 defines food security as existing "when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life". In this period of rapid population growth and urbanization, many multinational companies in different countries are coming forward to supply food for the whole world. That is why major portion of food market is occupied by fast food and junk food replacing the traditional or real foods. But, food security doesn't exist only when food is sufficient but it should also be safe and nutritious.

Therefore, the question is whether the food producers who have taken responsibility of supplying food are helping to maintain food security or they are making the situation even worse.

Junk Food and its consequences on health

Junk food are energy dense food with high sugar/fat/salt content and low nutrient value in terms of protein, fiber, vitamin and mineral content.(1) Foods like chips, chocolate, soft drink etc are generally taken as junk food. These foods contain high amount of refined sugar, white flour, trans fat and polyunsaturated fat, salt and numerous additives.(2) These foods contain

ingredients that make people unhealthy when eaten frequently. Junk food are getting very popular among people due to time factor, taste factor, its attractiveness and appealing advertisements. School aged children are usually more attracted to these foods with its colorful packaging and good taste.

Children usually get addicted to such foods as they contain sweetening agents and food preservatives that are addictive in nature. Due to this reason, they deny eating homemade foods and skip their meal. However, these foods do not have sufficient nutritive value to fulfill their dietary needs. Good nutrition is of utmost priority in children at the time of steady growth between the ages of 6-12 years.(2) So, it brings about serious consequence in their growth and development. On one hand because of high fat content particularly cholesterol and sugar content it increase risk of obesity and the other having low nutritive content it increase chances of micronutrient deficiency diseases like vitamin A deficiency and iodine deficiency. It also affects oral hygiene as these foods contains high amount of sugar. It increase chances of getting heart diseases due to trans fat and polyunsaturated fat.

There is different scenario between developed and developing countries in case of food and nutrition. In developing countries where there is already extreme poverty and food insufficiency, high use of junk food among urban and semi-urban areas has added another big problem. In case of Nepal, it has been pushed towards double burden of disease. While malnutrition and infectious disease remain great challenge, non-communicable diseases are becoming more prevalent and 65.7% of all deaths in Nepal are now attributable to NCD.(3) The scenario is same in other developing countries.

Marketing and distribution of food items

Increasing popularity of junk food these days is due to the phenomenon of globalization and market liberalization. In this competition, the major food producers are large multinational companies, supermarket chains and the losers tend to be the small local agents and traditional food markets.(4) Biggest food producers are located at developed countries, they are producing food in large amounts which are being supplied across the whole world. In the United States, the ten largest food companies control over half of all food sales and worldwide this proportion is about 15% and rising.(5)

The world's food system is not a competitive market place of small producers but an oligopoly. What people eat is increasingly driven by a few multinational companies.(5) This is pushing small scale food producers out of food markets in developing countries affecting their national economy.

Situation in Nepal can be seen as an example. Farmers of Nepal are slowly shifting towards alternative jobs, as they do not get market for their production. Some of those who are still sticking to their business sell their whole grains, fruits and vegetables to purchase packaged foods for consumption. This imperishable behavior further leads to poverty and household food insecurity.

Dietary pattern of people are shifting from homemade food to junk foods. This shift in dietary pattern has greater impact in school aged children. Parents often send their children to the school with these fast and easy food items for lunch. It has been easy for parents and tastier for children. Daily expenditure of a family is increasing, as these foods are costlier than homemade items. But they are hardly aware of the fact that local foods produced by them are far more cheap and nutritious than attractive food stuffs bought from market.

Increasing attraction of these food items is attributable to sophisticated advertisements. Multinational companies have been able to exploit the lack of controls and regulations on marketing and advertisement in developing countries and have been using a range of techniques to promote foods, which are high in fat, sugar and salt to children.(6) The food producing companies are spending large amount of budget on advertisement. It spends more than \$1.6 billion per year on children and teenagers targeted marketing of their products. (7) Colorful and attractive advertisements with different supplements allure children to buy such products. Most of the times, these advertisements make a false claim of these foods being healthy. Television has been a very useful media to reach every part of countries. The advertisements made with added creativity are so powerful that its popularity is spread among the population in a great speed leaving country's health promotion activities behind.

Right to good food is a human right

Article 25.1 of the universal declaration of human right has stated that "everyone has the right to a standard

of living, adequate for the health of himself and of his family including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services.” In developing and under-developed countries where people are already deprived of right to good food due to food insufficiency, global food system controlled by few developed countries is taking them farther away from their right. This existing food system does not provide food adequate for standard of living but focuses only on profit. The producers spend more time on packaging and marketing of food items rather than its nutritive value. In this instance, it has been a public health issue where prominent role from public health workers is expected.

Conclusion

Access to good food is indispensable to maintain optimal health. For overall health of population, action form national and international level is required. Regulatory policy on expenditure of budget in advertisement and high taxation for production and distribution of food items is the bottom line in addressing this issue. Prohibition and punishment will help to reduce false advertising. Most of all, government can play a major role by providing market opportunities for farmers and real food sellers. Health promotion activities focusing on benefit of green foods, whole grains and homemade items should be conducted in every part of countries. School administration can restrict junk food in schools to discourage children. These efforts will help to maintain food security in developing countries.

We do not need to import those colorful foods from foreign countries. We certainly have the ability to produce food that is far more nutritious in our own country. Understanding the health and economic benefit of real food is necessary. Traditional foods that are unique to us are important as they complement our diet. Lastly, it is equally important to realize that man eats not for enjoyment but to live.

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