

The False Food Aid Dependency Narrative in Karnali: Lessons for Food Security Policies

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Abstract

Food aid constitutes a heated debate in development discourse. In Nepal's Himalayan region it is blamed for aggravating food insecurity by inducing dependency and negatively affecting local agriculture and diet pattern. Transferring large amount of rice, a grain scantily produced locally, food aid is considered to have worsened human nutrition by directing the traditionally diverse diet to rice-based monotonous diet. The aid dependent farmers are alleged to have given up cultivating land for less preferred local grains, ultimately reducing local food production and reproducing the need for more aid. Therefore, the removal of food aid is considered indispensable to the achievement of self-sustained food security. This paper examines the dependency narrative in light of empirical data produced by a mixed-method study conducted in Humla, a highly food insecure district in western Nepal. The results show no signs of 'dependency' as alleged in the narrative. Despite the free/concessional food transfers, the local farms have not only maintained diverse traditional crops, recent agricultural innovation has actually increased on-farm crop diversity. Consistently, the local grains contribute about 75% to the total grain consumption signifying a diet pattern well embedded with the local food system. Making positive food security contribution to food deficit households, food aid mirrors a promising welfare resource. I will discuss these findings in the context of emerging environmental and socio-economic stresses in the agrarian based livelihoods of Himalayan farmers and will provide some insights useful for new food security policies.