CHAPTER FIVE

GEOPOLITICS OF FOOD AID IN BANGLADESH
Food aid finds its place in bridging the demand-supply gap. It is evident from the preceding chapters that it is indeed of great significance and essential in the food security system. Here, its essentiality and functions need to be examined. Generally, food aid is in response to the prevailing hunger in various parts of the world. The detailed analysis of the dynamics of food surplus and deficit countries would perhaps explain this controversial yet essential phenomena.

Britain was one of the pioneers in providing food aid. This was primarily as a means of colonial famine relief and supplies of wheat purchased for distribution in the Indian famine of 1890s and also the same in British Somaliland and Sudan in the early 1900s.1

In the post World War II period, this started up shaping as a programme. Due to the rapid population growth, low and poor agricultural production, mainly in Africa, and Asia led to a rising demand for food aid. Due to strict terms and conditions of bilateral aid it was not preferred. Therefore, the inception of a multilateral agency like 'World Food Programme' (WFP) was welcomed. In the history of transfer of bilateral food aid, 'Marshal Plan' occupies the first place. It was basically the European Recovery Programme. Strategic considerations and political motives were of prime importance along

with humanitarianism. Under this programme the aid was properly utilized in rehabilitating industries and hence food was necessary only for short duration. This 'plan' is actually a milestone in the evolution of food aid programmes.

In the early 1950s, three political factors in a combination augmented food aid as an international assistance regime. First, surplus agricultural commodities owned by the US Government piled up as a result of domestic price supporting programme and created pressure for their disposal to poor countries. Second, anti-Communist attitudes in the US promote promises of foreign assistance to help weak countries to stave off their economic problems. Finally, threat from famines, especially in India and Pakistan, and recognition of widespread hunger in poorer countries have stimulated by US humanitarian impulses. The US Congress then, passed 'Public Law 480' in 1954.

Since then the US has remained the single largest donor. The PL-480, also known as the 'Agricultural Trade Development Act' was passed with the support of the US farmers. The PL-480 was primarily meant for the disposal of surplus food but its humanitarian intentions were also inherent. Later on, the emphasis on surplus in the food aid programme was changed into the use of food as a long term investment in development.
Conflicting objectives have marked food aid since the 1950s, e.g. humanitarian relief, surplus disposal and expansion of export markets, support of foreign policy, and overseas economic development. Apart from these objectives, there was the compulsion of the disposal of surplus farm products as mentioned above. Regardless of emphasis, such multiple objectives often ten conflict in determining allocations. Countries that are good candidate for becoming commercial customers often receive priority for food aid allocations.

Such commercial calculations seldom target the most needy countries. In other instances countries with modest needs are given high priority for political purpose. Generally speaking, these developed countries find aid package as the best way to use their surplus and to gain political and economic mileage. In fact, these advantages come with conditionalities and modalities as strings.

Motives of donor countries are difficult to define, but they range from being social economic and political in character. For example, the economic advantage includes expansion of their economy by creating markets in highly populated countries of Asia and Africa to exploit economic resources of those developing countries. And Bangladesh is no different in this era of free trade and unipolar world.

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Basically, food aid finds its meaning and purpose in alleviating hunger. If there were no hungry people food aid would lose all its significance. It is the existence of hunger, especially in the developing countries, and the statistics of millions of malnourished people, that arouses world awareness and concern, which forces the international community to take appropriate measures for its immediate diminution and gradual elimination.3

Therefore, it is clear that in a less developed food deficit country like Bangladesh, which has high population growth rate along with high population density, food aid compulsions need to be examined. Politics of food aid in the context of the Indian sub-continent dates back to the early 1950s and the geopolitical interest of the US is not a hidden fact. Establishing military alliance with Pakistan and concern over India’s increasing influences in the Non-Aligned Movement led to the formulation of a calculated food aid policy with vested interest. Since independence, Bangladesh has been dependent on food aid till date.

The consequences of food aid to Bangladesh and geopolitical implications for the South Asian region is of utmost concern. In the changing economic and strategic scenario the analysis would evoke interest. Future of food aid to Bangladesh in the light of regional co-

operation for food security in South Asia would add important dimension.

5.1 Food Aid Compulsions:

Low income food deficit country are those which had a per capita GNP of US $ 1345 or less in 1993 and a net deficit in cereal trade averaging over the five years.\(^4\) In Bangladesh, population growth has been exceeding food production growth on an average in the past two decades (Chapter-2). Food gap in Bangladesh is sizeable (Table-2.9). With rapid rise in agriculture, this sector is now confronted with the low and stagnating yields of most crops including rice. And the food gap between domestic production and demand has evidence widened. This is a clear cut case of a food deficit country.

The food deficit of the population is defined as the amount of additional food that would be needed in the aggregate to ensure that the present prevalence on food inadequacy in a population is practically eliminated.\(^5\) This situation creates the atmosphere for the food surplus countries to take advantage. Being a poverty-stricken and poor in balance of payment, countries like Bangladesh and Ethiopia are regular recipients of food aid.


\(^5\) *Ibid.*, p. 57
Low resource base and frequent natural calamities make the situation worse. The effect of food shortages and crop failures on both macro-variables (balance of payment, etc.) and micro-variables (demand) depends on the resilience of the economy. Scarcity of resources and high poverty levels means that in a country like Bangladesh, even a relatively small instability level could lead to greater dependency on food aid. Bangladesh is overwhelmingly rural and agricultural. The nature of food production is subsistence-oriented. Majority of the household in rural Bangladesh depend on exchange of food grains. Thus further food-deficit means different kinds of adjustment and responses by different groups of people. It could even lead to chaotic situations and political unrest.

With these inevitable dangers, the governments look for immediate solutions. And with the available cheap international food prices and eagerly waiting donors and agencies, these countries do not think beyond that. Data on food grain import during 1980-81 to 1995-96 clearly portrays the picture of a perennial importer of food grains (Table-5.1). Low rice import except 1995-96 clearly suggests that the country has moved towards self sufficiency in rice production
### Table 5.1

FOOD GRAIN IMPORT (AID/COMMERCIAL/PRIVATE) DURING (1980/81-1995/96) PERIOD
(in 000 tonnes)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th><strong>Government (Aid/Grant)</strong></th>
<th><strong>Government (commercial)</strong></th>
<th><strong>Private (commercial)</strong></th>
<th><strong>Total Import</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rice</td>
<td>Wheat</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Rice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980/81</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>732</td>
<td>751</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981/82</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1111</td>
<td>1141</td>
<td>114</td>
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<tr>
<td>1982/83</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>854</td>
<td>1006</td>
<td>186</td>
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<td>117</td>
<td>1324</td>
<td>1441</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984/85</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>1181</td>
<td>1306</td>
<td>569</td>
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<tr>
<td>1985/86</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1060</td>
<td>1087</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>1986/87</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>1317</td>
<td>1425</td>
<td>153</td>
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<tr>
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<td>192</td>
<td>1595</td>
<td>1787</td>
<td>401</td>
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<td>1988/89</td>
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<td>1316</td>
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<td>41</td>
<td>908</td>
<td>949</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>10</td>
<td>1530</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>1375</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>716</td>
<td>735</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993/94</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>654</td>
<td>654</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>935</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995/96</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>773</td>
<td>774</td>
<td>490</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Import of large quantity of wheat is a compulsion for Bangladesh because most of the aided developmental programmes run on wheat import. Stagnating rice production in the late 1990s is not a positive sign. The government will have to engage itself continuously to meet the increasing demand and hence, look for food aid.

Meeting food gaps while being necessary, may do nothing to reduce future food aid needs. A country unable to import food this year may be even less able to do so next year. Like Bangladesh, in most of the Asian and African countries population growth exceeds food production growth and hence they look for food aid regularly. These countries have always sought ‘program food aid’ and ‘project food aid’. South Asian countries including India fell in this category till recently. So, population explosion, low agricultural productivity, environmental degradation and colonial legacies in the form of plantation agriculture, and their linkage with international markets are the various reasons for seeking food aid.  

So, the basic need of the LIFDC is to grow more and more food and decrease dependence on food aid. Food aid has been criticized on many grounds:

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(a) it increases dependence;
(b) it has a dis-incentive effect on local agriculture;
(c) it is unreliable because it depends on surpluses; and
(d) it promotes wastages, leakages and inefficiency in distribution.

Nevertheless, the aided programmes have helped reducing the level of important contribution of food security and economic development. In the short run, it has provided developing countries with the means to protect their nutritional status. In the long term, it has also helped to pursue employment oriented agricultural strategy of development. But somehow this has not influenced Bangladesh.

By supporting food-for-work and other programmes while determining the use of food aid, the objective should not be the elimination or narrowing of the food aid gap, but the elimination or reeducation of poverty. This objective should dictate the uses not merely of the counterpart funds from the sale of programme food aid, but in the framework given by the availability of food aid.

If food aid is to make maximum contribution to food security and economic growth, then despite the compulsion, Bangladesh and other countries look for these from the donors: -

(i) to provide reliable amount of food aid so that long term development programmes can be built,
(ii) to provide large amount of food aid because a significant effect on employment can not be expected unless some measurable percentage of the countries existing food supply is added, and

(iii) recognize the conditions of effective food aid use so that effort can be made to provided other resources needed for the effective use of labour.

Bangladesh should give priority to agricultural development in order to minimize the disincentive effect of food aid and to ensure the feasibility of a high employment strategy. It also requires giving attention to investment polices and the type of technological changes in agriculture needed to stimulate growth.

These requirements for both the donor and the recipient demand high analytical skills in technical departments to develop and administer such a food aid strategy, which would take the country out of compulsions. Considering South Asian region in general and Bangladesh in particular, it is very difficult to estimate the usefulness of food aid. Food has seldom played more than a minor secondary role in the development promotion effort.\(^7\)

If dependency on food aid is a permanent feature then this aid may deepen the dependency and foster insufficiency. Bangladesh has

\(^7\) A.J. Fonseca, *f.n. 3*, p. 126.
remained a classic example till recently. Basically, unless and until the government does not have a balanced strategy to improve its production on a long term basic, the dependency will give chance to the donor to exploits the situation for political and strategic gains.

5.2 Politics of Food Aid and its Implication for South Asian Region.

Though South Asia is a contiguous geographical entity with its monsoonic character, yet there are wide variations in crop productions in the same year in different countries. India and Pakistan are now self-sufficient in foodgrain production in normal years, but both of them have to keep large stocks to meet their respective shortfall in production in bad crop years. Bangladesh also though marginally food deficit country, occasionally experiences bumper crop, as its experiences in 1980-81 and 1993-94 demonstrate.

The willingness of the donor countries to provide aid to the countries of South Asia has been influenced by at least three factors—surplus disposal, humanitarian and strategic interests. This can be said to be exactly the same with the provision of food aid to India under PL 480 by the US. But the US interests clashed with the foreign policy of India. However, since India was compelled to feed its hungry population it could not afford to forego the food assistance
from the US. This mutuality of interests lead to a compulsive relationship.  

The major role-played by any factor in the evolution of food aid and its geopolitical importance is the availability of surplus agricultural produce in the developed world.

The options available for the surplus producing country are. (a) reduction in production; (b) increase in commercial role; (c) destruction of destroy the surplus stock; and (d) selling them at concessional rates or giving them as outright gifts.

The first option sounds like a realistic solution, but it is politically damaging for any party in power to introduce drastic measures to cut down farm productivity abruptly. Increase in commercial roles can be ruled out because surplus is an indication that the open market is saturated. If a country like US, whose grain surpluses are substantial, goes into the world market and tries to dispose of its surplus, a catastrophic fall in prices would result both domestically and internationally. Moreover, for political reasons, the US would not like to hurt its allies by entering the world market and

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reducing world prices. Destroying the surplus would be the least welcome option, while millions of people are starving in the world.

So, the only alternative left is to sell the surplus at concessional rates or to give them out right gifts.

The possible adverse effect of food aid on South Asian recipient's agricultural production and development has been much debated. While some recommend lesser food aid, other advocate no food aid at all, except for emergencies. Decrease in food production can be caused by depression of price received by former due to additional food supplies under food aid programme. And secondly, the absence of the determined effect on the part of the recipient country's agricultural policy in achieving self-sufficiency.

The US with its PL 480 has been the largest source of food aid to the countries of South Asian region. And even till date Bangladesh gets its food aid from the US AID bilaterally and from WFP and other agencies multilaterally.

In its early days, PL 480 was of a good relief value to help drain some of the grain surpluses. By the early 1960s, US grain surpluses were running in excess of 30 million tonnes and were costing US tax payers billions of dollars in payments to farmers for storage cost each
year. In 1965-66, two years of drought brought India to the edge of widespread famine. The US sent relief in terms of food aid in unprecedented amount—14 million tonnes of grains. Some observers argued that the near disaster in India was in part induced by a food aid policy, that in effect, encourage recipient governments to avoid difficult domestic policies which are necessary to increase their own output of food. They predicted that unless these countries like India increase their self-sufficiency in food, the international community will have to gear itself for massive food aid.

In the second year of food relief to India, there was a significant change in the US food aid policy. Under the new ‘food for peace’ legislation passed in 1966, concessional food sales were tied to each recipient country’s own efforts to improve agriculture. In fact, each food aid agreement, a contract of sorts, contended provisions outlining specific self help measures the country would carry out in exchange for the aid. Subsequent programmes, typified by the ‘green revolution’ in 1969-70, made it evident that food aid could indeed be an effective instrument.10


10 *ibid.*
The third change in food aid policy began about 1972. It was not marked by any new legislation but rather by a New World situation in food supplies and a new economic confrontation between the industrialized and less developed countries in which food became an instrument, neither primarily of aid nor a development, but of US foreign policy.

In 1972, besides shortfalls in production in South Asia and Sahel, there was also a shortfall in production in the erstwhile USSR. This shortfall led the USSR to buy foodgrains in unprecedented amount from USA on a concessional basis. At the same time South Asia and the Sahel claimed large amount of food aid from US grain stocks. The stocks were drawn down precipitously, grains became scarce in the world market for the first time since 1966. With the worldwide shortage in food supplies in 1973, market forces pushed up grain prices and major exporting countries were faced with the prospect of selecting the countries to whom they would sell.

In 1974, world production of grains failed to achieve levels adequate to satisfy current demand and to rebuild stocks. Some thirty developing countries including Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, were caught in an economic vice.\textsuperscript{11} Large imports of higher priced fuel and

\textsuperscript{11} ibid. p. 243.
food strained their foreign exchange to the limit. Grain exporting countries found themselves in a position to profit from their strategic control over vital commodities.

The last decade witnessed major reviews and revisions of food aid policies and programmes. The enactment of the 'Agricultural Development and Trade Act of 1990' brought profound changes in American food aid policy and administration. This legislation places greater emphasis on the supply of grant food aid to least developed countries solely for food security and separates administration of food aid.

At the United Nations Conference on least developed countries in September 1990, it was agreed that food aid should generally be a transitional measure and should be considered as a developmental tool. It was suggested that in times of relatively favourable harvests in recipient countries, multi-year programme food aid should be replaced by other forms of aid, if necessary and justified. To strengthen the contribution of food aid to self-reliant development, measures should be taken to prevent perpetual dependence on food aid.

Food aid has been subject to constant criticism because of the possible disincentive effect on the recipient's food production and the dependency on food imports, which ultimately increases the leverage of the donor over the domestic and foreign policies of the recipient.

The commitment of donor countries has always been doubtful. Their motives and dimensions have always come under cloud. Most of the times their vested interests and politics are involved. Generally, these donor countries which are developed also, dictate their direct or hidden conditionalities through various ways. These days their interests are served through various institutions like IMF the World Bank and some UN agencies.

Bangladesh has been depending on food aid and food import without any interruption. All the agencies of the developed world mainly from the USA are keeping the government engaged. As we have discussed earlier (Chapter-41), they have started to infiltrate into the policy making exercise. Despite continuos and sustained food-for-work and other programmes, Bangladesh continues to import food and the self-sufficient for a longer period is still eluding. This reflects the success story of the major powers and especially USA to carry out its hidden policies through multilateral agencies, since most of the agencies of the UN is supposedly hand in glove with the US.
With Russia losing its status as a parallel to the US and with the emergence of China as a super power of Asia, the US policy seems to be shifting. The continuous engagement of US with Bangladesh has to be seen in the context of China influence over the military ruled Mynmar. The strategic significance of Bay of Bangal is understood by both China and USA. A full day visit by the US President Bill Clinton to Bangladesh occupies great significance. To offset China’s influence over Mynmar, the continuous US support of the developmental programmes of Bangladesh can be understood. By acquiring facilities from Bangladesh, US can keep track of the activities of both China and India. The increasing share of USAID and WFP in the food aid and other developmental programme is not purely humanitarian. Though Bangladesh does need food and financial aid, yet it should not be trapped in a false sense of security.

Dependency on food aid paves the way for economic dependency through the gradual penetration of foreign capital. The bulk of food aid is offered through concessional rates. Bangladesh is too poor to pay back. This increased indebtedness deepens the dependency problem. Sometimes, the farmer may switch over to cash
crops. Cash crop economy increases the role of multinational corporations. 13

Any kind of aid induces the vulnerability of the recipient to the pressure of the donor. Therefore, it becomes important to see how food aid is utilized in future because dependency of Bangladesh on food aid is still continuing.

5.3 Future of Food Aid in Bangladesh: The Quest for Relief and Development.

Food deficit countries compulsion creates environment for food aid. Multiple interests of donors support ‘aid’. Food aid provides legitimacy for the internation economic and political order. The rules for the provision of aid are set by the industrialized North and have only partially resilient to changes proposed by the South. This has helped keep a broad constituency of support for international liberal capitalist’s rules, including rules of debt repayment and accountability of aid. 14 Political relationship between donors and recipient plus political goals with in the recipient country are pursued through aid. And this is done in the name of relief and development.


Aid is frequently tied to commodities the provider has to export. Humanitarian goals, visibly initiate the process of food aid.

Food aid is supported by groups who feel a moral obligation to reduce the inequality. In addition, specific elements of suffering caused by droughts, civil upheaval or chronic poverty are targets for relief. This takes place when aid is given to help particular categories of people within states, such as refugees, famine victims poor women and children. Going by this, Bangladesh does not need food aid continuously.

But as we have seen, various relief and developmental programmes are running round the year in Bangladesh from FFWP to PFDS, RMP, RWP etc. The problems of inefficiency in distribution and leakage have hampered their short-term objectives. Even those who have benefited from various programmes, have attained temporary food insecurity. Most of the food aid has not benefitted poor and food-insecure people in sustainable ways.

Despite several programmes, vulnerable groups continue to be the same. Poor rural population continue to be the group most affected by food insecurity. Among the socio-economic groups most at risk are the landless, women headed households, single crop farmers and small-scale pastoralists. There is a shift in emphasis from chronic
to transitory food insecurity, despite the complex interrelationship between the different causes of ethnic undernutrition.

Targeting has not been a problem in Bangladesh. Concerns are there in the design and implementation of poverty specific interventions. Still risk and vulnerability mapping can be useful for focusing action of people and areas most in need and for determining quickly the type and amount of assistance needed when disasters strike.

Bulk of food aid has been used for food for work programme. The rationale for these programmes lies in the principal of additionality. Such programmes result in additional consumption by beneficiaries whose incomes are too low for them to buy sufficient food for a healthy life. This multifaceted additionality of FFWP permits the extension of the limits of consumption, income, employment and investment.

FFWP has its own problems—coverage, sustainability, and effectiveness. Since rural poor are scattered over large areas, the programmes have been relatively small and costly. After securing some rural people in any particular area, a follow up programme is needed. Otherwise, these people would remain captives of the programme. In future, certain conflicting views have to be cleared
regarding FFWP so that its effectiveness could be advanced. These are: 15

(a) the argument about employment creation versus income generation and the size and distribution of the longer term income and assets, and

(b) the generalized statements about the superiority of food as cash are not helped because they do not take account of particular site-specific situations.

Therefore it is evident that food aid support would continue for this programme, and if implemented in true sense with a vision to secure for long term, it can be terminated one day.

Since Bangladesh is frequented by floods and cyclones, a development emergency linkage would be needed. Developmental projects have to be designed to expand rapidly when emergencies occur to provide additional food and employment when household food accessibility collapses. This strategy would need food aid even in future, considering Bangladesh's eluding self-inefficiency.

Women have been focussed through several vulnerable group development programmes with the assistance from WFP. But its beneficiaries are very small in number. They are in a better position

now. In Bangladesh, poor women are being provided with a package of development services, savings, credits, functional education and training in income generating activities. These women are in the process of joining the mainstream development.

The concerns of donors in all certainty will guide future food aid—the evaluation of relief and development. Even in the past donors have expressed their concern over the efficiency of the distribution system. They are also seeking to control the setup to ensure that the food actually reaches the intended beneficiaries with liberalization and opening up of markets. The end use is becoming a nagging concern not just of the donor country but also by reflection as much a worry for the worry of the recipient country wishing to ensure a continued flow of food aid.

To use food aid to combat hunger and poverty it should be made part of national development plans and programmes specially aimed at these objectives. The United Nations Committee for Development Planning (CDP) had proposed four interrelated key elements for such a strategy: accelerated economic growth, greater concern for human development, an absolute reduction in the

number of human being suffering from extreme poverty and deprivation, and restraining deterioration of the physical environment.

The essence of this proposal is to eliminate poverty and hunger on a lasting and sustainable basis through broad based economic growth that respects natural resource base and build on the capacities of all people including the poor.\textsuperscript{17} In Bangladesh, there is a large stock of labour that can be mobilized readily for growth. The addition of wage goods would help labour with little or no land without decline in agricultural production.

Therefore, food aid can play a major role in addressing this fundamental problem of food insecurity only if both donor and recipients are determined to achieved it. Food aid must come out of the earlier image of serving diverse political and economic proposes. Bangladesh should try to gain form the Indian experiences and should strengthen itself by the regional food security led by India.

5.4 Need for Regional Cooperation for Food Security in South Asia.

Considering the size of population vis-à-vis existing temporary and chronic food insecurity in the South Asian region, regional action is inevitable. The realistic assessment of regional food requirements to

\textsuperscript{17} World Food Programme, \textit{Annual Report}. Rome, 1990, p. 10
overcome chronic food insecurity fostered a kind of interest towards creation of regional food reserve. Basically, the seven member countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation agreed to maintain a regional food reserve of about 200,000 metric tonnes for the use in emergencies at their 1987 summit level meeting in Kathmandu.

Generally speaking, this kind of idea was motivated by improved grain situation in India since India has already achieved what we call ‘self-sufficiency’ in foodgrain production and has got a huge buffer stock. The idea was mooted by the then Indian Prime Minister, Mr. Rajeev Gandhi. He said, “Where twenty years ago many of us were still dependent on food imports for survival, our remarkable achievements in agriculture have made it feasible to counter scarcities and unexpected shortages by recourse to our resources. Our national self-reliance could be reinforced by a framework of regional self-reliance”.

This act was justified by a series of natural disasters that caused considerable damage in three countries, India, Bangladesh and Nepal, in 1988. Besides the plan to fight natural disasters through concerted effort, there are also strong political and economic

reasons for maintaining a food security reserve for each of the member countries.

Considering the complex political situation in the South Asian region, the major challenge in a regional food reserve system is posed by its implementation. There are very few regional schemes for maintaining regional reserves of food. One World Bank report has rightly observed that without agreement on domestic policies, on emergency buffer stocks, and on sharing the financial burden, any regional scheme will dissolve.¹⁹

Basically to have a regional food security system or to formulate a course of action for regional cooperation, political commitment is desirable. And to have political commitment, political unity is required. Moreover, the decision to set up such a regional reserve is not based on a realistic assessment of the regional food requirement and the potential of the member countries. The managerial and economic problems regarding its implementation are additional constraints.

Baring instability in food availability and instability in food production, political instability in South Asian region along with

disturbed relation between India and Pakistan, make the situation worse. In the light of the needs to achieve food security in the region on the one hand, and the complex problem associated with its achievements on the other, we have to evaluate the establishment of regional food insecurity and regional action required to overcome chronic food insecurity.

So far availability and reserves are concerned, the highest degree of instability in the region was experienced by, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Pakistan. India experienced less fluctuation in foodgrain production.

Since the possibility of stabilizing food supplies through intra-regional trade in food and agriculture is limited, one effective measure to solve temporary food insecurity problems could be to set up domestic buffer stocks. The growing self-reliance in some countries and growing food unavailability in others would surely provide some form of regional insurance against shortfalls in food availability. So, the region must have some reserve.

But the reserve requirement in South Asia depends on many factors. First of all, the size of the regional reserve should be based on the annual fluctuations in food availability rather than on chronic food shortages. Secondly, such reserve should be over and above the
member countries' domestic food reserves. Thirdly, it should not be expensive. Lastly, there has to be a 'political commitment' on the part of the comparatively better off countries to contribute to the cost of holding the reserve. Reserve composition should include combination of rice, wheat, and maize. Two other important issues arise in connection with the implementation of the regional food agreement. These are about the location of the reserve and its pricing mechanism.

Apart from these measures, other measures must be taken to enhance the purchasing power of the ordinary people. The SAARC member countries could gain considerably in terms of combating malnutrition, poverty and hunger through some form of cooperation. Besides setting up an emergency food reserve there can be some other areas of cooperation. These include:

(i) setting up an early warning system;

(ii) flow of food by both limited and regulated trade and intergovernmental lending;

(iii) encouraging research and extension in agricultural technology and processing; and

(iv) increasing agricultural productivity through cooperation in developing the most important factor of production including the protection of the environment.
Permanent food security can be achieved through the creation of a regional Food Reserve. But this would not serve the purpose to those sections of population, who lack accessibility. This is where Bangladesh can take lessons from past experiences of India and exchange planning schemes. Lack of employment opportunities and maldistribution lends to chronic food insecurity. To overcome that situation, efforts at the individual country level and multilateral level is required.

One of the permanent features in the South Asian countries is flood, which ravages agricultural land and causes enormous suffering, especially in Bangladesh, Nepal and some parts of India. This leads to food insecurity. Protection of forestland resources and environmental resources could be another area of cooperation. Population pressure on land is the principal cause of deforestation and soil erosion, which in turn causes flooding. Enhanced cooperation in protecting the environment and forest resources will definitely help in achieving food security.

A number of issues related to the location of the reserve, the kind of grain pricing mechanism, sharing of costs and conditions of release of the reserves are yet to be resolved given the bilateral political problems.
Apart from domestic reforms, countries in this 'region' should also review their agricultural and pricing policies. These days, protection of environment from degradation should be one of the important areas of co-operation. This has regional as well as global implications, because a serious environmental crisis in one country may affect the environment of the entire region.

But, without improving the bilateral relations between India and its neighbouring countries, nothing substantial can be done. Still, Bangladesh can take the initiative at this moment since it is also going to hold the next NAM summit.