

Against Malnutrition - Advocating for Sustainable Local Food Systems

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According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, around 18 million hectares of forests are lost annually. This results in 24 billion tons of soil degradation each year. Between 1970 and 2010, biodiversity on Earth decreased by 52%, leading to ongoing risks for natural, social, and physical resources. When natural resources are lost, it not only impacts ecosystems but also negatively affects human communities and the physical resources upon

which they rely. The degradation of natural resources has been identified as a major issue in achieving social development. In response, sustainable development, which is aligned with the concept of a "Green Lifestyle," has been embraced as a model to safeguard both current and future generations. Sustainable development aims to cultivate environmentally friendly lifestyles.

In this approach, it is essential to reconnect people with nature and it is a responsibility in communities to protect the environment. Misuse of natural resources can harm the environment and threaten humanity's continued coexistence. Current consumption patterns, driven by a capitalist economy, have led to the depletion of

global resources. The World Bank estimates that by 2050, global food production will need to increase by 60% to meet the needs of an estimated 9.6 billion people. Modern development, based on industrial and environmental metrics, has taken root within society due to public awareness. Moving away from traditional food systems, we now heavily invest in imported foods, which increases foreign exchange spending. The Green Revolution has driven agricultural industries to produce genetically modified crops that are sometimes unsustainable and harmful to the environment. Due to high input costs and artificial additives, modern agriculture has compromised traditional knowledge and sustainable practices. Sri Lanka's agriculture, with its indigenous varieties, water management systems, pest-resistant seeds, and eco-friendly pest control methods, is at risk of being overshadowed by artificial additives and modified organisms.

Globally, about one-fifth of the population consumes between 70-80% of the world's fuel and mineral resources, primarily



in industrialized countries. In contrast, the remaining four-fifths, mainly in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, use only around 20% of these resources. This inequality in resource consumption is a major factor driving environmental degradation and highlights the critical responsibility of developed nations in preserving the planet. In developing regions, nearly 1 billion people face undernourishment, with many suffering from hunger. South Asia and Africa have a significant number of people living with malnutrition and food insecurity, despite global advances in agricultural productivity.

Approximately 17% of global land area is used for agriculture, yet environmental degradation continues to affect these lands. Roughly one-third of global food production, equivalent to 1.3 billion tons, is lost due to factors like drought and floods. It's estimated that by 2025, food waste could increase to 2.2 billion tons, highlighting an urgent need to reduce food loss. According to FAO reports, food waste in developed nations alone costs around \$680 billion annually, while developing nations lose about \$310 billion. In countries like Sri Lanka, reducing food waste could significantly alleviate hunger for vulnerable populations.

The modern development and progress indicators are now primarily focused on industrial agriculture, green agriculture, and environmental sustainability. This focus is largely due to the increased public awareness surrounding

these issues, which have become popular subjects of global discourse. We are in an era where we are spending foreign exchange on imported foods, often ignoring traditional food systems that are part of our heritage and should receive more attention. Green agriculture has become an ideal that people are beginning to embrace, despite its impact on traditional agricultural methods and local crop varieties. Reducing the expenses incurred on imports could benefit our economy, but this also demands caution about the harmful pesticides added to food, the degradation of soil, the destruction of biodiversity, and the risk of natural food systems being lost. Our agricultural heritage, traditional irrigation methods, crop varieties suited to the climate, indigenous seeds, and practices that support soil health and beneficial

microorganisms have been neglected in favour of modernized green agriculture and new economic strategies. Unfortunately, we have lost much of this valuable knowledge and tradition in the process.

The media, once regarded as the voice of the people, has now been transformed into a profit-driven entity, nurturing a new culture within it. For an ancient time, our ancestors lived in harmony with green landscapes, benefiting from the earth's abundant health and well-being. However, due to various socio-economic influences, dietary habits evolved along with progress, leading to an era where artificial colourings and instant foods now dominate, replacing the once pure foundations of nourishment. The commercialization of the food industry, driven solely by profit, has led to the creation of foods filled with artificial flavours, colourings, and additives, which endanger people's lives. Through relentless advertising and media campaigns, the industry persuades the public to consume harmful foods loaded with excessive sugar, salt, and processed flours, without any consideration for the health consequences. Pharmaceutical companies, too, reap profits by alienating people from natural foods, raising doubts about potential commercial ties with various artificial food and pharmaceutical corporations.

To increase the variety of nutrients obtained from different sources, we strive for diversity and balance in nutrition. This means that local foods and imported foods, as well as foods rich in fibre and traditional foods, should be embraced with various adaptations to promote our



community's health and nutrition comprehensively. Consuming rice prepared with pulses, different types of grain-based rice dishes, and rice with locally sourced flavours all represent sociocultural values. Furthermore, today, rice dishes prepared with pulses have become a popular food trend in our local restaurants, shaped by cultural influences.

On the roadside, stalls selling rice dishes with pulses, traditional local rice meals, homemade meals, and coconut-infused rice, as well as other small vendors and restaurants, showcase our heritage. Although nowadays rice dishes with pulses and other grains are being marketed as traditional, these foods harken back to simpler times when people, often traveling in harsh conditions, relied on practical and sustaining food options to alleviate hunger. The nutritious value of these rice dishes, like rice prepared with pulses or grains, is widely appreciated today, and awareness about their health benefits is spreading, bringing advantages to people across society. These rice dishes, such as coconut-infused rice, are enjoyed in rural settings as a nostalgic link to village life by urban dwellers. Restaurants that serve coconut-infused rice may have modern decor with glass tables, electric fans, and ambient lighting, creating a unique fusion of traditional and modern dining experiences.

Plating a serving of rice with pulses typically involves placing a small heap of rice with pulses on a plate, reflecting the traditional style of authentic rural cuisine. This rural-style dish would often be complemented with ingredients like sautéed onion, green beans,



grated coconut, a piece of dried fish, a slice of lime, and a sprig of leafy greens. Additional side dishes might include beetroot, leeks, carrots, chicken, and eggs. The meal a villager enjoys with coconut-infused rice echoes the authenticity and quality of traditional fare. Sometimes, the rice with pulses itself is prepared in a Thai-inspired way, incorporating Indian flavours. Ingredients like red onions, green chilies, garlic, and ginger have origins in India. Cinnamon and cloves are used sparingly for aroma, while coconut milk hails from Thailand, and tamarind is from Malaysia. Although the spices and vegetables are locally sourced, the grains of rice, vegetables, and herbs are entirely domestic. Therefore, the term 'authentic local cuisine' is often a cultural misconception.

This misconception can be dispelled by recognizing that traditional recipes passed down from the past and created with care bring a sense of satisfaction and connection. To truly enjoy the experience, one would enter the setting where these meals are served with the understanding

that coconut-infused rice, bean curry, and clay pots are part of the traditional presentation, but it may lack certain cultural symbols. For instance, it may not involve wood-fired cooking or clay vessels but rather a gas stove. Still, the rice might be served in clay dishes, embodying a mix of tradition and contemporary dining.

Our ancestors have handed down to us a rich tradition tied closely with water, which thrived amidst dew-covered landscapes. The fields once filled with the crops and rice of our agricultural diversity and cultural wealth, were adorned with grains that nourished a nation full of abundance, strength, and growth. However, today, commercial advertising, backed by various media, subtly shapes innocent consumers' minds, overshadowing the true worth and diversity of our traditional foods, diluting their quality and transforming them into mere commodities. In the wake of all this, our Sri Lankan nation, lost and misguided, seems to be sinking deeper. Today, we bow our heads, consuming adulterated

milk powder and flour at inflated prices, turning us into a nation that continues to poison itself while dumping toxins into the ocean. Essential food items like rice, vegetables, flour, sugar, and milk powder, which are essential for life, are being consumed by people who unknowingly wait for imports even while fertile lands remain uncultivated. However, it's not too late. Now is the time to open our eyes and cherish our own rich food culture, preserving what truly belongs to us.

The ability of sustainable agriculture to nourish people and safeguard their health is immense, with a hidden power in its green practices. It is essential to recognize, value, utilize, appreciate, and further innovate these aspects for a future-oriented sustainable approach. Expanding accessibility and promoting traditional food varieties and professional diets and launching initiatives at both national and local levels can further broaden health and

nutrition. Rediscovering traditional knowledge and associated technical methods used by our ancestors and appreciating their significance can be achieved by studying and adapting them to meet current needs, fostering a skilled approach towards sustainable soil development for the future. In such an endeavour, professional expertise and systematic methods have considerable value. We should focus on development goals aligned with the Millennium Development Goals to ensure effective progress. Reviving and sustaining eco-friendly lifestyles to avoid environmental degradation and preserve life amid rising populations is essential, although the challenges are significant. Reducing the impact of harmful lifestyles followed by some can help mitigate the damages.

Our villagers, who used to rely on traditional means for their needs, now sell coconut toddy only to end up consuming bottled mineral water and chilled beverages. This unfortunate shift highlights how national policies have yet to reach rural areas. The time has come to mark an end to the era where milk was sold to buy powdered milk for children. There are still many parents who sell homemade jaggery to provide store-bought sweets to their kids. In our homes, we witness a society where traditional foods like hingurala, katuala, kahata ala, wel ala, and innala are sold off to eat potatoes instead. The trend of selling kithul flour and spending money on imported milk powder has sadly infiltrated rural households. Locally grown grains like cowpeas,

mung beans, chickpeas, millet and sesame seeds are sold to outsiders, only to buy broiler chicken instead, changing the eating habits of villagers. The culture of selling local vegetables such as Thumbakavila, Kekiri, cucumber and elabatu to buy preserved and processed foods still thrives in villages. Our society has now reached a point where even native fruits like divul (wood apple), pomegranate, and Bael are sold to afford unhealthy snacks like fried dumplings.

As fresh, local milk flows down the drain, we import powdered milk worth billions, a consequence of short-sighted national policies that favor industrialization over self-sufficiency. While discarding valuable local produce like gotukola and other greens, the wealthy indulge in luxury hotels, tied to these modern conveniences by thousands, revealing the flaws of our industrialized mindset. Innocent villagers bear no responsibility for this state of affairs. Due to the influence of multinational corporations, our country has sacrificed local dietary traditions, a grim reminder of the devastating effects of colonialist-influenced policies on our food sovereignty. When the symbol of self-reliance is replaced by a purely profit-driven agenda, it disrupts the natural progression of generations and endangers traditional ways of life. Unfortunately, such industrialized thinking also diminishes the lifespan and sustainability of these traditions, jeopardizing their very existence.

Malnutrition is a nutritional issue that affects development more subtly than overt hunger. Nutritional deficiencies and poor dietary absorption can cause



malnutrition even when food shortages are not present, often due to metabolism. Experience has shown us that rice porridge can provide proper nourishment when consumed correctly. We have had a porridge culture since ancient times. Ayurveda provides a scientific system to understand the benefits of porridge, while our traditional heritage has used porridge to treat and support health. Thus, porridge is a nutritious and easily digestible food that can be prepared in various ways. porridge serves not only as food but also as a therapeutic supplement for individuals who are ill, with medicinal properties beneficial for treatment and prevention of certain illnesses. Therapeutic nutrition was an essential part of our heritage, where porridge was used as a health supplement. From a modern perspective, it is classified as a functional food. Prepared porridge is a nutritionally complete food, especially valuable for addressing malnutrition due to low protein and calorie intake.

Rice porridge typically contains four main ingredients: rice, coconut milk, rice grains, and spices (like ginger and garlic). At first glance, it appears as a simple, nutritious food containing essential nutrients. However, rice porridge alone may not be sufficient to address protein deficiencies. For this reason, flour from legumes such as mung beans, chickpeas, cowpeas, or black gram can be added. Ideally, these legumes should be soaked overnight and then incorporated for easier digestion. Thus, rice porridge is a valuable food that can also act as a remedy for children suffering from malnutrition. Including other types of grains like red rice is also beneficial. Considering the

nutritional value of drumstick leaves, they provide highly valuable nutrients.

Although the main ingredient in rice porridge is rice, it can also include other grains, root vegetables, legumes, and even various types of greens. Coconut milk is a highly valuable nutrient that can be added to porridge varieties in our culture. Additionally,

other protein sources may be incorporated. In African communities, porridge is sometimes prepared with insects and worms as per their dietary customs. As such, researchers worldwide are currently studying the potential and effectiveness of porridge for addressing childhood malnutrition. In societies with traditional food cultures, giving porridge to children with nutritional issues is a common practice. During times of food scarcity, porridge is a highly adaptable and valuable food.

Despite protein deficiency being a significant nutritional issue, researchers should also be keen to explore the effective use of pumpkin-based porridge to address Vitamin A deficiency. The availability of beta-carotene-rich pumpkin varieties and the successful absorption of Vitamin A when paired with fat-based mediums like coconut milk can be scientifically verified. However, the focus still seems to lean towards promoting multinational corporations' vitamin supplements.

Some nutritionists assume that pumpkins, widely present in rural areas, are only used as luxury items in upscale hotels and cafes. Yet, they too could benefit from recognizing the nutritional value of green-based pumpkin porridge prepared with modern knowledge.

During the preparation of herbal porridge (kola kenda), adding garlic and ginger is essential. This



not only enhances the hunger but also improves the absorption of important nutrients efficiently. Therefore, giving herbal porridge to malnourished children can improve their appetite and their ability to absorb nutrients. The water content within is more than just plain water; it's a nutritive liquid fortified with essential nutrients. Any village mother with basic knowledge understands the importance of this. No advanced science is required to understand it. To avoid unnecessary expenses on imported functional foods and nutraceuticals, it's the responsibility of every community

leader to raise awareness about our traditional foods. In addition, it's necessary to research the nutritional value of our pumpkin porridge and make it widely recognized. Developing more accessible ways to utilize these foods is also essential.

Due to various commercial trends, traditional food practices have been gradually replaced by fast foods and other convenience foods. The wholesome characteristics and positive qualities associated with traditional food, such as cultural heritage and preservation of nutritional knowledge, are being lost. Consequently, traditional food ingredients such as fresh vegetables, fruits, and meats are being substituted with instant or processed alternatives, including instant noodles, canned fish, packaged snacks, and processed meats. These changes are leading to the decline of traditional diets, which were once rich in natural, healthy, and locally sourced foods. The increasing reliance on processed and fast foods in society is a result of the growing demand for convenience and the fast-paced nature of modern life. However, there is a need for basic awareness and education about the importance of nutrition, traditional food practices, and cultural literacy.

Such knowledge allows individuals to better understand the link between food choices, health, and cultural identity. The shift from a culturally rich and environmentally conscious food system to one dominated by convenience foods is due to changes in societal behavior. Today, the loss of cultural and environmental literacy, once central to our food systems, is becoming more evident. The decline of traditional food knowledge and practices, which were once deeply embedded in everyday life, is a significant concern in our modern society.

The traditional food culture is an essential part of our identity and well-being. It is deeply rooted in our cultural heritage and reflects the values and practices of our ancestors. In our rural communities, traditional food culture was once an integral and highly valued aspect of daily life. However, the rise of anti-cultural mentalities, which are opposed to the preservation of cultural traditions, has led to a disconnect from our cultural roots. This shift has created an environment where people are no longer as culturally aware or connected to their food traditions. Today, as different cultural influences become more

widespread and integrated into society, we are losing touch with the traditional food practices that once nourished us. This is a consequence of a globalized world where convenience and modernity have become the driving forces. As a result, many people are now opting for ready-made, fast, and processed foods instead of locally sourced, culturally significant food. This transformation has led to the commercialization of our cultural heritage, with a focus on profit rather than preserving traditional wisdom. The true essence of our food culture has been overshadowed by mass-produced food products that prioritize profitability over nutritional value. In urban societies, "user-friendly" food cultures are being created, designed to appeal to the modern consumer who seeks convenience but lacks an understanding of the deeper cultural significance behind their food choices. These changes are not only damaging to our food culture but also to our sense of identity. The Americanized food systems, with their relatively short history, have replaced our long-standing cultural practices with new ones that have little regard for tradition. Reviving and reconnecting with our cultural heritage is a challenging task, but it is essential. To achieve this, a broader cultural literacy is needed.



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