



Ernährungssicherung im Hochgebirge: Akteure und ihr Handeln im Kontext des sozioökonomischen Wandels in Ladakh, Indien [Food Security in High Mountain Areas: Actors and Their Agency in the Context of Socioeconomic Change in Ladakh, India]

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Source: Mountain Research and Development, 36(4) : 565-566

Published By: International Mountain Society

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1659/mrd.mm195>

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Ernährungssicherung im Hochgebirge: Akteure und ihr Handeln im Kontext des sozioökonomischen Wandels in Ladakh, Indien
[Food Security in High Mountain Areas: Actors and Their Agency in the Context of Socioeconomic Change in Ladakh, India]

By Juliane Dame. Erdkundliches Wissen 156. Stuttgart, Germany: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2015. 368 pp. € 52.00. ISBN 978-3-515-11032.

Food security in the global South has gained renewed political and scientific attention in recent years, in light of a global number of nearly 800 million people still suffering from undernourishment on the one hand, and food price hikes, food speculation, “land grabbing,” and impacts of climate change on the other. With her book, human geographer Juliane Dame contributes to the ongoing academic debates on food security in 2 significant ways. First, she points out a blind spot in these debates: they largely ignore the particular challenges of food security in mountain areas. Second, she contributes to filling this gap by providing a pioneering, comprehensive, and empirically rich in-depth case study on the food security and livelihood strategies of mountain dwellers in the Leh district in Ladakh. The Leh district is particularly well suited for such a study; in this high mountain area, which is cut off from road access during winter, limited local opportunities for agricultural production coincide with a growing population and far-reaching changes in people’s livelihoods—a combination of factors that greatly affects subsistence food production. In addition, the area has undergone processes of intensified economic and political integration in recent years, which have affected local production

systems, market supply, development policies, food security, and livelihood strategies in manifold ways.

In her concisely written and well-structured study—the first comprehensive study on food security in Ladakh—Dame takes an actor-centered approach, examining the agency, interests, strategies, and discourses of local households and non-place-based actors using a multilevel analytical framework. A historical perspective is added by considering current dynamics in light of their path-dependent development over longer periods. The study is theoretically informed by political ecology and action theories, as well as livelihoods and vulnerability studies.

Dame’s sophisticated analytical framework is sensitive to complex interrelations and multiple causations and enables an integrative approach. By including political, economic, sociocultural, and environmental aspects and dynamics, the book is much more than a study on food security only. It also provides deep insights into the local agropastoral production system and current trends of socioeconomic change and livelihood diversification. In a detailed, nearly 60-page historical chapter, Dame provides an overview of more than 2 centuries of Ladakh’s history from precolonial times to the present, with a particular focus on local production systems, market integration, and food security.

Empirical data for the study were collected during 11 months of fieldwork between 2006 and 2010, using an innovative and well-founded mixed-methods approach that combines open, qualitative interview methods and participant observation with standardized survey tools, field mapping, remote sensing, geographic information system analysis, and archival studies in Leh and at the India Office Records archive of the British Library in London. Empirical fieldwork focused on the Buddhist case study villages of Hemis

Shukpachan and Igu in the Leh district.

According to Dame’s findings, the nutritional status of the population in the Leh district has improved over the last decades. Today, it is characterized less by undernutrition than by malnutrition, sometimes also referred to as “hidden hunger.” Large seasonal differences in food availability and a low level of dietary diversity—particularly during the critical winter and spring seasons—have led to deficits in certain micronutrients, which affect children, pregnant women, the sick, and the elderly in particular. In the absence of recent studies and medical statistics on nutritional status, Dame resorts to birth weight register data from selected hospitals and personal assessments by medical personnel in the Leh district. In addition, she provides in-depth insights into the everyday dietary habits of people in the study villages. Nevertheless, her assessment of the population’s current nutritional status is based on a set of fragile proxy indicators, which hampers the identification of particularly vulnerable groups.

Dame states that there has been a relative loss of importance of subsistence agriculture for livelihoods and food security. Land use and cropping patterns have changed, new varieties have been introduced, and agricultural labor has been reduced and shifted increasingly onto the shoulders of women, elderly people, and hired workers. The use of high pastures is in decline, and former cropland is being left fallow or used to build houses on. Production of cash crops such as vegetables and fruit has become established only in small seasonal niches. According to Dame, these trends must be seen in the context of livelihood diversification and people’s preference for new and more rewarding off-farm income-generating opportunities, such as military service, tourism enterprises, or regular employment in the public

and private sectors in and outside the region. Along with increasing selective outmigration for education and employment, these trends have led to multilocal household structures and growing social disparities due to uneven access to new income opportunities.

Dame also considers Ladakh as a “development hotspot”: a political arena in which a range of local, national, and international actors—including government agencies at different levels and international development nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and their local counterparts—propose diverging visions of “development” and “modernization,” with far-reaching implications for food security. Enthusiasts for further market integration, who endorse food imports from the Indian lowlands at the expense of local agricultural production, face advocates of increased self-reliance, nutritional

self-sufficiency, and reduced external dependencies and determination.

Dame’s concluding assessment of current trends in food security in the Leh district is a mixed one. Tapping off-farm income sources has enabled households to obtain their food supplies from the market, which potentially mitigates seasonal supply shortages, increases dietary diversity, and reduces micronutrient deficiencies. A number of government and NGO programs on food security have worked in this direction. However, increased workloads for women, dependencies on food imports, unbalanced food price subsidies that aggravate socioeconomic disparities, intensified competition and individualization, household fragmentation, and a decline in social cohesion have caused malnourishment to persist,

particularly in poor and marginalized sections of society.

Dame’s book is based on her PhD dissertation at the South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University, for which she was awarded the Wilhelm-Lauer Prize of the Academy of Sciences and Literature in Mainz, Germany. The book is certainly of great interest to all those concerned with changing living conditions and development processes in mountain regions, be it from an academic or an applied perspective.

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