



FOOD SECURITY CHALLENGES FOR PAKISTAN

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Globally, the issue of food insecurity has taken the central stage of policymakers. Nearly a billion people across the world experience the effects of food insecurity with the largest proportion of undernourished people living in Asia and the Pacific Islands, followed by Sub-Saharan Africa.¹

Pakistan has also been one of the worst impacted nations in the world in terms of a massive increase in the number of chronically food insecure population. Prime Minister Imran Khan while announcing the Kisan Card said that “farmers are the backbone of Pakistan and it is a step in moving towards modern agriculture and would transform and change Pakistan.”² Recent food crisis in the country has attracted popular attention throughout the country, while there is also criticism of the policy makers for being unable to present a timely assessment of demand and supply. This issue has been further augmented by the recent food price crisis which has adversely impacted upon the purchasing power of those already living below the poverty line of less than \$2 a day. According to the International Food Security Assessment by the US Department of Agriculture in the coming decade from 2021-31, a total of 38 percent of the population of Pakistan is going to be food insecure. This assessment also reports that Pakistan suffers from the largest food gap in the whole region, with

¹ ‘The state of food security and nutrition in the world’, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. <https://www.fao.org/publications/sofi/en/>

² “Kisan Card Will Transform Pakistan: PM Imran Khan”, *Dawn News*, April 26, 2021 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1620494>

the highest food insecurity level even below Bangladesh. It stands at 389 with Nepal around 255.³ Moreover, a recent survey conducted by the World Food Programme suggests that around 82 per cent of children in Pakistan have been deprived of a meal when they need one, and has the second-highest rate of malnutrition in the region. Approximately 18 per cent of children under the age of five suffer from acute malnutrition and 40 per cent of children in the same age group suffer from stunted growth. According to a Pakistan Bureau of Statistics report, 16% of the population is experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity. The incidence is twice as high among the rural population, 20%, as among the urban, 9.2%. Moreover, three out of five households are experiencing food insecurity.

The lack of technological advancement disfavours productive efficiency. Farmers are still using handmade tools and ancient methods to undertake agricultural activities which not only lead to the under-utilization of land resources but also to fewer yields. Secondly, due to lack of decentralization in decision making at the top level of the government, the food security crisis has been further exacerbated. This is mainly because of bureaucratic bottlenecks, leading to ineffective policy formulation to deal with the issue on a timely basis.

Water scarcity is also a major impediment to food security in Pakistan and is expected to become worse by 2025,⁴ if a progressive policy is not implemented by the government to solve the impending problem. Agricultural industry will be the most affected sector by this endemic problem and Pakistan may lose the legacy of being 'self-sufficient' in this area. Farmers are the ones suffering in the inter-provincial water tussles as their lands are deprived of unhindered water access further contributing to their plight. Over-population is another burning concern which is facilitating sharp decline in agricultural capacity. In Pakistan, population is expanding by an average 2.4% each year and neither the cultivable land mass nor the produce has correspondingly increased. This means that continuation of this growth rate may also lead to unpredictable food insecurity in the years to come.⁵

³ "Climate Risks and Food security analysis: A special report for Pakistan," World Food Program, SDPI. Govt. of Pakistan, December 2018.

https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Climate_Risks_and_Food_Security_Analysis_December_2018.pdf

⁴ Shah Mir Baloch, "Why is Pakistan running dry?" *DW News*, June 07, 2018

⁵ "Special Report on Climate Change and Land," IPCC, 2019, <https://www.ipcc.ch/srccl/chapter/chapter-5/>

What needs to be done

Food insecurity is not just about the shortage of food, it also signifies people's inability to purchase the required amount of food to sustain a day. Also, food insecurity affects women, children and rural households disproportionately, which leads to socio-economic inequalities and increases the number of food-insecure households. Thus it is important that the government devise its policies to ensure an equitable economic growth and wealth distribution in the country. Growing the size of the economy is equally important to create job opportunities for the larger proportion of people, so that they can have income to access food along with other provisions of life. Moreover, the availability of staple foods like wheat can be ensured by creating more cultivable lands along with using the available land and its resources more effectively through modern technological enhancement. Pakistan's agricultural cooperation under the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) provides an important opportunity to revamp the agriculture sector, increasing its efficiency and productivity in the long run. As Goal 2 of the SDGs seeks for sustainable solutions to sustain hunger and achieve food security, promotion of sustainable agriculture is the key to achieve the targets.