

COVID-19 AND PAKISTAN'S FOOD SECURITY ISSUES

By

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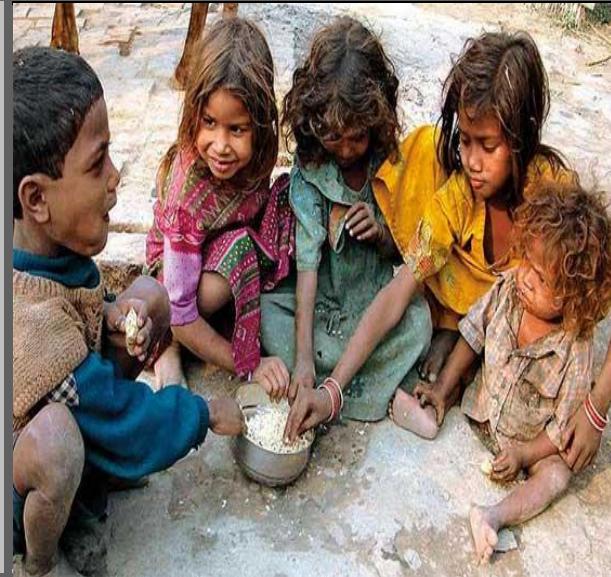
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The pandemic created severe impediments to economic activity resulting in drastic changes in the livelihoods of people and the situations of food security and nutrition. The food security status in developing and under-developed countries worsened with the progression of the pandemic. According to the World Food Program (WFP), 271.8 million people were acutely food insecure due to the destructive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic across the world. Similarly, around 20%–30% of the population of Pakistan, that is, 40–62 million people, has been suffering from acute food insecurity due to the pandemic, and other socio-economic and environmental/climatic issues.¹

The COVID-19 pandemic reached Pakistan at a time when the people of this country had been grappling with various other crises such as prolonged drought, desert locusts (*Schistocerca gregaria* Forsk.) infestation, severe winter season, escalating economic losses, persistently widespread poverty, and consequent food security challenges. The pandemic impacted the country at the time when Pakistan was going through slow economic growth and high inflation. It is estimated that around 53 million people in Pakistan live below the poverty line. Likewise, 20%–30% of the population in Pakistan is already suffering from food insecurity and the economic experts believe that the number of food-insecure people will rise in Pakistan in 2022 due to the evolving nature of

¹ Ubaid-ur-Rehman, Waqas Asghar, Numan Khalid, "Food security challenges for Pakistan during Covid 19 pandemic: An overview of the response plan", *World Food Policy*, May, 02 2021
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/wfp2.12026>

the current pandemic. It has also been reported by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics that the Consumer Price Index has been increased in Pakistan by 11% between May 2020 and December 2021. Moreover, food inflation has also increased by 13.73% in the rural areas and 10.94% in the urban areas during this pandemic era.²

The already cash-starved Pakistan will be facing an increasing food import bill as experts fear up to a 15 percent drop in the domestic wheat yield due to shrinking acreage, poor application of fertilizer, water scarcity, limited certified seeds, etc., leading to further reliance on imported grain. Estimates suggest that the country will need to import around four million tonnes of grain to meet the local shortfall. Pakistan had harvested a bumper crop and produced a record 28.75m tonnes of wheat last season. It had to import 2.2m tonnes of grain to meet local requirements and build strategic reserves of 1m tonnes. A 15pc loss in the yield means there will not be more than 25m tonnes wheat output this year.³

Former federal minister for food security Fakhar Imam said that their government used all its resources to protect Pakistan from the adverse impact of food insecurity. He said that the issue of food security is at the core of climate change. Furthermore, the government aim was to provide maximum facilities to farmers to increase domestic production in agriculture. The government played a critical role in facilitating the Research Centers in helping the farmers increase their productivity. Numerous projects started all over Pakistan under the National Agriculture Emergency Program are supporting sustainable development in the agriculture and livestock sector. Under the Agriculture Transformation Program, fertilizers and seed subsidies, innovation in the field of agriculture, and the up-gradation of institutions are at the forefront.⁴

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 No. 2 of the SDGs seeks sustainable solutions to sustain hunger and achieve food security, the promotion of sustainable agriculture is the key to achieving the targets. To mitigate the food security issue, Pakistan needs to adopt different measures by replacing old agricultural methods with the latest machinery and best practices including drip irrigation which could tackle the water scarcity issue.

² Ibid

³ Amjad Mehmud, A bleak prognosis of wheat, *Dawn News*, February 14, 2022
<https://www.dawn.com/news/1674952>

⁴ "Steps being taken to promote agriculture", *The News*, February 04, 2022
<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/930641-steps-being-taken-to-promote-agriculture-says-minister>

In addition the agriculture and food ministry should set up a special fund for research on seeds and pesticides, as there is no protection of farmers from climate change and other disasters, for instance locusts. Also, there is no subsidy on agriculture tube wells, as electricity is very costly, farmers cannot afford to install solar tube wells. This is leading to a drop in crop yields. Agriculture loan is another hurdle in this sector because of a complex procedure and no subsidy on agriculture products. Furthermore, the lack of technological advances 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. Smuggling of staple food to other countries is another major cause of food shortage in the country.⁵

It is important that the government devise its policies to ensure equal 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 the income to access food along with other provisions of life. In Pakistan, 90 percent of farmers are small farmers and they have been neglected in policy-making, which is mostly influenced by big industrialists and businessmen. 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.

⁵ Daud Khan, Namash Nazar, Willam Janssen, "Four actions address food inflation in Pakistan", World Bank Blogs, November 17, 2021 <https://blogs.worldbank.org/endpovertyinsouthasia/four-actions-address-food-inflation-pakistan>