

THE STATE OF FOOD SECURITY IN PAKISTAN

By
Mir Sher Baz Khetrin
&

Mahrukh Khan
Research Fellow
Centre for Strategic Perspectives (CSP), ISSI

Edited by
Dr Neelum Nigar

June 15, 2022

(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



On May 19, 2022, Foreign Minister of Pakistan Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari attended the United Nations conference on “Conflict and Food security” where he acknowledged that Pakistan has a real threat of food insecurity coupled with water insecurity, as well as energy security which has been exacerbated by recent geopolitical developments. He stressed that Pakistan is one of the most climate stressed countries at the moment like the rest of the developing world, and face the same existential threats of climate change COVID pandemic, and poverty making Pakistan not only food insecure but water and energy insecure. Distress could well be avoided by increasing the cultivable land mass besides effectively utilising the available land resource with the use of modern techniques to enhance growth and productivity.¹

Globally, Pakistan is ranked 26th on the list of nations with high mortality rates principally because of undernourishment and malnourishment. But the problem is not just food unavailability or deprivation only but also includes food adulteration. The energy concentration of food dies down when the nutrients are either synthesised by chemicals or are inherently of degraded quality. According to WFP data, a staple adjusted nutritious diet is not available to around 70% of the

¹ Foreign Minister participates in the Open Debate of the UN Security Council on “Conflict and Food Security,” Press Release, May 19, 2022, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Pakistan, <https://mofa.gov.pk/foreign-minister-participates-in-the-open-debate-of-the-un-security-council-on-conflict-and-food-security/>

population of Pakistan. Furthermore, about 20.5% of the population is undernourished with half of those being under the age of five years, causing stunted mental and physical growth.² Pakistan ranked 92 out of 116 nations in the Global Hunger Index (GHI) in 2021 scoring 24.7, categorising Pakistan's level of hunger as 'serious.'



Source: Global Hunger Index³

Multiple surveys and reports also showcase the growing acute food insecurity in Pakistan. The Food Security Assessment Survey (FSA), highlighted that 18% of the population in Pakistan is undernourished; similarly, the National Institute of Population Studies (NIPS) reported a high level of severe stunting at 45 per cent, wasting 15 per cent and underweight 30 percent along with higher malnourishment problems rural areas accounting for 46 per cent and in certain regions like FATA 58 per cent, Gilgit Baltistan 51 percent and Baluchistan 52 per cent with half of the population consuming less than the dietary requirement of Vitamin-A and Iron.⁴

Challenges

Food security in Pakistan is threatened with a litany of challenges on multiple fronts. The challenges not only constitute insufficient financial resources and undersized policies but also a growing unstable geopolitical environment and extreme weather conditions. The economic challenges created in the wake of the Covid pandemic have further added to the difficulties to address the food security nexus in Pakistan. The continuing evolution of the concept and application as well as implications of food security is reflecting upon its renewed recognition as an element of concern for the overall comprehensive security. In the changing geo-political and geo-economic world order, the concept of food security is not only limited to the issues of drought, famine, food crisis or hunger but it has become a multi-dimensional phenomenon with a multitude of challenges at national, regional as well as global levels. Even though Pakistan produces vast quantities of major staple and non-

² Fareeha Siddiqui, "The Intertwined Relationship between Malnutrition and Poverty", *Frontiers In Public Health*, August 28, 2020. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpubh.2020.00453/full>

³ Pakistan, *Global Hunger Index*, <https://www.globalhungerindex.org/pakistan.html>

⁴ National Food Security Policy, Ministry of National Food Security and Research Islamabad, Government of Pakistan, [http://www.mnfsr.gov.pk/userfiles1/file/National%20Food%20Security%20Policy%20%202018%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.mnfsr.gov.pk/userfiles1/file/National%20Food%20Security%20Policy%20%202018%20(1).pdf)

staple food crops, the state of food security in the country is unsatisfactory complemented by an ever-increasing population bulge and unfavourable water and climatic conditions.⁵

Multi-Layer Challenges		
Food Security and Agriculture	Investment Challenges	Research Challenges
Increasing focus and improving dietary diversity, nutrition and healthy food, quality & quantity, and timing of supply of agricultural inputs	Enhancing the public sector investment in agricultural R&D inline	Improve Research capabilities toward modern agriculture
Enhancing the level of affordability for nutritious food by the poor segments of the society and efficient utilization of land and water resources	Providing an enabling environment for foreign and private sector investments in agriculture R&D	Improving coordination in research and technology dissemination
Improving the rate of diffusion of technological innovations and developing infrastructure and technologies for management and value addition	Improve infrastructure for the development of nutritious food products	Inducting qualified and trained human resources for research
Sustainable use of natural resources and mitigation and adaptation to climate change effects	Invest in qualified human resources in food sciences	Demand-driven research
Addressing infrastructure and prices requirements and trade restrictions		Update research and methods for inclusion of private sector
Promoting innovative livelihood practices opportunities, particularly in the marginalized and remote areas,		Improve research infrastructure
Securing qualified human resources for food security and food systems analysis		

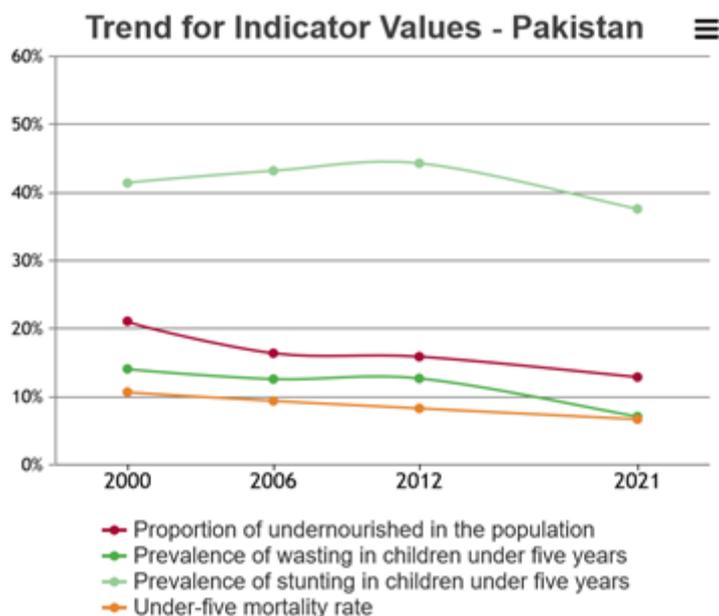
Source: Ministry of National Food Security and Research Islamabad ⁶

In 2021 Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and Sindh face a high prevalence of food insecurity, malnutrition and poverty as the populations in the three provinces faced multiple shocks including high food prices, drought, and inadequate rainfall and livestock diseases, exacerbated by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷

⁵ The State of Pakistan's Economy, , Special Section 2: The State of Food Security in Pakistan, Third Quarterly Report FY 19, <https://www.sbp.org.pk/reports/quarterly/fy19/Third/Special-Section-2.pdf>

⁶ National Food Security Policy, Ministry of National Food Security and Research Islamabad, Government of Pakistan, [http://www.mnfsr.gov.pk/userfiles1/file/National%20Food%20Security%20Policy%20%202018%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.mnfsr.gov.pk/userfiles1/file/National%20Food%20Security%20Policy%20%202018%20(1).pdf)

⁷ Pakistan: Acute Food Insecurity Situation October 2021 - March/April 2022 and Projection for April/May - June 2022, <https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipc-country-analysis/details-map/es/c/1155374/>



Source: Global Hunger Index

Nutrition has historically been a low priority area in Pakistan however, Pakistan over the years has renewed its pledge to improve the health outcomes of the population especially after it signed the World Health Organization's (WHO) Alma-Ata Declaration in 1978, which laid the foundations for "Health for All" by the Year 2000.⁹ Over the years multiple governments have taken laws to incentivize agriculture and the farm sector to ensure food self-sufficiency, to overcome and alternate social and Agri protection programs to address the growing population, especially targeting the poor majority.

Moreover, several important policy initiatives have also taken place, including the concept development of the National Zero Hunger Program; food security assessment survey; commitment of the Government to Sustainable Development Goals 1 and 2 about poverty and Zero Hunger Challenges.¹⁰

While Pakistan is making significant investments to accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and its national development programme – Vision 2025 it is still being challenged by high levels of malnutrition, along with frequent natural hazards in the form of flash

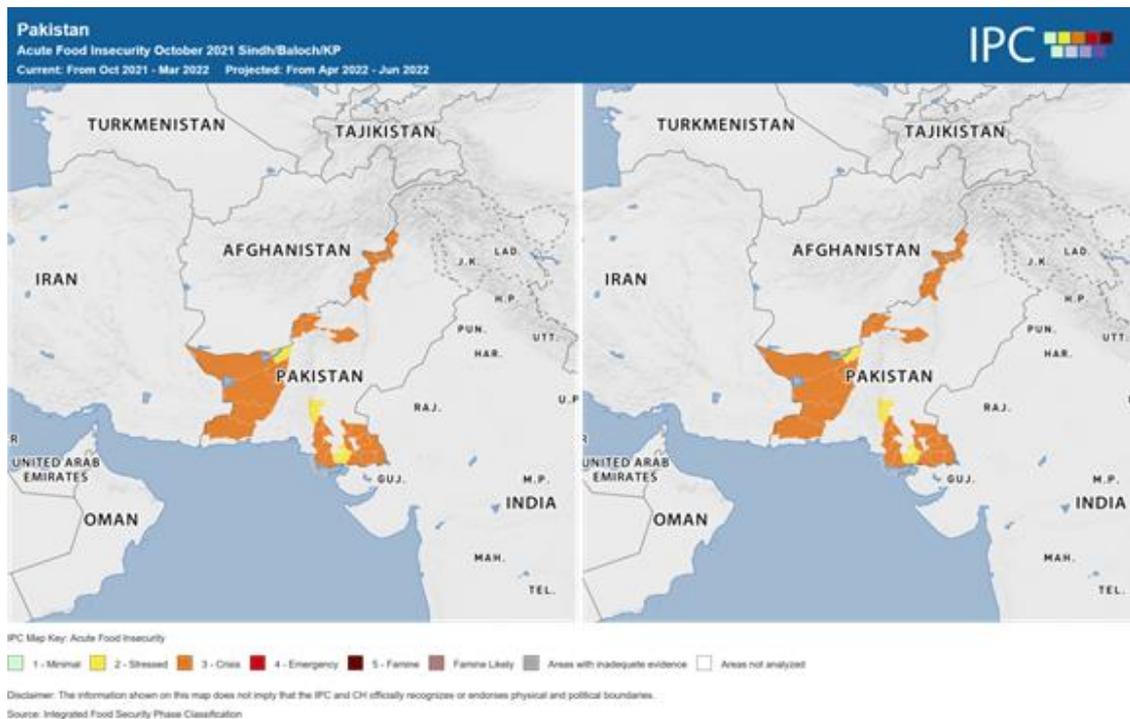
⁸ Pakistan, Global Hunger Index, <https://www.globalhungerindex.org/pakistan.html>

⁹ Ali Turab, Saman Tahir and Shujaat Zaidi, "Nutrition History in Pakistan," International Food Policy Research Institute, 2018, <https://ebrary.ifpri.org/utils/getfile/collection/p15738coll2/id/132714/filename/132926.pdf>

¹⁰ National Food Security Policy, Ministry of National Food Security and Research Islamabad, Government of Pakistan, [http://www.mnfsr.gov.pk/userfiles1/file/National%20Food%20Security%20Policy%20%202018%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.mnfsr.gov.pk/userfiles1/file/National%20Food%20Security%20Policy%20%202018%20(1).pdf)

floods and droughts, and dramatically changing weather patterns throughout the country. The socio-economic impact of COVID-19 has further added to this fire causing degradation to the already financial resources and policies in place obstructing the progress.

Multiple other factors also contribute to this deprived situation across Pakistan including a slow rate of technological innovation, limited adoption of progressive farming techniques, problems with timeliness of input supply, limited investment in construction and maintenance of infrastructure; marketing and trade restrictions, pest and livestock disease problems, and limited amounts of credit for agricultural and the lack of agriculture-specific financing.¹¹



Keeping in mind this trend according to Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) Acute Food Insecurity analysis nearly 4.66 million people will experience high levels of acute food insecurity through March/April 2022; these include over one million people in the emergency phase and over 3.5 million people in crisis phase.¹² For all three provinces, food insecurity has consistently remained high over the years, and urgent action is required to protect livelihoods and reduce food consumption gaps of people in Crisis and save lives and livelihoods of those in Emergency.¹³

¹¹ "Pakistan Vision 2025," Planning Commission, Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform, Government of Pakistan, <https://www.pc.gov.pk/uploads/vision2025/Pakistan-Vision-2025.pdf>

¹² Pakistan: Acute Food Insecurity Situation October 2021 - March/April 2022 and Projection for April/May - June 2022, <https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipc-country-analysis/details-map/es/c/1155374/>

¹³ Pakistan: Acute Food Insecurity Situation October 2021 - March/April 2022 and Projection for April/May - June 2022, <https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipc-country-analysis/details-map/es/c/1155374/>

Way Forward

The concept of food security is rapidly becoming part of the comprehensive national security analogy coupled with increased climate change and extreme weather anomalies are all the more drawing food stability and security, its production and the livelihoods of the farmers to a downward spiral. Moreover, threatened ecosystem services are limiting our capacity to achieve sustainable agriculture in the long run. The national average yields of almost all crops are low and productivity is declining over time due to climate change effects.

1. The government of Pakistan must provide critically required aid and relief packages for nutrition and dietary support to vulnerable populations across the country.
2. Multiple private and international organisations can partner to assist local and federal bodies to enhance and fast track the Government's efforts in enhancing food and nutrition security.
3. Update research, innovation and technical support sectors at the national, provincial and district levels to manage and research to make better and more effective policies in sync with broader national strategies.
4. It is equally imperative to encourage community resilience building and national ownership for disaster risk management and preparedness elements for sustainability.
5. Build impact assessment and optimization of adaptation strategies under climate change scenarios, and develop a coordinated crop planting and harvest as well as livestock breeding program involving national and international research centres.¹⁴
6. It is necessary to introduce strong infrastructure dominated as well as politically owned and motivated food security programs to address the growing need to change, modernise and innovate new farming as well as supply chain methods.
7. Regulate an integrated policy and strategy approach at multiple levels in the district, provincial and national, to develop multi-sectoral nutritional strategies, which encompass economic benefits for income generation with a keen focus on key strategic areas.

¹⁴ National Food Security Policy, Ministry of National Food Security and Research Islamabad, Government of Pakistan,
[http://www.mnfsr.gov.pk/userfiles1/file/National%20Food%20Security%20Policy%20%202018%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.mnfsr.gov.pk/userfiles1/file/National%20Food%20Security%20Policy%20%202018%20(1).pdf)

8. Lastly, work rigorously to achieve the top 5 objectives for food security envisioned in Pakistan Vision 2025 documents;¹⁵
 - i. Protect the most food-insecure segments of the population through effective relief measures, including long-term arrangements and adaptation mechanisms,
 - ii. Create a modern, efficient and diversified agricultural sector – aligned with associated water and energy infrastructure –that can ensure a stable and adequate provision of basic food supplies for the country’s population, and provide high-quality products to its industries and for export,
 - iii. Optimise production and supply mix in line with current and projected needs by leveraging our unique strengths,
 - iv. Ensure that the entire supply chain related to food security is geared towards the provision of stable and affordable access to adequate, nutritious and safe food for a healthy life, and
 - v. Use the resource base efficiently and sustainably with outcome-based benchmarks agreed in line with regional and global standards.

Conclusion

Food security is increasingly becoming a human security and economic security concern as it has strong challenges and implications on both fronts. At its essence food security deals with access to a sufficient amount of food to fulfil the nutritional and dietary needs of the population. However, for Pakistan, this challenge has remarkably multiplied in the past decade, primarily due to outsized fiscal costs and undersized government policies and initiatives. It is equally important to take acute policy and strategic measures to address economic and food security-related repercussions and shortages caused by global conflicts and the environment such as the Russia-Ukraine war which has currently largely contributed to the festering issue of food security at the global level leading ripples around the continents. It has never-before-seen consequences for food production, supply and overall security. The first impact has been on transnational food supply chains and how they have been disrupted in the aftermath of war consequently causing the food prices to skyrocket and food availability scarce. Food and fertiliser exports are in serious trouble with future harvests in question.

¹⁵ “Pakistan Vision 2025,” Planning Commission, Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform, Government of Pakistan, <https://www.pc.gov.pk/uploads/vision2025/Pakistan-Vision-2025.pdf>