

Strategic Analysis Paper

9 April 2019

Food Security in Pakistan: Surplus Food is not Enough to Create a Food Secure Country

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Key Points

- Despite food surpluses, Pakistan experiences high levels of food insecurity due to a lack of access for poor households.
- Women and children are particularly affected by malnutrition and only 15 per cent of children consume a minimally acceptable diet
- Poverty is a particularly strong predictor of household food insecurity. Daily wages have increased, but food price inflation has reduced the purchasing power of poor households.
- Pakistan's ongoing economic problems will make it difficult to implement the proposed food security and poverty reduction reforms.

Summary

Although food is readily available in Pakistan, the country's overall food security is poor. High levels of poverty and high food prices have given Pakistan some of the highest rates of malnutrition, undernourishment and childhood stunting in the world. The situation is especially bad in rural areas, despite the importance of agriculture to the rural economy. This is due to the high incidence of poverty in rural areas and the fact that many farmers are net buyers of food. Furthermore, economic and environmental shocks have left many poor Pakistanis deeper in poverty, which, in turn, decreases their access to food. With economic pressures increasing, it seems unlikely that the Pakistani Government will be able to successfully implement a series of proposed reforms designed to reduce poverty and increase food security.

Analysis

The State of Food Security in Pakistan

Pakistan is a [lower middle-income](#) country and the sixth most populous in the world. While undernourishment has slightly declined over the last two decades, it remains “moderately high”. Strictly speaking, [Pakistan is a food surplus](#) country and a series of good harvests has meant that food availability is high. Despite that, 60 per cent of the country faces food insecurity, with many of the country’s poorest people unable to afford an adequate diet.

Hunger and Malnutrition

Pakistan has some of the [highest malnutrition rates](#) in the world, particularly affecting women and children. Equally alarming is its stunting rate, which refers to [impaired growth and development](#) caused by inadequate nutrition. At [45 per cent](#), the incidence of stunting places Pakistan at 124 out of 132 countries. Similarly, the incidence of wasting (severe weight loss, causing low weight for a child’s height) is also [extremely high](#). In several parts of the country, the incidence of wasting has reached emergency levels. To make the problem worse, programmes designed to treat severe acute malnutrition are only available to less than five per cent of malnourished children. These figures have improved very little over the [last four decades](#) and the poorest people are inevitably the most adversely affected by these trends.

Malnutrition often begins in early childhood. The World Health Organization recommends that infants should be [exclusively breastfed](#) until they are six months old, to guard against malnutrition and infection, but in Pakistan only around 38 per cent are nourished this way. Although surveys suggest that most women in Pakistan are aware of the benefits of exclusive breastfeeding, factors such as illiteracy, poverty and cultural issues related to having a female child, all contribute to lower levels of breastfeeding among Pakistani women. Low levels of breast milk, due to maternal malnutrition or illness, further contribute to the problem.

Complementary feeding practices, where children are transitioned to eating solid and semi-solid food after six months of age, are also lacking. Although consumption of grains, roots and tubers is [consistently high](#) throughout most regions and socio-economic groups, overall only around 15 per cent of children aged 6-23 months consume a minimally acceptable diet, while 22 per cent receive the bare minimum of dietary diversity.

Poor early-childhood diet reflects an overall lack of adequate nutrition across Pakistan. Micronutrient deficiency rates are high, with women and children particularly vulnerable. [Current estimates suggest](#) that 61.9% of young children and 50.4% of women are anaemic. Similarly, 54 per cent of children and 46 per cent of women suffer from vitamin A deficiency. [Forty per cent of Pakistani women](#) are also zinc deficient, much higher than the global average of 17 per cent. In-depth analyses of vitamin D deficiency are not available, but estimates indicate that it is [common in Pakistan](#). Micronutrient deficiencies in children exceed 50 per cent, even in the wealthiest groups, indicating that the problem is [prevalent](#)

[among all socio-economic groups](#). This is alarming as micronutrient deficiencies are a strong factor in maternal and infant mortality and morbidity.

Key Pressures on Food Security

Although food production has increased and Pakistan was able to export [a record 1.4 million tonnes](#) of wheat last year (total food exports increased by [1.08%](#) in the same period), hunger and malnutrition remain alarmingly high. According to [a 2016 report](#) by the Food and Agriculture Organization, Pakistan's performance in reducing the prevalence of undernourishment is the second-worst in the region – only Afghanistan is lower. The World Food Programme (WFP) also reports that [60 per cent of the population](#) faces food insecurity. Despite this, availability of all food (except pulses) [has increased](#) over the last decade, as agricultural productivity and livestock production have improved. Food availability is not the main food security issue in Pakistan. Instead, the issue stems from poor access to food, which has meant that increased food production has not translated into better food security. [According to the WFP](#), affordability is 'the greatest barrier to achieving a nutritious diet'; it estimates that most Pakistanis are unable to afford a nutritionally adequate diet.

Although per capita income has increased in the last decade, this growth has been outstripped by rising food prices. Daily wages have increased, but purchasing power has declined. This is especially acute among skilled labourers, whose purchasing power has declined by [18.5%](#), although other workers have also been affected. As a result, since 2002, Pakistani household expenditures on food have [risen substantially](#), while the daily consumption of calories has fallen in the same period, from 2,228 to 2,033, 13 per cent below officially recommended levels. The drop in calorie consumption has been especially acute in poor rural households, which consume an average of only 1,570 calories (23 per cent lower than recommended).

Wheat plays a particularly important role in Pakistani diets, accounting for around [half](#) of the calories consumed. Its importance in diets means other products are rarely used as a substitute for it, making the poor especially vulnerable to wheat price fluctuations. Although global wheat prices currently sit at around US\$234 a tonne, in Pakistan the price is closer to [US\\$300 a tonne](#), or around 1,300 Pakistani Rupees. The idea of setting higher prices for wheat, is to reduce rural poverty by ensuring farmers receive good prices for their crops. In practice, this does not usually work. This is because many farmers are net buyers of food and a lack of storage infrastructure means they must often sell most of their crop and buy it back later at a high price.

The policy has also received criticism for favouring farmers in Punjab, where [80 per cent](#) of the country's wheat is grown, to the detriment of farmers in other regions. Furthermore, even if farmers were able to consume their wheat without having to buy it back, the policy ignores the fact that most of the rural poor are landless and more than half come [from non-farm](#) households and do not produce wheat anyway. As a majority of rural Pakistanis are not involved in growing wheat, the policy of keeping wheat prices high to boost rural incomes does more harm than good to the rural poor.

Food accessibility is also highly vulnerable to economic and environmental shocks and Pakistan's food security has declined since the 2000s, due to a succession of environmental disasters, conflicts and economic crises. The aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis caused the so-called three "F" (fiscal, food, fuel) crises in a number of countries. Pakistan, however, [suffered from six](#) crises (fiscal, food, fuel, functional democracy, frontier conflict) and fragile climate). This produced a cumulative effect on Pakistani food security, causing significant increases in both poverty and food price inflation.

In most countries, food price inflation had [largely stabilised](#) by 2009, but Pakistan was less fortunate. It did eventually stabilise, but recent experiences suggest that food price inflation could become problematic again, despite a good performance in the [2018 financial year](#). It is also important to note that food price inflation disproportionately affects the poor. The average Pakistani household spends [52 per cent of its income](#) on food. Poor households spend 61 per cent of their income on food, while other households spend 39 per cent of theirs.

Studies of food price inflation in Pakistan link it to a [number of variables](#), including GDP, unemployment, fiscal deficits and interest rates. In effect, as Pakistan's economy deteriorates, the risk of high inflation rates increases. This makes Pakistan's current economic crisis of significance to its food security. Currently, the national debt is unsustainably high and its costs are predicted to [reach 30 per cent](#) of Pakistan's federal budget. Pakistan is currently in talks with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to negotiate a loan, to avoid a looming balance-of-payments crisis (Pakistan's Finance Minister, Asad Umar, has stated that this loan should be [secured by May](#)). Although this will help Pakistan avoid one crisis, IMF loans are rarely given freely. Typically these loans require [structural re-adjustments](#), which often include financial austerity measures, deregulation and privatisation. The IMF is also likely to require Pakistan to devalue its currency as part of the terms of the loan, and increase the price of imported goods, including food. By accepting the likely terms of an IMF loan, Pakistan will risk an economic slowdown it cannot afford. That would lead to an increased likelihood of further food price inflation, not long after it has been brought under control.

Pakistan's environment also makes it vulnerable to food insecurity. Pakistan is the [16th most vulnerable](#) country to the effects of climate change and different parts of Pakistan [are subject to different risks](#). Northern parts of the country face snowstorms, landslides and floods. Coastal areas are prone to cyclones and floods. Floods are also the main risk in central Pakistan, while southern Punjab, Sindh and Baluchistan are prone to drought.



Source: US Library of State

Natural disasters have increased in frequency and intensity over recent decades. From 1973 to 1993 [16 floods occurred](#) in Pakistan, but from 1993 to 2013, the number rose to 54. Again, the poorest are generally the most affected by natural disasters. [The 2010 floods](#) destroyed local infrastructure and agriculture and poor rural households were the slowest to recover, due to poor aid distribution and the government response exacerbating the crisis. More recently, parts of Pakistan experienced one of [the worst droughts](#) in the country's history. In Sindh, a lack of adequate rainfall [since 2014](#) has led to crop failures and livestock deaths. The region is heavily dependent on agriculture and the drought has adversely impacted fragile livelihoods. As a result, while there has generally been enough food in

markets, 45 per cent of the Sindhi population is too poor to be able to afford it, while 70 per cent have taken on debt to meet household needs.

Policy and the Future of Pakistani Food Security

The food security situation in Pakistan is precarious and the Pakistani Government has been taking steps to try to address the issue. In 2018, the country's [first food security policy](#) was unveiled. The policy aims to alleviate poverty, eradicate hunger and promote sustainable food production. Those aims would be achieved through close co-operation between federal and provincial governments, the implementation of new food safety measures and the launch of a “zero hunger” programme. The intent behind the policy is good, but is likely to experience difficulties. Ensuring the co-operation between federal and provincial governments is likely to be a struggle due to a [lack of trust between](#) the Federal and provincial governments, especially in Sindh. At present, [little has been done](#) to translate the policy into practical action. The government has also recently introduced a large [anti-poverty initiative](#), which aims to provide employment, healthcare and empowerment for women in Pakistan's poorest communities. This too, is likely to encounter difficulties. The government has pledged to allocate 80 billion rupees towards the initiative, which considering Pakistan's economic situation and the likelihood of IMF constraints in the near future, puts the success of any anti-poverty measures in serious doubt.

Until Pakistan is able to spend freely on the poor and on food security, it is likely that the ongoing pressures on food security will continue to multiply, which will inevitably put pressure on the most vulnerable members of its society.

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Published by Future Directions International Pty Ltd.
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