**From crises to cultivation**

Mariam Saleem

Monday, Oct 09, 2023

Today, Pakistanis are being compelled to risk their lives for necessities as basic as a sack of wheat. When flour becomes more valuable than human life, it serves as a stark call to action, demanding those in power to urgently reevaluate their priorities.

If history is any lesson, it is noteworthy that the mighty ancient Egyptian empire, renowned for its grandeur, ultimately fell to its knees due to a catastrophic shortage of wheat. Amid a rapidly growing population, Pakistan consumes over 30 million tons of wheat yearly, but produces only 27 million tons, causing a $2 billion drain on foreign currency reserves, despite wheat being a previous source of export revenue.

Facing an estimated 32 per cent food insecurity and a 27 per cent inflation rate, Pakistan is grappling with chronic managerial myopia and a penchant for quick-fix solutions to deep-seated systemic issues.

Economic transformation is our sole path forward: we must urgently accelerate and sustain growth in the next 25 years to secure a stable, prosperous homeland for our children, honouring the legacy our forefathers tirelessly pursued.

As Rumi wisely noted, the cure often resides within the ailment itself. Pakistan’s path to economic resurgence lies within its fertile soil. Contributing to a substantial 26 per cent of the GDP, employing 44 per cent of our workforce, and playing a pivotal role in export revenue, with the potential to influence every facet of our nation’s development agriculture remains the cornerstone of Pakistan’s economy – its very backbone.

In these desolate times of destruction, those entrusted with power are urgently pleaded to recognize agriculture as our solitary hope, the golden thread that has the power to mend the nation’s woes. Directing even a modest measure of attention to the following areas will allow our abundant and earnest land to accomplish the rest:

Increase crop yield: Pakistan’s crop yields fall far below their potential. Wheat production could surge from the current 27 million tons to a formidable 80 million tons. Currently, our wheat production stands at just three tons per hectare, while neighbouring India produces four tons per hectare, and China six tons per hectare. Similar disparities exist for crops like rice, sugarcane, maize, and mustard, with their national average annual yields per acre at 25, 645, 57, and 16, respectively, compared to potential yields of 80, 1200, 130, and 35.

Achieving these potentials requires simple solutions including minimizing tillage, certifying seeds, seed drills, precise fertilizer applications and efficient water resource management.

Crop diversification: Pakistan, with its fertility and one of the world’s largest canal systems, holds untapped potential for crop diversification, which not only promotes self-reliance, it also equips farmers to cope with climate change.

However, the government’s historical focus centred on wheat and sugarcane, has neglected growth of other vital crops like pulses, oilseeds, and vegetables, leading to significant imports, making it the world’s third-largest legume importer.

In fact, pulses offer profit margins of 40-50 per cent, requiring only three irrigations compared to 12-14 for crops like maize. In contrast, India supports approximately 22 essential commodities, promoting agricultural diversity and encouraging self-sufficiency.

Water management: Pakistan’s water-intensive economy ranks among the world’s least efficient. Over 80 per cent of cultivated land relies on water-guzzling crops (wheat, sugarcane, rice and cotton), consuming 93 per cent of freshwater resources, well above the global average of 70 per cent.

The sector operates at just 50 per cent efficiency, with canal irrigation often as low as 33 per cent, where only a third of water released reaches the farm, due to outdated practices like flood irrigation. To boost agricultural output, adopting modern technologies such as drip irrigation and digital water monitoring is imperative.

Government interventions and protectionism: Excessive government interventions, often under the guise of food security, have caused recurrent issues in sectors like sugar and wheat, resulting in shortages, market distortions, and unsustainable subsidies, as evidenced by Punjab’s massive Rs640 billion wheat debt in 2022. These long-standing problems persist due to political considerations, worsened by unconstitutional inter-provincial movement bans that breed corruption.

Pakistan must swiftly reassess intervention costs, favouring market liberalization, as seen in successful cases of rice and maize markets. The focus should shift to strategic reserves, public policy, R&D in seed technology, agronomic practices, and cost-effective social safety nets like the Ehsaas and BISP programmes to ensure a resilient food system.

Wastage and storage: Ironically, Pakistan loses $4 billion worth of food annually, equivalent to 26 per cent of its total production, while 43 per cent of the population faces food insecurity. About 800,000 tons of wheat worth Rs90 billion go to waste due to inadequate storage, contributing to agricultural losses of 15-35 per cent. Inefficient cold chains further exacerbate perishable goods wastage, preventing food from reaching those in need, despite ample production.

To combat this, there is an urgent need for investment in transport and storage mechanisms, while raising awareness on food preservation and developing a robust cold chain and efficient strategic grain reserves. Further, our nation’s digital prowess must be swiftly leveraged by implementing solutions such as mobile apps and blockchain for transparent supply chains and direct consumer-supplier links; which would stand as a dual triumph, serving as a catalyst for the growth of our digital economy as well.

Access to finance: Agricultural credit is vital for rural growth, commercialization, and modernization. Despite 63 per cent of Pakistan’s population residing in rural areas, its $69 billion agricultural economy receives just $800 million in credit. Small-scale farmers struggle to access formal finance, often relying on the informal sector.

The Zarai Taraqiati Bank Limited (ZTBL) plays a significant role in providing agricultural finance, but its reach is limited, particularly for non-cereal crops and information gaps and regional disparities persist.

Government action is needed to ensure equitable access to funding for all crops and regions. Without formal financing, agricultural transformation remains elusive, perpetuating food supply challenges and farmer vulnerability to local moneylenders.

Climate adaptation: Climate-smart agriculture is pivotal for addressing Pakistan’s agricultural challenges, while adapting to climate change. As climate costs surge, the country must prioritize strategies that blend commerce and trade to foster economic growth through research, resilient crops, and efficient production methods.

Today, the anguish of every Pakistani is palpable, burdened by the weight of economic mismanagement and corruption amassed over the years, demanding a shift from reactive crisis management to proactive resilience-building and breaking free from antiquated policies that have held us back for far too long.

The golden thread of Pakistan’s agriculture is the lifeline that can stitch together our journey from desolation to transformation, weaving a story of hope, resilience, and shared prosperity for all Pakistanis.

The writer is an Islamabad-based lawyer and graduate from King’s College London. She can be reached at: mariam12saleem@gmail.com