**Can vegetables change the fate of smallholder farmers in Pakistan?**

[**Naeem Abbas Abid**](https://nation.com.pk/Columnist/naeem-abbas-abid)

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The rapid spread of COVID-19 has changed the world so suddenly and enormously that it will take some time to understand the impact of this pandemic on many food systems. The pandemic has not only affected food production but has also altered food consumption patterns. During the pandemic, experts are suggesting that increasing vegetable intake in the diet can boost immunity. Even the UN General Assembly has designated 2021 as the International Year of Fruits and Vegetables (IYFV). Unhealthy diets were deemed one of the leading causes of deaths and diseases before COVID-19; while a healthy diet is a driver of immunity and overall health, focusing on diets containing the nutrients we need to thrive, not just to survive, is crucial. Vegetables have particular food system characteristics that develop our immune system, making them a necessary ingredient to keep the calamities like COVID-19 at bay.

Smallholders are indispensable to ensuring food security in the developing economies where they farm. In Pakistan, smallholder farmers are about 78 percent of the total agriculture force. They grow various crops ranging from field crops like rice, cotton and wheat, to fruits and vegetables. Historically, the country’s development efforts have always focused on producing and developing cereals to ensure food security and increase farmers’ income. On average, if we look at our crop yield in the last fifty years, these development efforts are proven successful in increasing yield per acre. Still, our current yield per acre for almost all crops is way low compared to international standards. These development efforts have also failed to increase farmers’ net income and lift their living standards.

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Businesses achieve economies of scale by increasing production and lowering costs. This happens because costs are spread over a larger number of goods. In today’s world, to get maximum net income from field crops or cereals, it needs to be heavily mechanised. When it comes to involving machinery or introducing modern technology, our small-scale farmers neither have machinery nor the investment resources to buy the machinery or install a modern facility on their land.

In my opinion, small-scale farmers need to move from the traditional pattern of growing field crops to vegetable farming. In Pakistan, the increasing pressure on food and cash crops has limited the area under vegetables to about 0.62 million ha, which is 3.1 percent of the total cropped area. Many multinational companies are currently producing hybrid seeds for different vegetable varieties, keeping in mind each country’s climatic and soil conditions. Hybrid vegetable crops have higher yield potential, higher return, high nutritional value, and a short maturity period. All these factors favour small landholding farmers because they can have more crops per acre and high income per year as compared to growing field crops. Also, vegetable cropping needs less investment per crop in terms of seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, and mechanisation compared to field crops. Vegetable farming is not only economically feasible but is also needed for the Pakistani population. In Pakistan, the daily per capita vegetable intake is low, about 100 grams, compared to the recommended consumption of about 285 grams.

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Although vegetable farming looks very lucrative and favours smallholder farmers, smallholder farmers would not reap the full benefits without policymakers, the private sector, and development sector professionals’ support. The policymakers need to develop an end-to-end vegetable farming promotional programme to make it successful. Research institutions can start with dividing different geographical regions into zones suitable for particular vegetables based on the soil and climatic conditions to get the maximum yield. The private sector could develop seeds for various vegetables for different zones, distribution, and logistics networks to supply vegetables to the market or urban population. The current mandi/regional market needs to be upgraded to modern standards to ensure cleanliness, hygiene, and fewer post-harvest losses.

Historically, it has been observed that in case of excess supply for any crop, farmers were not able to fetch better prices and were forced to dump their produce in open fields or canals. Therefore, given the high yield of hybrid vegetable varieties and short shelf life, mini processing plants on a district level must be established to convert excess supply to by-products for local and export markets to avoid losses. The government should involve an agriculture extension force to educate small-scale farmers about the economic benefits and modern cultivation methods of vegetable farming in order to gain maximum benefits. On the other hand, consumers should be aware of vegetables’ nutritional benefits to increase the demand and improve their health well-being.

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Supporting small-scale farmers and vegetables does not mean that the government should stop focusing on cereal or field crops because they are unnecessary. No, they have their essential value. Let the large-scale farmers do field-crop farming using modern and efficient technologies to have optimal production and benefits. The government can help large-scale farmers in bringing modern technology and mechanisation to the farms. Let’s create a win-win situation for everyone. As Simon N. Groot, the 2019 World Food Prize laureate, once said, “You cannot live on corn and soybeans and rice and wheat alone; you need vegetables to make life better for everybody”.

Naeem Abbas Abid

The writer is a Fulbright scholar and specialises in agribusiness. He is currently working as a business executive. He can be reached at abbas.naeem0463