[**Food insufficiency**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1630022/food-insufficiency)

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IT was sobering to learn that Pakistan had imported $6.12 billion worth of foodstuff in the first nine months of the current financial year, up 54 per cent from last year. This includes (in rounded figures) $1bn of wheat, $2bn of palm oil, $0.5bn each of pulses, tea and milk products and $127 million of sugar.

If you extrapolate that for the last quarter of the year and add $2bn of cotton (we already imported $1.5bn in nine months), we reach a conservative figure of $9.5bn imports of agricultural products. This is appalling. Despite the trillion-rupee concession to our export industry, we will hardly reach an export figure of $24bn. For a country where 70pc of the population is engaged in agriculture is it not shameful we spend almost 40pc of what we earn in importing agricultural produce, supposedly our area of strength?

The Federal Committee on Agriculture says that despite an unprecedented good wheat harvest (28.75 million tons), exceeding the target by 2m, we will still need to import 1m ton for strategic reserves, a requirement that will rise further when we consider the needs of 1.5m Afghan refugees and 300,000 tons of smuggling to Afghanistan. The centre is reportedly planning to import 4m tons to play it safe; it is likely to cost $1bn.

Is anyone doing anything to address this? We have the Ministry of National Food Security and Research at the centre, with agriculture departments in each province and an equal number of irrigation departments, plus provincial food departments, research institutes, the Zaria Taraqiati Bank etc. Yet we spend 40pc of our export income on importing food and agricultural products.

Agriculture is only paid lip service.

One reason for this is the romance of past governments and the present government with infrastructure projects and the complete lack of priority for agriculture, only paying it lip service.

I heard the speech of an MNA in parliament where he informed the house that the Punjab government wants to convert the Bahawalpur Research Institute into the provincial secretariat of the proposed government of South Punjab. The Multan Cotton Research Institute has been closed and large swathes of land of the Cotton and Textile Institute Karachi were handed over to the US Embassy.

The contempt and low esteem that the government holds agriculture research institutions in is evident in these actions. This contempt for research is seen across the board. Rather than improve research in the country the solution seems to be to close down such institutions and leave everything to either the private sector or imports.

The management of wheat, which is the main staple of the masses, has been the responsibility of the provincial food departments. Their responsibilities entail how much to procure; at what support price; the timing of the announcement of the support price; the pace of release of stock to the flour mills; keeping a watch over wheat across the district to provincial boundaries to check hoarding and smuggling; and when and how much to import in case of a possible shortage.

A lot of these decisions have financial implication worth billions. Because of the risk involved and the fear of blowback, officers and ministers have stopped taking timely decisions. Resultantly, avoidable shortages occur leading to an increase in prices and panic imports.

While we talk about water shortage, and see squabbling among the provinces we rarely hear about water-saving schemes. The practice of flood irrigation, a luxury for those with ample water supply, continues unquestioned. Drip and sprinkle irrigation schemes were introduced some years back but implementation remained on a pilot project scale. Methods like furrow irrigation, which can save up to 50pc of water, with enhanced production, are not even on our radar screen.

Controlling the population increase, or the number of mouths to feed, is nowhere to be seen. Bangladesh started off with a larger population 50 years back and today has 37m less mouths to feed than us.

I am no expert on agriculture but my heart cries when we spend precious foreign exchange on buying food while we claim to be an agricultural country. Rectifying the problem is a complex matter entailing adequate water supply, producing quality seed, making adequate amounts of fertiliser available at an affordable price, effective agriculture extension to impart best practices, good research institutions to innovate based on local conditions, providing correct and unadulterated pesticide, and other interventions.

A range of government ministries, departments and corporations are responsible for various aspects of agriculture. In order for all of them to function simultaneously to make an impact, we need a supra body for agriculture like the NCOC, which has done good work to control Covid. It is only when all aspects of agriculture and food production, especially for import substitution, are kept on our radar screen that we may have success.

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