**Looming food insecurity**

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The confession by Shaukat Tareen during the budget debate that Pakistan has now become a net food importing country was bold. Statistics spoke louder than the Finance Minister; Pakistan’s food import bill grew by 53.98 percent to $7.550 billion year-on-year during the 11 months of the outgoing fiscal year. This included sugar, wheat, and palm oil and pulses were imported to bridge the shortfall in domestic production.

Data compiled by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) showed that the share of food items in the total import bill reached 15.08 percent, compared to 12 percent last year, making the country more dependent on imports to ensure food security.

As per a recent Policy Brief of World bank titled Food Security and Covid 19; an increasing number of countries are facing growing levels of acute food insecurity. The Brief noted that the Agricultural Commodity Price Index remained near its highest level since 2013, and as of mid June, 2021, was approximately 33 percent higher than in January 2020.

[Oil marketing companies announce hike in price of LPG](https://nation.com.pk/30-Jul-2021/oil-marketing-companies-announced-hike-in-price-of-lpg)

Gone are the days when Pakistan was a self reliant food producing country. As an agricultural country, Pakistan now has to rely on continuous imports for food security. What went wrong with the agriculture sector culminating in this alarming situation? Leading economist Dr. Kaiser Bengali revealed in a research report that the Pakistan economy as well its agriculture sector remained in a constant state of stagnation during 25 years from 1990-2015.

According to his research, large crops of the agriculture sector grew at an average of 2.8 percent annually during these 25 years. If outlying years are set aside when the annual growth was above extraordinary, the average annual growth of large crops is reduced to mere one percent for the remaining years. Similarly, small crops grew at an average of 1.9 percent per annum during these 25 years; barring the outlying years, average growth decreased to a dismal 1.5 percent per annum. It’s worth mentioning that the population growth rate during this period remained well above two percent per annum.

[Global warming will claim 83M lives without emissions changes: Study](https://nation.com.pk/30-Jul-2021/global-warming-will-claim-83m-lives-without-emissions-changes-study)

How would food shortages impact vulnerable communities, say during the next 25 years? According to the Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement, a nationwide survey conducted during 2019-20, more than 16 percent of the surveyed households experienced moderate or severe food shortages. In the ten districts of Balochistan and nine districts of Sindh surveyed, 26 percent faced severe food shortages. If statistics are decoded any further, it turned out that 19 percent of the households were in crisis while 7 percent of the households were in emergency.

Why has agriculture production been stagnant and didn’t keep pace with the increasing demand and population growth? The reasons are all the same old ones. The research institutions mandated to develop new high yielding varieties have done a pathetic job. A bulk of the budget is spent on salaries and many times it is spent on managing careers, perks and comforts. There is hardly any evidence of ground breaking development of seeds for cotton, wheat, sugarcane, rice, pulses, fruits and vegetables.

[Ambassador of Jordan calls on Air Chief](https://nation.com.pk/30-Jul-2021/ambassador-of-jordan-calls-on-air-chief)

Indiscriminate use of pesticides has wiped out most friendly insects. The trend of mechanised farming has not flourished. An obsolete and skewed value chain has pushed the farmers to a disadvantageous position whereas middlemen are well in command thanks to their financial and trading muscles.

The conclusion is that all major stakeholders mandated to help grow the agriculture sector have ended up with this dismal outcome. Add the population growth and the massive trend of urbanisation and we have a perfect recipe of food insecurity. An ever weakening exchange parity and import dependency on food items for market stabilisation is adding fuel to the fire of existing food insecurity.

One wonders if basic and strategic issues like food security are a priority (forget any expectation of “high” priority) in political discourse except for this being used for political mudslinging. The clock is ticking; looming food insecurity is not far away. Urgent short and long-term measures are needed to escape the threat.