**Looming food insecurity**

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July 16, 2021

During the budget debate, Shaukat Tarin made a bold confession that Pakistan has now become a net food importing country. Statistics spoke louder than the Finance Minister; Pakistan’s food import bill grew by 53.98 per cent to $7.550 billion year-on-year during the 11 months of the outgoing fiscal year. Mainly sugar, wheat, 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 achieve food security.

As per a recent Policy Brief of World bank titled as ‘Food Security and Covid 19’, an increasing number of countries are facing growing levels of acute food insecurity. It further noted that the Agricultural Commodity Price Index remained near its highest level since 2013, and as of mid-June, 2021, was approximately 33% higher than in January 2020. Gone are the days when Pakistan was a self-reliant food producing country. Pakistan being an agricultural country has to now rely on continuous imports to meet domestic demand.

[Africa to receive first US-donated COVID-19 vaccines](https://nation.com.pk/17-Jul-2021/africa-to-receive-first-us-donated-covid-19-vaccines)

What went wrong with the agriculture sector and what allowed this alarming situation to culminate? Leading economist Dr. Kaiser Bengali revealed in a research report that the Pakistan economy, particularly its agriculture sector, remained in a constant state of stagnation during the last 25 years.

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

An unexpected trend emerged during this period which caused fast shrinking of cultivation land around the major consumption areas, like major cities and towns, due to rapid urbanisation. Considering this trend has been growing and will continue to grow for the next 25 years, reduced land availability would compound food shortages that further aggravate demand and cause a supply imbalance along with more price hikes.

[UK's COVID-19 infections surpass 50,000](https://nation.com.pk/16-Jul-2021/uk-s-covid-19-infections-surpass-50-000)

How would food shortages impact vulnerable communities in the next 25 years?  Here is a glimpse how it’s impacting them right now and one can stretch their imagination to predict how much worse it can get. According to the Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement, a nationwide survey conducted during 2019-20 revealed that more than 16% of the surveyed households experienced moderate or severe food shortages. In the ten districts of Balochistan and nine districts of Sindh surveyed, 26% faced severe food shortages. If statistics are decoded any further, it turned out that 19% of the households were in crisis while 7% of the households were in a state of emergency.

Why has agriculture produce been stagnant and why did it not keep up with the increasing demand that came with population growth? Well, the reasons are all the same old ones which are a little too familiar now. The research institutions mandated to develop new high yielding varieties have done a pathetic job. A major bulk of the budget is spent on salaries and most of the time, 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.  Simultaneously, a strange crop pattern evolved in a water-scarce country where sugar cane and rice grabbed most of cultivated areas whereas cotton kept losing the area and lost its silver status of the preferred cash crop.

[German military on alert after severe floods](https://nation.com.pk/16-Jul-2021/german-military-on-alert-after-severe-floods)

Indiscriminate use of pesticides has wiped out most of the friendly insects. The trend of mechanised farming has not flourished. Obsolete and skewed value chains have pushed the farmers to a disadvantageous position whereas the middlemen are well in command thanks to their financial and trading muscles. On the credit side, banks have been all too happy to lend to the industry, trade and buying government treasury bills that have resulted in an eyewash of paltry loaning to the agriculture sector. Last but surely not the least, successive governments failed to develop focused and result oriented sets of policies except for the politically motivated Kissan packages.

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

[Four tourists injured in Babusar Top road mishap](https://nation.com.pk/16-Jul-2021/four-tourists-injured-in-babusar-top-road-mishap)

Forget any expectation of viewing the matter as high priority; one must question if basic and strategic issues like food security figure any priority in today’s political discourse expect for being used for political mud slagging. The clock is ticking and permanently looming food insecurity is a fate not far away. Urgent short and long-term measures are needed to escape from the future that seems to wait for us if we continue with and condone inaction.

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