[Fida Muhammad](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/fida-muhammad)

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**Strengthening food systems**

Achieving food security and nutrition for all goes beyond eliminating hunger – which is a high priority under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030 agenda.

SDG2 – ‘End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture’ – is a task challenging but achievable. With less than 10 years remaining to achieve the target, global trends portray a skewed scenario. There is a growing realization at the global and national level to have food systems and nutrition for growth pathways to approach Agenda 2030. Both pathways (food systems and growth) shall ensure pro-poor and inclusive outcomes.

The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020 (SOFI-2020) reported that Asia is still home to the highest number of malnourished (381 million). In Pakistan, nutrition and a looming concern of obesity emerging alongside put more pressure on social, economic, and public health efforts. Covid-19 has exposed vulnerabilities and inadequacies making nutrition a more complex challenge now.

Pakistan has become a staple food surplus country with overall food availability being relatively stable yet expressing low dietary diversity. On the standard required level of dietary diversity (five categories of food commodities from amongst 10 at a population level), a study in rural Sindh, for instance, notes only 20 percent of pregnant women having dietary diversity (Lander, 2019). On the contrary, among the same group in urban Islamabad it was noted to be at 89 percent (Ali, 2014). While this contrasting situation may be partly owing to better awareness, yet availability of a variety of food products in urban environments could be another important factor. Today Pakistan’s food chains are linear and extend mainly from rural to urban areas, thus warranting structural transformation.

An assessment of complementary feeding (NIPS, 2017) indicates that in Pakistan (both rural and urban areas with different income quintiles), poor feeding practices exist owing to poor knowledge, negative beliefs, and perceptions, as well as family’s financial situation. Further studies inform that, although these factors may operate to some degree in some areas, low demand for a specific food is rather related to, or caused by, cost and affordability (Cost of Diet Analysis, 2018). Thus, addressing affordability would be key to improving the average diet in Pakistan which will require improving overall competitiveness of the food chains.

Policy and public-sector efforts continue to concentrate on supporting staple food production, managing its availability (public procurement and storage) and influencing affordability (through subsidies and price control). Along these lines, Pakistan’s food security policy has remained focused on staples. It is time to divert attention to taking a holistic approach. Achieving food security and reducing malnutrition through this approach will require development of dynamic and inclusive agricultural value chains, improved food access and enhance demand for affordable nutritious food products and create an enabling environment around food systems.

The demand side is particularly weak. To strengthen the pull effect factor, warranting rigorously enhanced awareness on the significance of improved nutrition, dietary diversity, consumption of nutrient-dense foods, improving facilities both at the country level and the consumer level. It will in turn require leveraging private-sector investment in spearheading nutrition awareness campaigns and exploring the link between social safety nets and nutrition outcomes. At the same time linking subsidy to nutritional outcome and to improve affordability for the poor and vulnerable is also critical.

To generate social and economic dividends, it is important to prioritize and upgrade supply chains of nutritious food from start to end, making them efficient and competitive. To this end, policies must incentivize value chain upgradation through investment in all functions including input supply, production, processing and marketing.

In the policy spectrum, it is important to foster a simplified compliance and taxation regime; redirect subsidy schemes making it more direct; focus on quality assurance; deregulate prices to encourage investment in quality improvement; and, introduce safety nets (crop, produce and livestock insurance schemes). Institutional reforms are essential and should go hand in hand with policy reforms. It is critical to define the mandate and institutional anchorage for nutrition outcomes, strengthen R&D for nutrition, budget allocation, support public-private partnerships, enforce nutrition-related regulation including salt iodization, compulsory breastfeeding, food fortification and mainstream nutrition in development planning. In addition, national dietary guidelines need to be translated into local contexts, harmonizing these with local endowments and cuisines.

Contemporary global efforts are important. Of special reference are the two international summits to be organized in 2021 – the Food Systems Summit (FSS) and Nutrition for Growth (N4G) – which are both basically taking a systems approach to tackle food insecurity and malnutrition. The International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and World Food Programme (WFP), having comparative advantage, are actively supporting the government of Pakistan to consolidate the opportunities and priorities of the country’s food systems going forward. It is critical to make food systems inclusive, pro-poor and to ensure that markets work for poor.

The writer is country programme officer, Asia and Pacific Division at International Fund for

Agriculture Development (IFAD), a specialized agency of the United Nations.