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February 9, 2021

**Unsteady pulse**

Pakistan faces an elevated need to import key food items including edible oil, wheat, sugar, tea and pulses, with lower-than-expected levels of output.

Production of the highly valued cotton crop has dipped to a level of 30-year low. Productivity of the five staple crops has slipped to less than half of the world’s best. Recent supply shocks have increased food prices by an average of 31 percent in the past 29 months. This is dramatic enough for an economy with an agrarian base.

The fact that 36.9 percent of the country’s households are food insecure paints an even more straining picture – a finding of the National Nutritional Survey 2018 conducted by Pakistan’s Ministry of Health and Unicef. Things don’t get any better, with children under five years suffering high levels of severe stunting at 40 percent and almost 30 percent of them underweight.

The future looks more vulnerable. A high population growth rate of 2.4 percent, inefficient use of water in the Indus River basin irrigation system; unfavorable climate changes; weak policies and regulations governing markets for agricultural inputs and commodities – all raise concern of a marked increase in food insecurity.

The Food and Agriculture Organization identifies food security to “exist when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” A low per capita income of $1,497, rising prices and high poverty concentrated in rural areas have made Pakistan struggle with issues of under-nourishment and lack of micronutrients. Limited technological innovation in farming, weak research, trade restrictions and low quality of inputs is less than desirable.

There is no easy way to describe it. Pakistan’s agriculture benefited from the green revolution. However, it missed on the gene revolution and is currently losing out on the precision agriculture revolution. We simply cannot afford an unsteady agriculture pulse. A possible way forward has been adequately defined in the framework for national food security for Pakistan. A comprehensive document was finalized in May 2018, covering four main pillars of food security: food availability, food accessibility, food nutrition and food stability.

The first pillar, food availability, is the amount of food present in a country or area through all forms of domestic production, imports, food stocks and food aid. The agriculture sector is the mainstay of food availability in a country. The way forward for Pakistan is to undertake interventions suggested in the policy including developing new varieties, improving fertilizers availability and use, restricting government procurement to strategic reserves and revitalizing the world’s largest irrigation system.

A thrust beyond the agriculture emergency program of the government is critical. A reconsidered focus on investment and reform of governance especially in agriculture research and regulatory public-sector bodies is required. Involvement of provinces is imperative.

The second pillar, food accessibility, relates to a household’s ability to afford an adequate amount of food consistently through various means. Pakistan’s income support program has grown credibly to help the vulnerable over the last decade. Further interventions can include benefit cards to meet input costs and reduction of food losses in supply chains. Market support through better market intelligence, regulation and transparency is also required.

The third pillar, food utilization, relates to safe and nutritious food which meets people’s dietary needs. The availability and access to food on their own are not enough. Citizens have to be assured of safe and nutritious food as well as safe drinking water and adequate sanitary facilities, and awareness of food preparation and storage procedures. Food regulations require a serious redo and strong implementation.

Pakistan, being a signatory to the World Trade Organization, has to adhere to Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures for import and export of quality and safe food products to protect human, animal, and plant life and health. Standard setting and implementation leave much to be desired. The conditions of Pakistan’s vegetables and fruit markets as well as of grain markets require a makeover. The infestation of rodents in grain markets cannot be tolerated as a routine. The country suffers an irrecoverable loss of 20 to 40 percent due to poor transportation and storage. Interventions in all these areas can improve overall productivity.

The final pillar, food stability, means food must be present at all times in terms of availability, access and utilization. Sustainable agriculture requires the use and management of natural resources in a way to maximize social, economic and environmental benefits. Climate change and management of resulting disasters is essential to maintain a stable supply of food in calamity-stricken cases.

The National Food Security Policy lays out various qualitative and quantitative goals, supporting four percent yearly growth in the agriculture sector. The interventions can make a serious dent in poverty. The policy also targets attainment of zero hunger; an attempt to fulfill goal 2 of the Sustainable Development Goals. It moves on provincial agricultural policies. In the absence of land extension, focus is rightly placed on yield improvements as an alternative to sustaining agriculture growth in Pakistan.

There is no contest of ideas. It’s all about adoption. It would be wise to draw the policy document from the shelf, dust it and allocate resources to make the policy a reality. Implementation can be supported by a National Food Security Council. In addition, a matched focus on population control is imperative to ensure food security in the country.

Adoption of user-friendly, efficient and fast IT-based systems and Artificial Intelligence is the future. It is good to recognize the global context of substantive subsidies as a way of agri-support, besides research generating new technologies to increase crop and livestock production while we make our decisions.

The plight of the agriculture sector, leading to insufficient availability of local production of food items and impact of rising domestic demand, cannot be left unresolved. Shortages can have serious repercussions for the country’s fiscal and external payments. Pressures will surmount with increasing global food prices, making the laudable objective of food security more distant. A radically successful reform effort can lift agricultural productivity, create market efficiency and increase farm incomes.

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