**[Feeding the poorest](https://www.dawn.com/news/1745269/feeding-the-poorest)**

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The writer is a hands-on farmer.

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SINDH’S eastern districts of Sanghar, Umerkot and Badin are agricultural planners’ canaries in the coal mine for the wheat crop. The output from these areas is important enough to warn policymakers of what is to become of Pakistan’s most important food crop. The signs right now are ominous.

The crop in these districts has been almost entirely harvested, and the grain has started reaching nearby markets, including Karachi. What is worrying is that the crop is so short that the government has not been able to purchase grain at the official rates. This shows that the market is prevailing and the farmers are getting a fair price; it also means that the government will not have sufficient stocks for leaner times.

The PDM government had raised the official wheat support price this year by almost 100pc to Rs4,000 per 40 kilogrammes. Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari strongly advocated giving Pakistani farmers wheat price parity with Ukrainian farmers. Many urban commentators did not appreciate the policy move, but now, with the new wheat crop harvested and the market prevailing well above the official price, it is evident that the price hike was no favour but a sensible policy decision.

If one calculates the cost of last year’s low wheat support price and compares it to this year’s market prices, it is clear that Pakistani farmers suffered hundreds of billions in lost earnings last year. Industry sources say that even with the relatively lower current international prices, imported wheat still costs over Rs12,000 for a 100kg bag, compared to Rs10,000 or Rs10,500 per 100kg of local grain.

Targeted wheat flour assistance is needed for the destitute.

Wheat is by far the largest cultivated crop by area in Pakistan, normally grown on more than 22 million acres. This year, it has been quite difficult to estimate the total area cultivated, as vast tracts of Sindh were under rainwater and farmers in affected areas could not cultivate winter crops even in the months of October and November. Similarly, rain losses left a significant number of farmers in Sindh almost destitute; consequently, many farmers were unable to afford the expensive inputs required to cultivate wheat. They opted for low input oil crops instead.

Based on these two factors, wheat production from Sindh is likely to dent national output this year. Nationally, we may struggle to go beyond a total output of 25m tonnes, though our requirement is over 28m tonnes. Afghanistan, too, is tied to our belly. We may require an extra one million for our neighbour. This may necessitate the import of as much as four million tonnes of wheat. Another piece of bad news is that 2023 is being termed a more volatile year for global wheat prices; with the rupee in free fall, the wheat import bill can be expected to be quite dreadful.

There have already been quite a few stories in local newspapers about how the poor have been dying for a few kilogrammes of wheat flour. The situation in the coming months — with wheat flour price inflation already in the triple digits — is going to get even tougher. Pakistan’s fragile fiscal position and its toxic politics will be made all the worse if the poor cannot access wheat. This will require a sensible and targeted wheat flour assistance programme for the destitute.

Basic foodstuff like wheat flour cannot be left at the mercy of the markets in Pakistan. They are not free and are highly manipulated. Wheat flour may touch as much as Rs200 per kilo during the months of October and November, putting it well out of the reach of many Pakistanis. This is the time that the country may be going to the polls for the federal and provincial assemblies. The people can be expected to punish the current rulers severely at the ballot box. Targeted support to the most vulnerable third of our population will be an absolute must to prevent such a scenario.

As someone observed on social media, if electricity bills can reach every household in the country, why can’t a bag wheat also reach every poor household? It is doable, but the more relevant question would be: does our bureaucracy have the capacity and orientation to be of service to the people?

It is the job of our policymakers to formulate a vison and force the bureaucracy to come up with a mechanism for its implementation. The government has to realise that the model of utility stores and truck sale points has not worked and will only result in more deaths of the poor, and more humiliation for the destitute. The government already has data on poverty: it should provide coupons for free wheat flour to the poorest of poor, as well as coupons for subsidised flour to poor households in rural and urban Pakistan. If the data, private logistics companies and community-level vendors can be utilised properly, the job can be sensibly done.

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