

**development: Diminishing food security —Syed Mohammad Ali**

*More needs to be done to ensure diversity in food production and consumption by all segments of the population, to have a productive and healthy workforce, and to avoid subsequent expenditures incurred to cure health complications prompted primarily due to malnutrition*

Incidents like the death of over two dozen women, trampled to death in the rush to grab free food items being distributed during Ramzan in a poor neighbourhood of Karachi, are a stark reminder of the growing threat of chronic food shortages and the accompanying social unrest that confront large parts of Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. The situation will only get worse unless major efforts are undertaken to improve inefficient water and farm management practices within the poor countries of such regions.

One obvious reason why food security is eroding in our part of the world is the fact that there will be an extra 1.5 billion people in Asia alone by 2050, and a majority of this population increase will be concentrated around our immediate neighbourhood. This projected population growth will put an even greater pressure on already scarce food supplies.

Overall, Asia's food and feed demand is expected to double by 2050. As there is little scope to expand arable land, growing the extra food can require better management of land and water supplies. According to specialised agencies like the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the International **Water Management Institute (IWMI)**, most Asian countries are facing the prospect of importing more rice, wheat and maize, to feed their populations. At the same time, there is a heightened risk that cereal prices will continue to rise within increasingly volatile international markets. Relying on trade to meet a large part of food demand imposes an untenable burden on the economies of any developing countries.

The best bet for countries in our part of the world at least seems to lie in revitalising our vast irrigation systems. Although Asia accounts for 70 percent of the world's total irrigated land, its irrigation systems are not being managed properly. Subsequently, millions of farmers have taken the responsibility for irrigation into their own hands using out-of-date and inefficient pump technology. Since they are allowed to extract as much water as they like from their land, scary scenarios of groundwater over-exploitation and depletion have begun to emerge.

It is high time that our governments invest in more efficient methods of using water. Without water productivity gains, South Asia alone would need 57 percent more water for irrigated agriculture. Given the scarcity of land and water, and the growing water needs for cities, such a scenario is untenable. It is also important to note that the above scenario forecast does not even factor in the impact of global warming, which will likely make rainfall more erratic and less plentiful in some agricultural regions over the coming decades.

Maplecroft, a British risk intelligence firm, has already placed Pakistan among countries at the 'extreme risk' of food shortages with an overall ranking of 11 out of 148 countries. The Food Security Risk Index is calculated from dozens of variables that determine a country's capacity to feed its people. The two other most populous South Asian countries India and Bangladesh are ranked as 25th and 20th for facing 'high risk'. India may be one of the world's key emerging economies, but it is finding itself under increasing pressure from food security issues. Two-thirds of India's 1.1 billion people depend on farming as their main income source. But acreage of land under cultivation has dropped significantly due to dwindling water resources, deforestation and uneven precipitation.

While poverty is a major source of food vulnerability, it is not the only one. Food security is also affected by agricultural development, trade flows, foreign aid as well as government policies on nutrition. Added to these are the impacts of population growth and climate change.

Food stress jumped toward the top of the global agenda after soaring commodity prices in 2007 and 2008 sparked riots in 30 countries, including many tottering on the brink of severe shortages or widespread hunger. The World Bank now estimates that food inflation has pushed an additional 100 million people into deep poverty, on top of a billion that were already scraping by on less than a dollar a day.

Within our own country, researchers have identified how in parts of Balochistan for instance, extreme poverty forces families to consume flour that was ground from wheat mixed with cactus plants and cases from Sindh have also emerged where people consumed tea as a way of killing hunger so as to save on food. The recently shifted Information Minister is on record for having recently stated that the public should resist the temptation of purchasing sugar to prevent hoarders from inflating the price of sugar, the luxury of proposing the same option for food consumption in general does not exist.

Punjab, the breadbasket of Pakistan, is challenged to protect its vulnerable population against the negative impact

of high food prices and insufficient household incomes. There is consensus emerging over the growing food insecurity risks and the need for a comprehensive food security strategy for Pakistan. The Prime Minister's Task Force on Food Security developed a comprehensive food insecurity index to encompass all factors ensuring food security at national as well as at the household level. Some of the recommendations like increasing wheat procurement price have been adopted to help boost wheat production. Other recommendations have been made to develop a more comprehensive food security strategy to be able to address the issue on permanent basis needs to be implemented as has been in the case in India, which has put forth a National Food Security Act. It would be wise if Pakistan were to take similar steps, paying special heed to the role of small farmers in achieving food security.

The challenge to ensure food security at the household level requires identifying poor households in need of support in cash or kind. Yet while safety net programmes are important in the short run, there was no substitute for a sound macroeconomic policy that would generate wage jobs and enhance real incomes. On the other hand, there is simultaneous need to focus seriously on quality control mechanisms to ensure availability of food products which are of a good standard. Addressing micronutrient deficiencies prevailing within different age brackets, particularly amongst pregnant and lactating women and children below 5 years of age, is also crucial.

While some initiatives are underway in this regard, more needs to be done to ensure diversity in food production and consumption by all segments of the population, to have a productive and healthy workforce, and to avoid subsequent expenditures incurred to cure health complications prompted primarily due to malnutrition.

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[Home](#) | [Editorial](#)