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*Mohsin Khan*



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Carlo Mierendorff Str. 43, 34132 Kassel, Germany  
Telephone +49 (0)56149941680,  
Email: [info@ms-researchhub.com](mailto:info@ms-researchhub.com),  
Web: [www.ms-researchhub.com](http://www.ms-researchhub.com)

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# The Covid19 Pandemic and Food (In) Security in Pakistan

Mohsin KHAN

Northeastern University (UK), M&S Research Hub (Germany)

[khan@ms-researchhub.com](mailto:khan@ms-researchhub.com)

## Abstract

*Pakistan currently faces its worse social and economic crises amidst COVID19 pandemic. The nationwide lockdown, desert locust attack, and rains have further exacerbated the economic crises, particularly raising food prices, unemployment, poverty and endangered food security of the public. This paper ascertain the ongoing pandemic, food crises, and concludes that the corona pandemic, combined with other factors such floods, locust attack and delayed decision making, caused a nation-wide food insecurity crises, particularly affecting the agricultural, and livestock sector followed by food supply chains. Similarly, the higher risk factors towards Food security are increased retail prices of food items, combined with reduced incomes, meaning that more and more households have to cut down on the quantity and quality of their food consumption. It is believed that this situation would otherwise be averted, if proper and timely interventions were taken. On the recommendations side, priority should be given to address underlying food security crises, by diversifying agricultural sector, subsidizing food items, tackling viral spread by strengthening health system, improve food and price surveillance, reduce rural poverty, in particular by provision of more and decent jobs in the rural economy, extending social protection to all, facilitating and promoting the formalization of the informal economy, labor rights, leverage tech and private-public partnership to curtail Food insecurity amidst covid19 crises.<sup>1</sup>*

**Key Words:** Covid19, Agriculture, Livestock, Food Security, Social Protection, Locust attack, Pakistan

## Introduction

As a world's sixth-most populous country, Pakistan exceeds its population to 212 million people in 2021, where more than 64 percent of the population are based in the rural

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<sup>1</sup> Note: This paper may also have implications for other developing countries that have similar socio-economic and political environment, and currently experiencing the worst crises of human history.

areas, and 40 percent of its population is directly engaged in the agriculture sector<sup>i</sup>. As one of the agro-based economy, where agriculture contributes 19 percent of domestic growth product (GDP), it remains 23<sup>rd</sup> largest economy in the world in 2018 in terms of nominal Gross Domestic Product (purchasing power parity, PPP)<sup>ii</sup>. Likewise, the Livestock sector contributes 11 per cent to the country's GDP (60.5 per cent in agriculture sector) and employs approximately 35 million rural communities. In addition to that, Fisheries and forestry sectors each contribute an estimated 0.4 per cent to the GDP (2.1 per cent in agriculture sector), and provide employment opportunities to millions of people. Similarly, 22.1 million hectares are cultivated in Pakistan out of the total area of 79.6 million hectares—while remaining comprised of cultivable waste, densely populated forests and rangelands. The total cropped area constitutes 23.3 million hectares, while forests cover 4.6 million hectares of the total land. The country has the world's largest contiguous irrigation system with almost 80 percent of the cultivated area irrigated.<sup>iii</sup>

In 2019, the Pakistan's agriculture sector grew by 2.67 percent compared to 0.85 percent in 2018. This was primarily due to outperformance of cash crops, i.e. cotton and sugarcane. The Wheat production increased 24.946 million tones compare to last year's production of 24.349 million tons mainly due to increase in cultivated area and better crop yields<sup>iv</sup>. However, despite its impressive and continuously growing agricultural production, the country is still facing high levels of food insecurity. According to a global report published jointly by FAO, WFP, UNICEF, WHO and IFAD in 2019, 20.3 per cent of Pakistan's population (40.0 million people) is undernourished/food insecure<sup>v</sup>. The prevalence of malnutrition amongst children aged 6-59 months is also very high, with an estimated 40 percent children stunted, 28 percent underweight, 18 percent wasted and 10 percent overweight. Further, around one-fourth (24 per cent) of the country's population is living below national poverty line and 39.0 per cent is poor based on multidimensional poverty index (MPI)<sup>vi</sup>. Similarly, large amounts of agricultural production and the continuously increasing population places high demands on Pakistan's water resources. At present, the annual per capita availability of water in Pakistan is estimated at about 1,100 cubic meters; below 1,000 cubic meters, countries begin experiencing chronic water stress<sup>vii</sup>. Vast majority of the country's water resources – some 90 percent – are used for agriculture, while the remaining share is split equally between industry and for domestic use.

Since historically, Pakistan continue to face numerous natural and manmade disasters, including catastrophic floods, earthquakes, droughts, war and conflicts. Wars in 1948, 1965

and 1999, the drought in 2013-15 to floods of 2010 affected almost 20 million people. Likewise, from 2007 onwards, the war on terrorism killed 52,000 civilians, and erupted large scale migration of around 1 million people from the conflicted areas of Pakistan<sup>viii</sup>. Likewise, despite among world's top ten producers of wheat, rice, cotton, sugarcane, mango, dates and oranges, the country is plunged by food insecurity. According to the Food Security Assessment Survey in 2016, 18 percent of the population in Pakistan is undernourished. UNICEF (2018) reported high level of severe stunting (45 percent), wasting (15 percent) and underweight (30 percent). The malnourishment problems are high in rural areas (46 percent) and in certain regions like FATA (58 percent), GB (51 percent) and Baluchistan (52 percent). Similarly, around half of the population is consuming less than the dietary requirements, and acute deficient in Vitamin A and Iron.<sup>ix</sup>

A number of factors have been identified including climate change, high population growth, rapid urbanization, low purchasing power, high price fluctuations, erratic food production, and inefficient food distribution systems<sup>x</sup>. However, the 2020 covid19 pandemic followed by floods and locust attacks, has further exacerbated the food crises, and the country witnessed one the highest inflation rate (11 percent) in the history. In fact, Democracy Reporting International claimed that “the pandemic did not affect the majority, the escalating food prices”<sup>xi</sup>.

However, despite these varying factors, our paper implies that the Corona pandemic, combined with other factors such floods, locust attack and delayed decision making, caused a nation-wide food insecurity crises, which can be averted, if proper policy interventions were taken. The next section will analyze key factors, and propose policy directives both in short and long terms, to reduce impact of the pandemic, and contain the food insecurity challenge effectively.

### **Methodology:**

Considering the scope of the essay, we employed secondary data resources, including Pakistan Economic Survey, Pakistan Labor Survey (various editions), Reports form Food and Agriculture Organization, National Nutritional Survey 2018, UNDP Country assessment 2019/2020, and COVID19 dash Boards from WHO and Government of Pakistan.

### **The Pandemic Crises in Pakistan—Impact on Agriculture, Livestock and Food (in) security**

In Pakistan, the numbers of Covid19 cases continue to rise, reaching its peak by the end of March-April 2021, with infection tally to 825,519 people. The death toll raised to 17,957 with 149 more fatalities recently<sup>xii</sup>. It is feared that the combined effects of pandemic, infestation of the locust and other natural hazards plummeted pre-existing vulnerabilities. Furthermore, if the spread of corona virus continues to accelerate, resulting in prolonged lockdowns, the number of additional people at risk of becoming food insecure could increase. The main anticipated effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on agriculture sector, food security and human being are analyzed below:

The 2020 has also witnessed an acute shortage of wheat which also turned into a major political issue. In addition to pandemic, the Locust outbreak in Pakistan (towards last part of 2019 and start of 2020) turned significant agricultural losses in the main crop production areas in Baluchistan, Punjab and Sindh provinces. According to the initial assessment damage to over 115 thousand hectares of crops including wheat, oil seed crops, cotton, gram, fruits and vegetables, besides grazing field losses<sup>xiii</sup>. Other food items, such as chicken, milk, vegetables, pulses, also became expensive or vanished from the market, adding to the miseries of the majority. Shortages in these essential commodities had cause their prices to soar at the end of last year and the trend continued into the new year, which began with a bang in more ways than one. January inflation rate rose to 14.6 percent, from 12.6 percent during the previous month, reaching the highest level in 12 years of Pakistan.

This consistent price hike and shortages of essential food items propelled the crisis, declaring it as a “national food security crisis”—which can have a far-reaching impact on the population, especially those who are already marginalized.” In addition, it is also predicted that the farmers will be forced to liquidate their assets for survival<sup>xiv</sup>. Similarly, Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), placed Pakistan in a list of 45 countries requiring external assistance due to food insecurity. It mentioned pockets of population in immediate need including 1.4 million registered and unregistered Afghan refugees and 1.8 million Pakistanis in the administratively merged areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa being in “crisis” and “emergency” phase in terms of food insecurity<sup>xv</sup>.

Likewise the average number of daily new cases has been rising sharply (over 12 percent) since the beginning of 2021. On April 30, the Government announced to impose a “complete lockdown” in 12 major cities to curb the spike in cases from May 8<sup>th</sup>. The effects of urgent and essential COVID-19 containment measures are having repercussions on the

country's already fragile employment situation and livelihood situation—as “most vulnerable groups susceptible to COVID-19 shocks include daily wage laborers (22 percent of all wage earners), internally or temporarily displaced persons, refugees, returnees, low income urban households, market-dependent rural households i.e. daily wages labors, elderly people, those already suffering from medical conditions, children and female-headed poor households.”<sup>xvi</sup>. The wheat production in Pakistan also will suffer harshly, since 70 percent of the wheat harvest depends on traditional farm laborers, current containment measures in May 2021, will significantly hindered their ability to move and work during harvest, resulting in production losses. In addition, food supply chains—including provision of the agricultural and livestock inputs (seeds, vaccination, and fertilizers), agricultural machinery, seed/food storage, and transport facilities, followed by inadequate extension services will further disrupt the production and re-distributional channels.

The Livestock sector also witness huge loss due to COVID-19 pandemic. The small breeders and farmers have been affected largely, as livestock markets were closed until mid-April and the buying/selling of livestock was at a standstill. Additionally, farmers' ability to access animal health services was hampered due to temporary closures of government and private sector animal husbandry services. Most significantly, the effects of COVID-19-related inter-provincial and inter-city transport restrictions is adversely impacting livestock products and the processing industry, such as milk and meat products, which could have detrimental repercussions on small businesses engaged in milk and meat supply chains. Last but not least, the ability of markets to supply a diverse range of staples, fruit and vegetables will also vary, creating price hikes in urban areas, which will further food crises and could reduce access to food for the most vulnerable households in Pakistan.

While the country saw a major setback with all key sectors failing to perform per expectation in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak—with a negative 0.38 per cent economic growth rate in fiscal 2019-20<sup>xvii</sup>. The services sector also witnessed a rare contraction of 0.59 percent in 2020, one of the worst since 1968, primarily due to Covid19 and the shrinkage in service delivery in major sectors, which had negatively impacted employment also.

Additionally, the economic impact of pandemic will significantly affect the purchasing power of the most vulnerable population. Since a quarter of the population of Pakistan lives below the national poverty line and around 2/5 are multidimensional poor. Food insecurity is very high, with 20–30 percent of the population (40 to 62 million people)

experiencing some form of food insecurity. An estimated 36.43 million people are persistently and chronically vulnerable to food insecurity and also highly exposed to natural hazards and shocks, including the ongoing pandemic. An additional 2.45 million people could become food insecure as a result of any medium-scale shock<sup>xviii</sup> and rise in food price. In year 2020, on the average, the food inflation, limited to seven most sensitive items measured on year-on-year basis was 17.57 percent in urban areas, and 21.30 percent the in rural areas<sup>xix</sup>. This rapid price increase of wheat grain and flour as well as other important food items, such as chicken, meat, milk, onions, and fruits could continue as long as governmental containment measures are in place. As a result, the purchasing power of the most vulnerable is likely to be significantly affected over the remainder of the year 2021-22, with potential repercussions on food security and nutrition situation of Pakistan. The Newly Merged Districts (NMDs) of Pakistan, which were formerly part of the Federally Administered Tribal Area, are extremely vulnerable to the impacts of the pandemic. According to the World Food Program (WFP), a majority of the households in the NMDs (65 percent) are dependent on unsustainable livelihood strategies (daily wages), while the remaining (35 percent) depend on somewhat sustainable sources<sup>xx</sup>.

Similarly, the steep increase in power and gas prices every few months, punishing middle-income households that are already struggling to cope with the pandemic's impact on their lives and livelihoods are not only increasing prices of food—consequently eroding the political capital and masses rebel to current government, as evidenced in the recent by-elections in different cities of Pakistan, where the ruling party was defeated badly<sup>xxi</sup>.

## **Recommendations**

Through the Federal and provincial Governments has adopted measures to safeguard financial stability, expanded refinancing schemes i.e. “package of 7.2 US\$ billion as part of its immediate response to COVID-19. Fiscal measures by provincial governments include expanding the Ehsaas emergency program's outreach from 5.2 million to 12 million households, providing a cash grant to 3 million daily wage laborers in the formal sector and providing food assistance to poor families at subsidized rates from utility stores. The Benazir Income Support Program is supporting 3 million households and the Government has enhanced their monthly stipend from PKR 2 000 (around 13 US\$) to PKR 3 000 (around 20US\$)<sup>xxii</sup>. Likewise, the governmental multi-sectorial relief package including 600 million

US\$ for agriculture—supporting nearly half of the population of Pakistan engage in agriculture sector. Additionally, 1.69 billion US\$ will be used to procure 8.2 million tones of wheat during the current season. The Punjab government has offered USD 905, 57640 worth of interest-free loans to farmers, crop insurance for 250 000 farmers and 1.2 million sacks of seeds for the next wheat crop.<sup>xxiii</sup> However, as we witnessed in the past, majority of these stimulus or relief packages are considered to benefiting large farmers and female producers are largely ignored<sup>xxiv</sup>. Likewise to curtail artificial price inflation by food hoarders, the government has promulgated COVID-19 (Prevention of Hoarding) Ordinance, 2020, to fine and jail traders who hoard essential items and create artificial shortage of goods.<sup>xxv</sup>

However, there is dire need to develop long-term and sustainable strategies to address the multidimensional agri-food and human well-being challenges. Priority should be given to addressing underlying food security crises. Following are key short and long term strategies to cope the food insecurity crises;

- 1) In short term, the government must **re-direct budgets** available within the provincial departments for provision of **food packages** comprising of essential items to vulnerable groups; and identify population pockets across the country suffering severe shortage of food; and build a strong **price monitoring mechanism** to curb the price hike and **food hoarding**. Similarly, the government, civil society and the private sector should join hands to ensure sustained supply of food packages in affected areas—re-directing corporate social responsibility budgets (CSR) in relief operations. These actors can also work on imparting **awareness drives** and media or on-ground campaigns on health and safety measures to reduce the risk of virus among rural communities—ensure SOPs, and protect the vulnerable farmers, markets, and their families from viral infections.
- 2) In long run, the government should have rapid and efficient policy response and effective coordination between federal and provincial government. The key areas of policy/programs are as follow;
  - a. The government must work on diversifying agricultural sector, and subsidize food items. Additionally, to tackle the viral spread, federal and provincial department must strengthen the **health system** and establish a **food production and supply surveillance mechanism**. This system will monitor and evaluate the food production, distribution, and supply chains, to curtail food insecurity or nutritional situation of the country. Similarly, in collaboration with donors and UN organizations (i.e. WFP, UNDP, FAO), government can re-design existing **farmer training** and **technology transfer** initiatives, addressing the skill gap among vulnerable farmers—improving farming practices, storage, processing, and reduce post-harvest losses. It can also increase their **marketing** capacities, access to internet sources (selling their crops/products) and **transportation, and storages**, strengthening the market linkages between producer, suppliers and other market forces.

- b. The Government along with bilateral organizations and monetary institutions (MFIs) can reevaluate existing stimulus packages (i.e. seed grants or interest free loans or insurance schemes) and direct them towards the small farmers and tenants, including female in the rural fraternity. The ***Crop/Livestock Insurance schemes*** can help vulnerable and small farmers/breeders to avoid negative spillover of the droughts. Floods, pandemic or other disasters.
- c. In order to reduce rural poverty, Government can provide more and ***decent jobs*** in the rural economy, and extend the ***social protection*** to all, facilitating and promoting the formalization of the ***informal economy*** and labor rights amidst covid19 crises.
- d. The federal government should lead a dialogue across the federating units to lift the ban on ***inter-provincial movement*** of cereal crops (i.e. wheat, Rice) and other essential food items. These restrictions only increase the prices and create an incentive to smuggle the goods out of the country. The federal government should also abolish the need for cabinet approval before ***import and export*** of food items and should allow open trade throughout the year. Likewise, both federal and provincial governments should withdraw from ***public procurement*** of wheat, sugar cane and other staple crops, but instead invest in strategic reserves of wheat and other crops to act as a buffer in the event of major supply disruption such as during pandemic or natural disaster.
- e. The government must ***invest*** in ***advance technologies***, i.e. Artificial Intelligence, remote sensing technology and satellite imaging for crop and disease monitoring. The government can initiate a ***public-private partnership***—offering incentives and growth opportunities in the supply chain and value addition in agricultural and other food related sector. The private sector can also invest in farming, introducing and expanding modern agricultural practices, increasing agriculture growth and positively contribute toward GDP growth.

## Conclusion

Pakistan continue to face multidimensional food crises, where millions of households are vulnerable to shocks—induced by natural disasters, inflationary pressures and supply disruptions. In 2020, Pakistan experienced worst possible shocks and the Corona lockdown intensified the shock waves because of job losses and restrictions on movements. The evidence suggests that majority of population in Pakistan suffers from pandemic, and lockdowns—consequently impacting food and supply chain, raising unemployment and prices of essential food items. It further calls for holistic, long-term and sustainable strategies to address the multidimensional agri-food and human well-being challenges. Priority should be given to addressing underlying food security crises, including strengthening agricultural economy, ensure availability of subsidize food items, tackling viral spread, strengthening health system and price and food surveillance system, reduce rural poverty, in particular

providing decent employment opportunities in the rural economy. Likewise, the government should extend the social protection to all, facilitating and promoting the formalization of the informal economy, labor rights, building efficient and vibrant public private partners, and use technology to curtail food insecurity crises amidst covid19 pandemic.

## End Notes:

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