



Poor Governance Spawns Food Insecurity

No food, no life. With such importance, nature has cherished us with the phenomenon of abundant food growth in a geometrical progression, where every kind of food plant has an inbuilt reproduction system through multiple seeds. Pakistan is blessed with all types of natural resources for food growth, including land, water, weather, workforce—you name it. However, all of these resources suffer from poor governance, causing food insecurity, with 40 percent of our population living below the poverty level and the majority suffering from malnutrition.

Out of the total area of 880,000 km², 42 percent is farmland, and around 90 percent of this is located in the Indus River Plain, which receives enough water through rain, glacier melt, and underground sources, providing food to the nation. We have all the necessary seasons essential for the production of various crops. Around 60 percent of our workforce is engaged in the agriculture sector. With such a favorable combination, how could a country be food-stressed except for poor management?

Countries that are vigilant and alert in the agriculture sector are affluent and prosperous, as they always remain sustainable. They start in the soil—plowing forward with passion—cultivating, innovating, and elevating. Farming is not just a routine exercise but a science, a change, a management, and an innovation—for the good, for the better, and for the best for its people. We grow 2.8 tons of wheat per hectare, which is good. India grows 3.5 tons, which is better, and China grows 5.8 tons, which is the best. This is called receiving the maximum output from the same area of land through the efficient use of available resources. These countries are always vigilant about the quality of seeds, the timing and amount of water, the type of fertilizer, and other necessary care. Obviously, a better looked-after plant gives a plentiful harvest. Our other crops face the same fate in our agriculture sector. Nothing else is to be blamed except the incapacities of the responsible officials.

The recent wheat scam (April 2024) highlights the ineptness of our government policymakers. In fact, we are not merely facing food insecurity at the moment; we are causing it with irrational policies. Food issues give birth to all kinds of evils. Suffering individuals tend to beg, borrow, or steal to provide two meals a day for their families. For a peaceful and content society, food security is a must and ought to remain the top priority at the government level for improving and streamlining our food availability program. Every other sector can wait except the food sector. Thus, the Public Sector Development Program must allocate maximum funds to address the existing problems and hurdles in the

agriculture sector, which contributes 22.4 percent to GDP.

A good amount of quality food constitutes a vigorous, robust, and self-reliant nation as:

- Enough quality food makes physically and mentally strong communities.
- Unhealthy nations provide an extra financial burden on healthcare.
- Healthy nations are far more efficient.
- Good health reduces the risk of viral diseases.
- A healthy body contains a healthy mind.

It is also said: if agriculture goes wrong, nothing else will have a chance to go right. Everything else can wait except agriculture. Agriculture is the backbone of our world. A food-plenty nation has nothing to worry about; industry benefits a few, but agriculture benefits all of humanity.

Wheat has always remained the dominant food product in our daily consumption, constituting around 60 percent of our diet. Our per capita wheat consumption is 125 kg per annum, the highest in the world. Despite its significance, we have not improved wheat production nor added enough productive area over the last 20 years. Our average wheat production growth remained just 1.6 percent during this period, while our population continued to swell at an average rate of 2 percent per year. By 2023, our population reached 235 million, but wheat production remained at 28 million tons. Yet, the situation is not upsetting. The present confusion in making a proper wheat policy and its judicious implementation has unnecessarily aggravated the wheat issue. Pakistan is the 8th leading wheat-producing country in the world.

The second-best food choice in Pakistan after wheat is rice. We hope to produce 9 million tons of rice during 2023-24, out of which around 5 million tons are to be exported, fetching over US\$3 billion. However, the yield of rice is just 3.5 tons per hectare, which is lower than India's 4.3 tons, Bangladesh's 5 tons, China's 7 tons, and Australia's 10 tons per hectare. Pakistan is the 10th largest rice-producing country. We may easily reach a higher ranking by improving the yield per hectare. Rice requires a lot of water to grow, which poses challenges, especially with the unchecked use of groundwater. There is a dire need to promote water conservation and eco-friendly rice production.



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Milk is also an important ingredient in our daily food consumption. We produce 60 million tons of milk a year and rank as the 4th largest milk-producing country, only after India, the USA, and China. However, we have not shown any significant increase in milk production over the last 10 years. We consume 90% of our milk raw. Due to poor storage and transportation facilities, 15 to 20 percent of milk goes to waste. Our average milk yield is just 14 liters per cow per day and 10 liters per buffalo. While the cow is the preferred dairy animal worldwide, in Pakistan, we prefer buffalo milk. In comparison, the milk yield per cow per day is 35 liters in Australia and Switzerland.

Sugar is another much-liked food item in our daily consumption, although added sugar is not an essential nutrient for our bodies and is generally called "white poison." Pakistan produced 88 million tons of sugarcane in 2022, making it the 9th largest sugarcane producer in the world. Its production is steadily increasing at an average rate of 4.04 percent annually. In 1973, we produced only 20 million tons of sugarcane. Currently, 72 sugar mills are operational in various parts of the country, using 60 percent of the sugarcane produce, while the rest is used for gur/shaker and as seed.

Apparently, Pakistan is not performing that badly on food security issues, yet the sector needs significant improvement to augment its productivity, which lags behind compared to the world's standards, and to stabilize our haphazard policies. Some of the problematic areas are mentioned hereunder:

- **Corruption** is rampant in water distribution, fertilizer sales, seed dispensation, product price fixation, and the procurement of various food items by the government.
- **Land reforms:** Huge land holdings need to be streamlined.
- **Soft loans** for the purchase of seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, solar panels, etc.
- **Salinity, waterlogging, and land erosion** need control to make more land arable.
- **Agriculture universities and research centers** need significant improvement. They must also train farmers about crop rotations, water management, soil preparation, livestock growth, etc.
- **Improvement in warehousing and transportation facilities.**
- **Water management** is the most vital, decisive, and fundamental area needing improvement, especially water preservation. We have a desperate record of dam construction. This causes a huge quantity of water to flow straight into the sea, especially during the monsoon, leading to flood havoc. Recently, the nation suffered an economic hit of over US\$30 billion, besides the loss of precious human lives and livestock, due to the absence of the required number of dams and the incapacity to build more.

In 2017, the Chairman of the Indus River System Authority told the Senate Forum that Pakistan dumped US\$20 billion worth of water into the sea each year due to a lack of water conservation facilities while facing a shortage of water by 36 percent. Pakistan could store only up to 30 days' worth of water, while India could store up to 320 days' worth (Dawn, November 2, 2017). It is necessary to immediately start

building a large number of kacha pits on both sides of rivers and deep into the land alongside rivers as far as possible. The mechanism should allow the discharge of water after a certain level is reached in the river to avoid the suction of the normal routine level. These pits are only to store excess water, avoiding floods and the direct flow into the sea during the rainy season. These kacha pits will also help improve the groundwater level.

Conclusion

Pakistan is far behind in utilizing existing techniques and technologies to the optimum level, resulting in low yield per unit of land for almost every staple and cash crop, especially wheat, our main diet. Among the many factors responsible for this deficiency, water remains the most vital input. The importance of water can be appreciated from the fact that 90 percent of our farmland is situated in the Indus River Plain. Water is life for agriculture, and water management must be our top priority, as we have already been warned about acute water scarcity by 2025. The reality is that we do not lack water availability but suffer from an acute shortage of water storage capabilities. We all know the flood-hit areas, so there is a dire need for providing storage facilities in all these vulnerable areas, but we are callous on this account. The Bhasha Dam is a glaring example of our ineptness. By the way, we have a total of 150 dams, whereas Sri Lanka has 350 medium and large-sized dams and 12,000 small dams. India has 5,334 medium and large-sized dams together with 19,300 small dams.

A cow does not give milk unless we wake up in the morning, feed the cow, and milk it. Similarly, Pakistan does not have a scarcity of water, but we have not made proper use of it for a better irrigation system. The only answer is the construction of dams, preferably small dams. Our experience with the construction of medium and large-sized dams has not been a success story, as our very dawdling decision-making process at the government level might take decades to complete a medium-sized dam.

At present, modernizing our agriculture sector would be a futile exercise until we optimize our current agriculture system by enhancing productivity and improving water conservation. This requires two quick actions:

- 1) **Improving our agriculture universities and research centers:** These institutions must become better and more efficient by eliminating the culture of nepotism, procrastination, and dithering.
- 2) **Construction of small dams (kacha pits):** This must be done on a top-priority basis. It has already been forecast that July - August 2024 will bring double heavy monsoons.

These steps are essential to addressing our immediate water management needs and laying the groundwork for a more productive and sustainable agricultural sector.

About the Author: The writer is a senior Chartered Management Accountant having Fellow membership of ICMA. He retired as General Manager Finance from the Karachi Port Trust (KPT) where he served for around 22 years in different positions. He was also a member of the Karachi Dock Labour Board for 7 years. After doing his MBA from IBA Karachi, he started his initial career with Citibank and then served in Awami Autos (now Pak Suzuki).