

## **Food Insecurity: A Threat to National Security**

Pakistan is grappling with a plethora of socioeconomic, development, and agricultural challenges. Among them, the country's inability to adequately feed all of its population—a problem known as food insecurity—dominates the list and requires urgent attention of policymakers.

Even though Pakistan is predominantly an agrarian country and possesses sufficient stocks of wheat, rice, and other staples throughout the year—barring periods in which the agricultural system suffers from an exogenous shock, such as a natural disaster, pandemic, or a locust attack—it is a pity that [a whopping 36.9%](#) of Pakistanis are food insecure.

The level of undernourishment is particularly conspicuous among young children in the form of stunting (low height for age) and wasting (low weight for age). According to data released by [The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World \(2017\)](#), the problem of stunting has been tackled rather successfully in the world as only 1 in 4 (i.e., 25%) children now suffer from this affliction. In Pakistan, however, about [4 in 10 \(i.e., 40%\)](#) children (under five) still suffer from stunting, indicating pervasive food insecurity in the country, especially among vulnerable segments such as children, women, the elderly, and low-income people.

Moreover, it is not only undernourishment that threatens Pakistan's food security equation, but also over-nourishment (in the form of obesity and overweightness) and deficiency of essential nutrients such as minerals and vitamins. Indeed, [research](#) shows that a significant number of Pakistan's population has Iron, Zinc, and Vitamin A deficiency, among others. The combination of undernourishment, over-nourishment, and micronutrient deficiency, is often known in the policy community as the 'triple burden of malnutrition', and [reports indicate](#) that this issue is rife in Pakistan.

To add to this, [research](#) shows that almost all of Pakistan's food insecure population also suffers from the malaise of multidimensional poverty. This means that in addition to hunger, this population group has inadequate or almost no access to quality healthcare, education, basic amenities, decent standard of living, and so on.

In fact, lack of access to healthcare, education, and clean water can breed food insecurity in a household/population that is already food secure!

Assume a self-sufficient rural household with enough resources to take care of all its subsistence needs but without adequate access to schools/colleges, hospitals/dispensaries, potable water, sewerage, and so on. This household is food secure for the time being, but will it remain so in the near future? Most likely not!

This is because even though the members of this household have access to sufficient food stocks, lack of education means that they would not possess enough knowledge about the virtues of a balanced diet and how to make their food nutritious despite the decent availability of food. This lack of knowledge can easily create a scenario where the family members either get overweight or miss essential micronutrients in their diet, hence becoming food insecure in either case.

Lack of access to clean drinking water means that members of this household will not be able to digest the food (no matter how balanced or nutritious) properly and get the necessary nutrients so vital for a healthy human body.

Similarly, lack of access to clean toilets and a modern well-functioning sewerage system means that the family members will constantly be at risk of several diseases such as hepatitis, gastroenteritis, diarrhoea, and salmonellosis, all of which severely undermine the health and food security of the household.

In this context, then, it becomes clear that our policymakers need to tackle the issue of food insecurity and multidimensional poverty simultaneously.

Food insecurity primarily exists because of low wage compensation, poorly skilled workers and due to the inefficient food distribution system, even though Pakistan is predominantly a food sovereign nation.

Backwardness in health, education, access to clean water, and sanitation prevails due to misplaced priorities and also because of low public investment in these sectors as Pakistan's non-development budget takes precedence over all other aspects of state and society.

However, it needs to be kept in mind that food insecurity (indirectly) compromises a nation's internal and external security. This is because a nation with food insecure young people will produce feeble and unhealthy soldiers, officers, cops, and firefighters, hence compromising the security of that nation's frontiers.

Similarly, food insecurity weakens a nation's solidarity as more people are concerned with their daily survival than caring for the mighty ideals of a country's security, progress, and national development. It is no wonder that citizens act less patriotically, religiously, and morally when they have an empty stomach and a weak, unhealthy body. Even the second caliph Hazrat Umar (RA), [suspended](#) the punishment of theft in periods of famine or severe food shortages.

It is heartening to know, however, that Pakistan's policymakers, academics, and intellectuals are highlighting the importance of food security within the broader contours of national security. This was demonstrated in the recently held *Islamabad Security Dialogue (ISD)* convened by the National Security Division (NSD) of the Prime Minister's Office.

In fact, the second session of ISD, organized by the Centre for Aerospace & Security Studies (CASS), was completely devoted to the issues of economic security, including food & water security, climate, population challenge, and multidimensional poverty.

Events like the ISD are a testimony to the fact that gone are the days when economists and policymakers had to make competing allocations between guns and butter. In the modern era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, defense is meaningless without a robust national economy, and development is forever vulnerable without an impregnable defense system.

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