

Poverty & Food Security

Domestic Context

Food Insecurity

According to assessments published by the UN World Food Programme, the poorest households in the country now spend over 70 per cent of their income on food. Consequently, their ability to spend on other essential areas such as health, education and housing is severely compromised. About 50 per cent of the child mortality in the country is food-related, and around seven million households are ranked as severely food insecure, i.e. people that consume less than 1,700 kilocalories per day. There are uncounted stories of poverty and deprivation in Pakistan but it takes crimes such as the one committed recently in Lahore to drive home the magnitude and human cost of these issues. On Tuesday a middle-aged rickshaw driver, Akbar, poisoned himself, his wife and three of his six children, resulting in his own death and that of two of his daughters. The family's relatives told the police that Akbar was besieged by financial problems and feared homelessness. It is not difficult to imagine the frustrations that led Akbar to take a step so extreme and so telling of utter desperation. Much is said about the country's plummeting economy and fragile infrastructure but not enough about the manner in which the figures on paper translate to exponentially rising food and job insecurity. The ranks of the newly poor are swelling by the day: people are being laid off in their hundreds, children are being pulled out of school and families are tightening budgets to the extent of compromising on nutritional needs. According to assessments published by the UN World Food Programme, the poorest households in the country now spend over 70 per cent of their income on food. Consequently, their ability to spend on other essential areas such as health, education and housing is severely compromised. About 50 per cent of the child mortality in the country is food-related, and around seven million households are ranked as severely food insecure, i.e. people that consume less than 1,700 kilocalories per day.

This is a frightening situation and one that, even beyond the immense human tragedy, holds long-term consequences. Consider, for example, that food insecurity is one of the factors that convince parents to send their children to madressahs: though blamed for fomenting religious intolerance and extremism, their attraction lies in 'education' accompanied by free meals. Consider too that a malnourished population is an unhealthy population, which translates to even more pressure on a healthcare system that is already collapsing. Then there's the issue of future workforces: what jobs will be available to all the children whose education has been forced to a halt, and how will their children fare? And is this situation not pivotal in terms of the erosion of the citizenry's faith in the state and the government, and in the democratic set-up? The crime Akbar committed should not distract us from the larger crime under way: the state's apparent inability to protect the most vulnerable. If this basic task cannot be fulfilled, the citizenry — whose welfare is the *raison d'être* of government — can be forgiven for questioning the viability of the system.

[Dawn – June 18, 2010]

Poverty Reducing Wheat Use in Pakistan

Wolfgang Herbinger, Country Director of World Food Programme (WFP), has said that poverty in the country and loss in purchasing power of the people resulted in the year-to-year reduction in consumption of wheat in Pakistan by 10%. Wolfgang was speaking at a Media Launch of 'State of Food (In)Security in Pakistan' jointly organised by Sustainable Development Policy Institute, World Food Programme and Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) at National Press Club here on June 2. Dr Abid Qaiyum Suleri, Executive Director, SDPI, conducted the proceedings. Wolfgang said that loss of purchasing power was one of the major factors behind 4 million metric ton carry over stock of wheat this year and it was not because of any surplus or extra production. Nazar Gondal, Federal Minister for Food, Agriculture and Livestock, said that war against terror is having its toll on Pakistan when it faced the problems of internally displaced persons and their reconstruction and rehabilitation. He said we believe in collective solutions and would like to have support of civil society, NGOs and masses. He said that apart from environmental degradations and other issues, drop in investment also marred our efforts to meet the challenge of food insecurity. He said that we want to promote farm mechanisation. He differed with the finding of the report on the number of districts facing food insecurity. He said that the government enhanced wages of labourers and made provision of wheat flour and other products through Utility Stores. He said that we will have to work more for ensuing food security and bringing about positive change in the lives of the people. Dr Abid Suleri said that the results of the report show that food insecurity at the household, district, provinces and country level has become more severe as compared to 2003. Many districts became food insecure while others became extremely food insecure. The food security situation at the household level is rather much severe. He said that 80

out of 131 (61 per cent) districts are food-insecure in Pakistan. He said that in them, 45 districts (34%) are extremely food insecure while this figure was 38 in 2003. In the second category, the number of districts more than doubled in 2008 as compared to 2003.

[The News – June 3, 2010]

Districts Should Prepare Poverty Reduction Plan

Experts called upon the government to empower the districts to plan their own counter poverty and pro-poor projects. Dr Sajjad Akhtar of Pakistan Institute for Trade and Development said that many countries give money to districts to fight poverty and prepare plans for poverty alleviation. The seminar on **“Federal Budget: Pro-Poor Planning and Social Safety Nets”** was organised by Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) in collaboration with the UNDP project of Strengthening Democracy Through Parliamentary Development (SDPD). He called for supporting initiatives at district level and said that provinces did not like to involve districts in this respect but the districts are more close to the masses compared to the Provincial or the federal governments. Shabban Khalid from Ittehad Steel said that generating resources and establishing industries were essential to alleviate poverty. He said that only 1.6 per cent people give tax and half of them were salaried class. He said that tax-to-GDP ratio is only 9.5 per cent and about 70 per cent tax is collected only from 800 tax payers or entities. He said cash distribution, food support, subsidies, public works, micro-financing and scholarships were social safety nets where money transfers from rich to the poor so that they could at least realise their basic necessities in a short term. Dr Abid Suleri of SDPI said that health sector is in the most shocking state in Pakistan even compared to South Asia. Our infant mortality is the highest while average age is lowest. He said that our policies were neither pro-poor nor anti-poor as there was no link between policies. Our middle class which has potential to excel is eroding rapidly. Referring to an SDPI study, he said that poverty was increasing and wheat consumption had reduced due to decline in the purchasing power of the people. The SDPI chief said that the West has unemployment allowance, and we can also have projects like Benazir Bhutto Income Support Programme and Waseela-e-Sehat, etc., even if income is not being generated from them. However, Dr Suleri said that country's 50 per cent population was under-20 and Pakistan needed resources to provide better opportunities to them. He said subsidies provide temporary breathing space but encourage inefficiencies.

[Dawn – June 25, 2010]

Global Context

‘Agriculture Growth Key to Food Security’

India faces a challenge to ensure food security for its fast-growing population of over one billion people, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said on June 19. “We must endeavour to raise our agricultural growth rate from around two per cent per annum to four per cent,” Singh told a convocation ceremony at an agricultural university in the northern Indian state of Uttarakhand. India commands over two per cent of the Earth's land area and about four per cent of its fresh water resources, but feeds about 17 per cent of its population, putting tremendous pressure on natural resources. While the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) has forecast normal rains for 2010, the agricultural sector has recorded the lowest growth in five years, at 0.2 per cent due to widespread drought in 2009. Singh stressed that modern technology had to be used to increase farm yields and called for reforms that will benefit small-scale and marginal farmers.

[Dawn -- June 20, 2010]

Surging Costs Hit Food Security in Poorer Nations

Families from Pakistan to Argentina to Congo are being battered by surging food prices that are dragging more people into poverty, fuelling political tensions and forcing some to give up eating meat, fruit and even tomatoes. With food costing up to 70 per cent of family income in the poorest countries, rising prices are squeezing household budgets and threatening to worsen malnutrition, while inflation stays moderate in the United States and Europe. Majeedan Begum, a mother of five living in Multan, says a bag of flour costs three times what it did two years ago. She can no longer afford meat or fruit. “My domestic budget has been ruined,” said Begum, 35.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation's food price index – which includes grains, meat, dairy and other items in 90 countries – was up 22 per cent in March from a year earlier though still below 2008 levels. In some Asian markets, rice and wheat prices are 20 to 70 per cent above 2008 levels, it says. Many governments blame dry weather and high fuel costs but critics in countries such as India, Argentina and Egypt say misguided policies are making shortages worse and collusion by suppliers might be pushing up prices. No single factor explains the inflation gap between developing and developed countries but poorer economies are more vulnerable to an array of problems that can push up prices, and many are cropping up this year. Farmers with less land and irrigation are hit harder by drought and floods. Civil war and other conflicts can disrupt supplies. Prices in import-dependent economies spike up when the local currency weakens, as Pakistan's rupee has this year. Costs also have been pushed up by a

rebound in global commodity prices, especially for soy destined for Asian consumption. That has prompted a shift in Argentina and elsewhere to produce more for export, which has led to local shortages of beef and other food. The global financial crisis hurt food production in some countries by making it harder for farmers to get credit for seed and supplies. In Mauritania in West Africa, rice prices doubled over the first three months of the year, according to the World Food Programme. Over the same period, the price of corn rose 59 per cent in Zimbabwe and 57 per cent in neighbouring Mozambique. In Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mami Monga pays \$25 for a box of fish that cost \$10 a year ago. The price of a 25kg bag of rice has doubled to \$30. "Today I am obliged to buy half the food I used to buy mid-last year," said Mami, a mother of five. Kinshasa shopkeeper Abedi Patelli said prices increase when the exchange rate of Congo's currency falls. "But when our currency improves against the US dollar, prices don't fall," he said. "They remain steady."

The FAO says the double blow of the global recession and high food prices has pushed 100 million people into poverty. In Egypt, a 50 per cent jump in meat prices in recent weeks has helped fuel demonstrations outside parliament over wages and other economic issues.

[Dawn – June 7, 2010]

Asia leads world with sharp drop in poverty

The sharpest reductions in poverty worldwide continue to be recorded in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, where the Millennium Development Goals target of halving extreme poverty has already been met, while most of Southern Asia is in danger of missing the target, says a United Nations progress report released on June 24. The percentage of people living on less than \$1.25 a day in Eastern Asia dropped from 60 per cent in 1990 to just 16 per cent in 2005, and from 39 to 19 percent in South-Eastern Asia. Poverty rates in China are expected to fall to around 5 percent by 2015. While India is expected to reduce its poverty rate from 51 per cent in 1990 to 24 percent in 2015 – slashing its number of extremely poor by 188 million – progress in the rest of Southern Asia was slow and not sufficient to cut poverty in half by the 2015 target date, the "Millennium Development Goals Report 2010" finds.

Southern Asia also has a large percentage of people in so-called vulnerable employment, characterised by inadequate earnings, substandard working conditions and a lack of formal work arrangements and benefits. With 77 percent of people employed as either own-account or unpaid family workers, Southern Asia has the second-largest rate of vulnerable employment among all regions, next to sub-Saharan Africa. Slow progress against hunger: In Eastern Asia, after a striking drop in the prevalence of hunger in the 1990s, the rate of malnourishment has stalled at 10 percent between 2000 and 2007. South-Eastern Asia, which was already close to the target for cutting the hunger rate in half against 1990 levels, made additional progress – but not as rapid as its rate of poverty reduction. In Southern Asia, the prevalence of hunger actually increased between 2000-2002 and 2005-2007, from 20 to 21 percent. Southern Asia has the highest rate of child malnutrition in the world, according to the report, with 46 percent of children younger than five years underweight in 2008, down a negligible 5 percentage points from 51 percent in 1990. Malnutrition in children is often linked to both a lack of quality food and inadequate water and sanitation services, which lead to frequent diarrheal diseases. In Southern Asia, feeding practices are poor, and nearly two-thirds of the population lacks access to improved sanitation, such as toilets or latrines, with almost half practicing open defecation – the highest rate among all regions.

In Eastern Asia, child malnutrition was reduced to 7 percent of children in 2008 – well below half of its 1990 level – and South-Eastern Asia is on track to meet the Millennium Development Goals target by 2015.

A different picture emerges for child mortality, where, despite some progress in all three sub-regions, Asia is not on track to meet the target by 2015. Most progress was made in Southern Asia, where the number of child deaths per 1,000 live births dropped from 121 in 1990 to 74 in 2008. Uneven progress: Southern Asia also made strong progress on access to primary education, according to the report. The sub-region reached 90 percent enrolment in 2008, up from 79 percent in 1999, and is on track to meet the target of universal primary education by 2015. In Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, however, although school enrolment has always been relatively high, there was little progress since 1999 and, if trends continue, the two sub-regions will not meet the target by 2015.

With regard to gender equality, progress has also been uneven. According to the report, girls in Southern Asia have been catching up in primary education, but still lag behind boys in secondary and tertiary education, with 87 and 76 girls per 100 boys enrolled, respectively, in 2008. In Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, the gender gap has been closed at all three levels, with as many girls as boys enrolled in school. In Southern Asia, gender inequality in education is mirrored by inequality in the labour market, the report notes. Only 20 percent of those employed outside agriculture are women. And only 9 percent of senior or managerial positions are held by women – the lowest percentage among all regions. Progress was made in political participation, with the proportion of parliamentary seats held by women reaching 18 per cent in 2010, up from only 7 per cent in 2000 in Southern Asia.

At a September UN summit, world leaders will seek agreement on an action agenda to build on successes and close the gaps in achieving all the MDGs by the target year of 2015.

[Daily Times – June 25, 2010]