

Before Covid-19 and Now: Roots of Food Crisis in Pakistan

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Millions of Pakistanis have been pushed into hunger with the COVID-19 lockdown. The first cases of COVID-19 began to be diagnosed in Pakistan in the midst of a two-year assault on the country's economy by the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government. Prime Minister Imran Khan, whose tenure had already been responsible for over a million jobs lost across the country[1], began to play the populist card: Pakistan's poor cannot afford a lockdown.

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Cheap food under attack

This was not the line that the government took when it enforced a deliberate contraction of the country's economy immediately after taking power. Alongside bringing the real GDP down by 30 percent in a single year and handing over control of fiscal policies to the IMF's man in Egypt, the PTI government began an assault on cheap food in the country.

Only months after taking power, in December 2018, the PTI government announced a plan to close 1,000 Utility Stores across the country.[2] In particular, it is the assault on Utility Stores that shows why the state is unable to step in to provide food to the most impoverished members of society amidst the COVID-19 lockdown. Created in the early 1970s, Utility Stores played a crucial role in maintaining cheap food supplies to the country's growing population amidst mass rural displacement that came after the Green Revolution. Since the announcement of the closure of Utility Stores, its employees have remained locked in the battle for survival. While the Minister for Planning, Asad Umar, was announcing ways for the public to order online deliveries from Utility Stores, all Utility Stores across the country went on strike on April 24, despite the lockdown, to continue their struggle for unpaid wages and the future of cheap food for Pakistan's poorest citizens.

In the next fiscal year the government allowed the consumer price of wheat to begin spiraling upwards,[3] culminating in the high wheat and sugar prices of January. Months of profiteering from essential commodities culminated in a surprisingly candid inquiry report by the Federal

Investigation Agency, which held that key government officials were beneficiaries of the price manipulation. Amongst those named are Minister of Food Security, Khusro Bakhtiar, head of the PM's Agricultural Emergency committee, Jehangir Tareen, and member of the ruling alliance, Moonis Elahi.[4] The named agro-industrial capitalists, who control agro-processing and storage to the detriment of wheat and sugarcane growers, were able to benefit by lobbying for a subsidy for sugar and wheat exports, while also benefiting from the resulting high domestic prices of processed sugar and wheat by creating an artificial shortage in these essential food items across the country. The report confirms that wheat prices spiked despite 21 million metric tonnes of wheat being present in storage.

Hunger and malnutrition before COVID-19

The PTI government's dual attack on cheap food is the context in which the COVID-19 lockdown began. With the public distribution system under threat and prices of essential food items spiraling out of control, millions of unemployed workers have been left to fend for themselves. It is clear that the government's policies were bent towards crippling the already tense balance in Pakistan's food system.

The irony that PM Imran Khan chose to talk in his inaugural address about the malaise of malnutrition remains a serious contradiction to the government's actual policies. Instead of targeting the structural causes of impoverishment and malnutrition, Khan announced a 'domestic poultry' plan. Somehow domestic poultry was supposed to step in while food prices increased by at least 20 percent in a single year.[5] The failed policy continued to deliberately misunderstand why millions continue to go hungry across the country.

The National Nutrition Survey conducted in 2018[6] shows that one in five Pakistanis faces severe hunger. The World Food Programme in 2017 estimated that 68 percent of families in Pakistan cannot afford a diet that is adequate from a nutritional point of view. This is in addition to the fact that one in five households in the country has experienced external shocks, such as floods, drought and displacement, which have severely affected their annual food intake.[7] Around two-thirds of households in the country suffer from malnutrition, with there being a sharp difference in child stunting in rural areas at around 43 percent compared to 34 percent in urban areas.

Why Pakistan's food system does not work

Such remarkably dire numbers are not new to Pakistan. The egalitarian myth of 'peasant agriculture' ushered in by British colonial rule did not correspond to a rural countryside shaped by landlords, tenants, exploited small farmers and a large mass of agricultural labourers. Net increases in grain production in colonial agrarian settlements in the Indus and Peshawar valleys were offset by large landholdings, high agrarian taxes, a highly unequal rural society, and export-oriented agrarian markets. Food producers continued to go hungry amongst the lush green fields of colonial agrarian settlements.

These colonial agrarian settlements became the ground on which the national food system of Pakistan was built. The new state continued to follow the same model of agrarian expansion as new agrarian frontiers were opened up in Sindh, Balochistan and the Seraiki Wasaib in the 1960s. Many still continue to think of the development of 'national agriculture' in the 1950s and 60s along this model successful in solving the ongoing food shortages across the country. However, even the doubling of grain yields in the post-Green Revolution period did little for most of the country's rural

and (growing) urban, labouring poor.[8]

While small and large food producers remained reliant on agrarian markets for at least a century and a half, the post-Green Revolution period was marked by a remarkable increase in market dependency for a range of agrarian inputs, including seeds, fertilizers, machinery and pesticides. The Green Revolution set off a process of de-peasantisation through evictions and mechanisation, which led to the loss of land and base subsistence for millions across the country.[9] The result was the creation of a large surplus population, producing a crisis that was resolved through state-supported mass migration to the Gulf and incorporation, within growing urban populations, of the poor into menial jobs in Pakistan. Already food insecure populations were left even more food insecure.

COVID-19 hits the working class

The fact remains that Pakistan's food system does not work and has only further deteriorated under the coronavirus crisis. The large surplus populations expelled from rural life found a semblance of refuge in informal sector employment. Even before the COVID-19 lockdown was announced, major textile factories began factory closures- a ripple effect of the collapse of the European market. Factories continue their practice of enforcing long-standing anti-union policies and employing labour without contracts, foreboding a wider sectoral collapse and mass unemployment. The closure of textile factories means the closure of all forms of processing, all the way down to power loom workers, cotton farmers and cotton pickers. With the cotton plantation starting in April, we should prepare for another crash in cotton cultivation as farmers expect low demand. This in turn will translate into a major decrease in on-farm labour hiring during the cotton harvest starting in the autumn.

The urban proletariat and agricultural workers are united in their deepening misery due to the collapse of the cotton-textile chain. The story is the same across all economic sectors. With many so-called formal workers being put out of work, it would not be outlandish to suggest that most of Pakistan's 73.3 percent of the informal labour force has been left without a source of income. The situation in urban centres is desperate, and the sight of the urban working class on the streets has driven fear into the hearts of the well-to-do professional and elite classes.

Many remember the food riots of 2008 across Pakistan. The emergence of such a situation once again is not a remote possibility, with the food supply for the upper middle and elite classes in Pakistan remaining largely undisrupted while the urban poor are staring starvation in the face. Grocery stores that supply the middle and elite classes have continued to remain open, while informal food vendors on carts, which supply the urban poor, have been unable to operate freely across the country due to the mobility restrictions. Instances of food looting have also begun to rise[10] as the state continues to play virtually no role in alleviating the misery of those starving amidst the pandemic. While its security apparatus has enforced lockdowns by force[11], the Pakistani state is playing a limited role in food distribution to the most vulnerable populations.

COVID-19 hits the farmer

Agriculture has arguably been the worst hit sector in the economy, and remains the most crucial requirement for ensuring the population continues to be fed and that industries have labour to function. The agricultural sector is responsible for a significant portion of the income of over half of Pakistan's population[12], a significant portion of industrial inputs and almost all of the country's

food supply.

Pakistan has already been in the midst of an agrarian crisis for over a decade, with the previous two governments declaring an 'Agricultural Emergency' in the country. Agriculture has suffered amidst a longstanding ecological crisis that goes at least as far back as the colonial agrarian settlement process. This is a crisis that has only intensified. More crucial has been the disruption of whatever limited forms of subsistence crop production existed over the last century and a half. The situation has become even more acute in the last two decades as the prices of agricultural inputs have continued to rise far beyond meagre increases in the price of crops.

This dire situation is the context in which Pakistan's agricultural producers entered the COVID-19 lockdown. The complete shutdown of agricultural trading markets, especially those that purchase outputs from farmers, has led to significant losses for farmers. With the movement of goods suspended, crops ready for harvest, including grain, have been left to rot in the fields.[13] Not only does this translate into immediate losses for farmers, but it means that Pakistan's traditional bumper wheat stock is no longer likely to be available. Instead, once the lockdown-enforced shortages are over, the country will have to prepare for at least another year of shortages in essential grains. More expensive-to-produce vegetables have been left to perish in the fields, which, beyond the losses to farmers, have also led to a major reduction in the diversity of food available to rural and urban populations.[14]

While the shortfall in supply of food to major markets could have been expected to increase the price of essential food items, the situation has been found to be the inverse. The collapse in demand through joblessness and the closure of all kinds of food sellers has brought the price of many food items to rock bottom. Even pre-coronavirus, small farmers across Pakistan received lower prices due to their limited ability to transport their produce from farm to market. In lockdown conditions, the entire network of agricultural trade found itself in limbo.[15] For the food traders continuing to operate, this has opened a space for further exploiting small farmers by paying them far below the price the food items will be sold for in the market. Reports continue to emerge of multinational companies buying milk from farmers at one-third of the normal purchase price, while continuing to supply milk to urban centres at the same rates as before.

Amongst food producers at risk of collapse is commercial poultry, which relies on the unsustainable mass production of chickens for the market. With spiking coronavirus cases and deaths amongst meatpackers globally, the unsafe working conditions of butchers and meatpackers is evident. Beyond unsafe working conditions, workers along these supply chains are suffering due to the crisis. In Pakistan, the lockdown brought the price of chicken in the market down from over Rs250 per kg to Rs90 per kg, while demand has continued to shrink. Reports indicate that hatcheries let chicks die and destroyed eggs with poultry farms unwilling to take in new supplies.[16] Industrial meat production continues to be particularly vulnerable to pandemics; millions of birds had to be culled in 2007 due to the spread of bird flu.[17] While industrial meat farming in Pakistan continues to suffer from the effects of the global COVID-19 pandemic, it also remains acutely vulnerable to new pandemics.

The forced return home of millions of unemployed workers has created surplus labour in the countryside for the first time in decades. Farmers who often complain of labour shortages during harvest seasons face a unique season where labour is available, but agricultural markets are more difficult to access.[18] They have no incentive to harvest their crops with food demand collapsing. One could take the romantic view that this mass return of urban labour signifies that the so-called 'moral economy' of the village is the last refuge of the poor, where there will somehow be subsistence in the villages for the returning landless population. But the reality is that surplus labour in villages is unlikely to be fed if food crops are not harvested and commercial crops are not

sold. While there is a theoretical possibility of some form of solidarity economy emerging, as has been seen with reports of small-scale revival of barter practices in parts of India, there are significant barriers to such practices emerging in a context where agricultural inputs and labour are increasingly monetised out of necessity. The reality is that most rural households, including small and middle peasants, are net buyers of food. This means that while cultivators have access to some non-marketised food, a range of factors such as the choice of crops, size of landholdings, amount of debt incurred, and household livestock are critical in shaping the ability of particular farmers to withstand the crisis.

A permanent ecological pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic has intensified the ecological 'pandemic' that has been brewing in Pakistan's agriculture since the mid-20th century. Pakistan's agricultural system is not just vulnerable due to high market dependency; it has been suffering due to the growing ecological crisis in the mode of agrarian production in the country. There is little doubt that this has to do with the agro-industrial mode of agrarian production that has depleted soil and water tables across the country, reduced biodiversity, promoted monocultures, and spreads poison in the form of herbicides, pesticides and chemical fertilizers across the rural landscape. The Green Revolution fundamentally altered the relationship of farmers and peasants to land and livestock, where the logic of productivity supersedes the logic of sustainability. Major crops, such as cotton, continue to suffer bouts of disease and pest infestations, which have become increasingly intense since the move to BT cotton.[19]

The ecological threat to agriculture has become more severe due to external changes, such as changing weather patterns and global locust swarms. Unseasonal rains continue to severely damage wheat harvest season after season. Once again, the standing wheat crop is set to be damaged by severe off-season rains. This is to say nothing of the cycles of floods and droughts that continue to impact large parts of the country every year. The major locust attacks sweeping from southern Punjab to Sindh last year have returned once again[20] and will continue to return as decades of pesticide use destroyed entire populations of insect-eating birds and animals. Natural resistance to pests has broken down, while chemical pesticides remain limited in their ability to counter new pest and disease infestations.

A food system on the brink of collapse

The return of surplus populations to rural Pakistan is only adding more mouths to feed in a food system that has not worked for food producers, let alone the rest of the country's population. The situation is reminiscent of Amartya Sen's work confirming that major famines occurred in times of bulk production due to market failures. The World Food Programme recently issued apocalyptic warnings of a famine of 'biblical proportions'. The prospects for economic recovery in the post-COVID-19 situation are already bleak in a global sense. In this context, Pakistan's truncated economy faces particularly significant challenges following two years of the PTI-IMF austerity governance in the country.

Austerity-led economic compression will combine with the expected post-pandemic compression to create mass joblessness. The ability of major export-dependent industrial sectors to recover depends on quick demand recovery in Europe, which is unlikely to be the case as jobs shrink and wages are compressed globally once the COVID-19 lockdowns come to a close. The inability of industries to recover would have a severe impact on agriculture, where both the textile and leather sectors are

crucial spaces for agrarian producers to sell their products. Moreover, there is a serious question over whether workers, even those on highly exploitative informal contracts, will be able to get back to work if industries and businesses do not reopen.

This, combined with the short-term and long-term losses suffered by both small peasant and larger capitalist producers, is already eroding whatever resilience access to cultivable land provides them. Market dependence is a poisoned chalice for small farmers in the best of times. The COVID-19 lockdowns mean crop surpluses are either stuck in the fields or being sold at severely truncated prices. The percentage of the wheat crop that ends up being harvested in Pakistan will provide us clues regarding whether the World Food Programme's apocalyptic predictions of famine will come true. It is clear, however, that the risks are severe in a food system that has produced hunger and malnutrition across the rural-urban spectrum even when it was supposed to be working.

Is there a path out of this?

There are two tendencies of how to emerge out of this situation. Mainstream solutions propose more of the same failed approach. Such measures continue to suggest the intensification of processes that are increasing the vulnerability of food producers. Proposals include increasing market integration for farmers, promoting building of cold storage and promoting the growing of more commercial crops to serve the global agro-industrial agenda.[21] Such solutions continue to replicate the hubris by the private sector, World Trade Organisation and a motley crew of so-called 'free trade' supporting countries of the global North that benefit from the dumping of grains and surplus milk in the global South and importing cheap food from the South.[22]

These ideas are out of place in a time when many countries around the world are looking to 're-nationalise' their food systems. It is clear that when Europe closed borders to all during the COVID-19 lockdown, it continued to protect its agriculture through the import of Eastern European agricultural labour. It is clear that the COVID-19 lockdown has exposed the disastrous state of neoliberal agro-industrial food systems. This is a food system that not only fails to protect the social, economic, and political rights of those involved in agriculture, it has failed to fulfill its core task: providing food to the world's population.

The collapse of the globalised food system in the face of COVID-19 has forced a return of 'food nationalism'.[23] There are important lessons to be drawn from the last era of food nationalism that came out of the anti-colonial movements of the 1950s and '60s. The key question now, as was the key question then, is whose voices will shape the future of our food systems? In the 1960s, the heyday of peasant movements across the formerly colonised world, agronomists from the anti-communist North won the debate through the mechanisms of World Bank loans and the programmes designed by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation. Newly independent countries that had been looted by their colonisers were too reliant on external loans and external expertise to be able to chart a path that could break the chains of the neo-colonial networks of global trade. Green Revolutions were implemented, which for a time seemed to reward farmers with more produce and states, struggling to produce enough food for their own populations, with food surpluses. This short-term boom was swiftly followed by the collapse of the international price of primary agricultural commodities, which was and remains controlled in the global North. Food nationalism was dead, as trade deficits were filled with international debts and forced liberalisation of economies of the global South via the IMF in the 1990s.

COVID-19's impact on food systems has raised serious questions about 'food nationalism,' in particular the ability of the state to deliver the end of hunger. As noted, the current crisis has been

made more severe by the Pakistani government's own assault on cheap food. Moreover, the disruptions in food supplies moving from farm-to-market and market-to-consumer have occurred within the national economic borders. Pakistan's national food systems continue to suffer from the assault of austerity and profiteering. While the failure of the state to provide food to all within its borders is not always bound to repeat itself, it is clear that the current state formation as well as the national food system are unable to feed the most vulnerable populations in the country. Moreover, the market dependence of farmers and peasants has meant that crops are being wasted, rather than distributed among the mass surplus labour populations that have returned to the villages. While there might still be some food that reaches these workers, unemployed urban workers have been forced to rely on charity and begging to make ends meet.

The mass return to the rural areas raises serious questions about the binary relationship between urban and rural space that has traditionally underpinned how we think about food systems. The working class has long oscillated between these two spaces in order to secure the means of its reproduction. Any path forward must be oriented toward securing a path for the reproduction of workers in both urban and rural spaces. While urban habitations might not be able to become self-sustaining in food supply, urban planners would do well to incorporate provisions for urban farms within working class settlements. The rural world needs to be transformed on the basis of two principles: land redistribution and localisation. One cannot operate without the other if we are to build a food system that can feed our population - especially in times of crisis.

Those charting a path to eliminate hunger today face two choices: to follow the failed policies of the 'globalisation of food' lobby or to heed the voice of the global 'food sovereignty' movement anchored in the peasant movements of our age. La Via Campesina South Asia, which brings together over twenty major peasant movements in the region, is one of the voices on the ground that has offered detailed proposals on how to mitigate the immediate impact of the COVID-19 lockdown and principles to transform our food system to protect peasants and workers beyond the current crisis.[24]

It is clear that the path to agrarian reform must be charted on a new basis, with some principles from the peasant movements that were prematurely abandoned in the 1970s, and some from the peasant movements of our age. We must revive the slogan of 'Land to the People' in a time in which hundreds of millions of workers have returned to their villages to stare mass hunger in the face due to the absence of land ownership. It is also time to build a new peasant-worker solidarity, based on the recognition of the shared relationship between land, labour and food that the lockdown has reminded us is the beating heart of our food system. We must look to the principles of peasant agroecology[25] for a new ecological principle to organise agrarian production that can avoid ecological catastrophe in our agricultural systems. Finally, solidarity must replace profit as the principle that organises our food systems and our economy if we are to avoid mass hunger.

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