

Weekend Read | Edition 57

Pakistan's Food Safety Challenge: Bridging Abundance and Insecurity

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Despite High Agricultural Output*

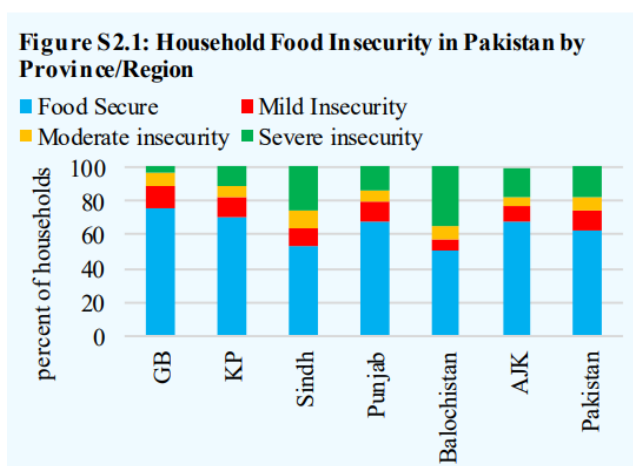


Pakistan's Food Safety Challenge: Bridging Abundance and Insecurity

Over One-Third of Pakistanis Face Food Insecurity Despite High Agricultural Output

World Food Safety Day, observed globally on June 7, serves as a critical reminder of the need to prevent, detect, and manage foodborne risks. These efforts contribute not only to human health but also to broader domains including food security, economic stability, market access, and sustainable development. For Pakistan—a country with a population exceeding 241 million—the relevance of this observance is both urgent and profound. Despite being agriculturally productive and largely self-sufficient in major staples, Pakistan faces significant challenges in ensuring food safety and security for its entire population.

According to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the concept of food security is flexible, but is widely believed to “exist when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”



Source: National Nutritional Survey 2018; Ministry of Health and UNESCO

Pakistan stands among the top global producers of several key agricultural commodities, ranking 8th in wheat production, 10th in rice, 5th in sugarcane, and 4th in milk production, according to the State Bank of Pakistan¹. These achievements underscore the country's inherent agricultural potential. However, this productivity does not translate into universal food security. According to the National Nutritional Survey (2018) conducted by the Ministry of Health and UNICEF, only 63.1 percent of Pakistani households are food secure. The remaining 36.9 percent experience varying degrees of food insecurity, with 18.3 percent facing severe food insecurity. This discrepancy between agricultural output and household-level food security illustrates the systemic issues in food distribution, affordability, and access, and it raises critical questions about the governance and structural efficacy of the national food system.

¹ <https://www.sbp.org.pk/reports/quarterly/fy19/Third/Special-Section-2.pdf>

From a nutritional standpoint, the situation is no less concerning. Data from the World Health Organization² and the National Nutrition Survey of 2011 paints a grim picture of public health. The Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM) rate—or wasting—increased from 13 percent in 2001 to 15.1 percent in 2011, indicating a worsening trend in child health. Rural areas were disproportionately affected, with a wasting rate of 16.1 percent compared to 12.6 percent in urban areas. More than 30 percent of children were reported to be underweight, and an alarming 44 percent were stunted—a condition that has long-term implications on physical and cognitive development. The burden is not limited to children; 49 percent of women were found to be moderately anemic. Additionally, over half of children under five are anemic, and 39 percent are zinc deficient, suggesting widespread micronutrient deficiencies that are symptomatic of poor dietary diversity and insufficient public health interventions.

According to the World Food Programme³, approximately 20.7 percent of Pakistan's population is undernourished. This places Pakistan in a critical category on the Global Hunger Index, where it ranked 109th out of 127 countries in 2024. Such a low ranking reflects the scale and complexity of hunger and malnutrition in the country and indicates an urgent need for comprehensive policy responses and institutional reform.

Table S2.1: Indicators of Food Security

Group	Variables	Unit	Year	World	Lower-middle income	Pakistan
Availability	Avg. dietary energy supply adequacy	percent	2015-17	120	113	108
	Average value of food production	\$ per capita	2014-16	313	210	196
	Average protein supply	gr/caput/day	2011-13	80	55	74
	Average fat supply	gr/caput/day	2011-13	79	64	64
Access	GDP per capita (PPP)	const. 2011\$	2016	15080.4	6298.5	4857.2
	Prevalence of undernourishment	percent	2015-17	10.8	13.9	20.5
	Share of food expenditure of poor	percent	2015-16			48.52
	% of population undernourished	percent	2017	10.6	13.7	20.1
Stability	Cereal import dependency ratio	percent	2011-13	0.9	-1.5	-17.3
	% arable land equipped for irrigation	percent	2013-15	23.3	32.8	66.3
	Food imports / total exports	percent	2011-13	5	9	16
	Political stability and absence of violence/terrorism	Index	2016			-2.47
	Per capita food prod. variability	Const.2004-06	2016	2200	3600	2500
	Per capita food supply variability	kcal/caput/day	2013	6	18	21
Utilization	People using at least basic drinking water services	percent	2015	88.5		88.5
	People using safely managed drinking water services	percent	2015	71.2		35.6
	People using at least basic sanitation	percent	2015	68.0		58.3
	Children under 5 years of age affected by wasting	percent	2012			10.5
	Children under 5 years of age who are stunted	percent	2012	24.9		45.0
	Prevalence of anemia among women (15-49 years)	percent	2016	32.8		52.1

Source: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations⁴

The relationship between food safety and food security is also worth emphasizing. Unsafe food compromises the nutritional value of food consumed and can lead to foodborne

² <https://www.emro.who.int/pak/programmes/nutrition-and-food-safety.html>

³ <https://www.wfp.org/countries/pakistan>

⁴ <https://www.fao.org/about/who-we-are/departments/statistics-division>

illnesses, thereby exacerbating existing health vulnerabilities in malnourished populations. It can also diminish consumer trust in agricultural and food products, undermine economic productivity, and restrict market access—both domestic and international. Therefore, food safety is not merely a technical issue but a critical public health and economic priority.

Efforts by the Government of Pakistan to address these issues have included high-level engagements, such as the Federal Minister for National Food Security and Research Rana Tanveer Hussain's meeting on certified seed availability. The availability of certified seeds is a key determinant of crop yields and food quality, directly affecting food security outcomes. Similarly, his discussion with Nestlé regarding tax reductions on infant milk powder signals a focus on addressing infant nutrition through policy-level interventions. While these steps are commendable, they must be part of a larger, coordinated national strategy that aligns agricultural productivity with nutrition-sensitive food policies and robust food safety standards.

In light of World Food Safety Day, it is imperative for Pakistan to strengthen its institutional capacity to monitor food safety and enhance inter-agency coordination between health, agriculture, and trade sectors. Developing resilient food systems that ensure access to safe, nutritious, and affordable food for all segments of the population must be a national priority. Equally important is the need to improve nutrition awareness, expand food fortification initiatives, and invest in rural infrastructure to bridge the urban-rural disparities in food and nutrition security.

While Pakistan demonstrates remarkable agricultural capacity, the country's persistent issues with food insecurity, malnutrition, and food safety demand urgent and sustained attention. Observing World Food Safety Day is not only an opportunity for reflection but also a call to action—to implement evidence-based policies, mobilize resources, and reaffirm commitments toward a future where every citizen has access to safe and nutritious food, every day of the year.



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