

## **Nutrition is a Challenge in Itself**

### ***Is Agriculture Still Relevant for Nutrition?***

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Agriculture was once seen as the base of a well-fed, secure and healthy population. National sovereignty was discussed in terms of a country's ability to feed its population using its own resources. Even after decades of official neglect the sector continues to enjoy unquestioned symbolism and no image of national prosperity and well-being seems complete without a picture of a golden wheat field. But is agriculture still relevant for nutrition in Pakistan? The country has among the worst nutrition statistics in the world, with two out of every five children suffering from chronic malnutrition and half of all women considered anaemic. And there have been no improvements despite periods of economic and agricultural growth.

Research that we are currently undertaking as part of the research programme Leveraging Agriculture for Nutrition in South Asia (LANSA) suggests that agriculture is still relevant to improving nutrition, but not in the way that most people think.

#### **Is agriculture important as an economic sector?**

The contribution of agriculture to the GDP has declined to under a quarter in Pakistan, but the sector still employs 45 per cent of the labour force. There have, however, been changes to the composition of the agricultural workforce. As Table 1 shows, proportion of the male workforce employed in agriculture has been declining over the years but agriculture remains the largest employer of women workers and women now represent almost two-fifths of the agricultural labour force.

Table 1: Labour force employed in agriculture, by sex

	Male	Female
1999 – 00	43.4	73.7
2003 – 04	37.0	66.6
2007 – 08	35.3	73.8
2010 - 11	34.7	74.2

Source: Pakistan Employment Trends, 2011

#### **Is agriculture growing and does that help?**

In the 1980s agricultural growth was close to overall GDP growth rates. From the 1990s onwards agricultural growth dipped well below GDP growth and this remained the case till the late 2000s, when agricultural growth experienced a turnaround. World prices and national policies were partly responsible for this rebound. The government is an influential player in the wheat market, and the price at which it purchases from producers has a big impact on farmer incomes. In the past, the government kept procurement prices low to cushion consumers. However, the government's ability to shield the local market from global forces has eroded as agricultural products are smuggled to neighbouring countries at global prices.

In 2008 the National Task Force on Food Security, formed as a result of the wheat crisis, recognised these market conditions and changed the objective of wheat pricing to ensure price stability and prevent shortages by creating parity between prices paid to farmers with global market prices. This policy change was partly responsible for boosting the national wheat output. This episode shows that the conventional view that agricultural growth will directly lead to a better fed and healthier population no longer holds, if it ever did. A policy that led to growth in food output and to higher income for farmers could not, by itself, guarantee that the food reached all those who needed it the most.

### **Do farmers eat better due to agricultural growth?**

Even if policies leading to agricultural growth may not directly benefit poor urban consumers, and that other measures might be needed to protect them, do these policies at least improve rural nutrition? The most direct connection between agriculture and nutrition is that agriculture is a source of food especially for agricultural households. Since many rural households consume the food that they produce, increasing food output should surely allow them to eat better. There is evidence that land-owning agricultural households consume more calories on average than those who do not own land. But almost half of rural households in Pakistan are landless, and as Table 2 shows about thirty per cent own less than 5 acres of land.

Table 2

Size of Holding (in acres)	Per cent of rural households	Per cent of owned area
0 (landless)	52	
Under 1.0	6	1
1.0 - 2.5	13	5
2.5 - 5.0	10	9
5.0 - 12.5	12	24
12.5 - 50	6	32
Above 50	1	30

Source: Authors' calculations based on Agriculture Census 2000 and Population Census 1998

Land ownership in Pakistan is highly skewed as 72 per cent of rural households own only 6 per cent of the total area compared to the top 1 per cent who has ownership of 30 per cent of agricultural land holdings. Since some of the landless and smallholders rent in land from larger landowners, families other than those who own land have some access to farming. But then there are the agricultural labourers who make up around a sixth of the agricultural workforce. They constitute the poorest class in agriculture and benefit from agricultural growth only if it leads to a rise in their wages. Agricultural growth can thus lead to increases in the cash and food earnings of poor rural families especially women.

### **Is food consumption enough for nutrition?**

In fact, nutritional outcomes are driven by a range of factors including consumption of nutritious food, access to health, water, sanitation and hygiene, education, knowledge about healthy practices,

and pro-nutrition behaviour such as breastfeeding of infants. The availability of food is an important component of what accounts for good nutrition but it is one among many. Many of these factors have little to do directly with agriculture. It is true, of course, that higher rural incomes can lead to pro-nutrition choices along many dimensions. For example, our research has shown that the value of dietary diversity is well understood even by those who are constrained by poverty and are subsisting on bread alone. When asked what they would do with additional income, these families list the nutritious foods they would purchase for their children and the health care measure they would take. For a large proportion of the population even affording soap for everyday washing of hands by all family members many times a day feels like a challenge.

But perhaps more importantly, it is widely known due the work of world-renowned economists such as Jean Dreze and the Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen that a lot of the non-food factors have to do with the outreach and quality of public goods and services. Surely these issues are beyond the remit of agriculture.

### **Who cares and does it matter?**

What is less well-acknowledged is that private incomes and public action can only help if complemented by the provision of care within the household. The amount of time and effort that children receive from adults determines how well any improvements in food availability are utilised, or how promptly health support is sought. Care is largely unacknowledged because it is almost entirely performed by women, and it is assumed by policy-makers and the wider population alike that women will be at hand to provide care. Acknowledgement might become the first step towards the long journey to challenging this patriarchal norm.

This assumption is being challenged progressively by feminist critics who argue not only for the recognition of women's work in the economy but also the work they do within the household to look after children and others. This assumption is also being challenged now by the way in which the agricultural workforce appears to be changing. The increasing reliance of the sector on women workers means that agriculture may now be drawing on one of the most important resources that might contribute to nutrition improvement.

### **Agriculture still matters, perhaps more than before**

Women's work in farming, not only in cotton-picking, wheat harvesting, dairy production and vegetable processing is as essential for the national economy as it is for the economies of the poor labouring families which these women sustain. An important question is who is paying the price? Available evidence from India suggests that the cost to women's own health and that of their children becomes visible through adverse nutrition statistics. Our own research will try to uncover if the same is the case in Pakistan, and what might be done about it. Perhaps it is no coincidence that some of the regions with the worst statistics for women and children's nutrition are those whose prosperous farm sectors rely the most on women's work.

Agriculture, therefore, still has an important role to play in improving nutrition in Pakistan. It is already a source of income for women who are known to make pro-nutrition choices in how

household resources are spent. Women will not, of course, stop working in farming and it would be a grave injustice to argue that they ought to continue carrying the burden of work and care. But agricultural policies can become more sensitive to concerns of women, and by so doing will become more sensitive to nutrition. We can and should use existing support programmes such as the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) and the Sindh women's land grants scheme to increase options for women who need the cash to care for their children, and are left trying to maintain a precarious balance between earning an income and having the time and energy to look after themselves and their children.

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