

Post-flood food crisis | The Express Tribune

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The recent floods have been turned into a worst humanitarian catastrophe of the decade, with substantial human and economic losses. Around 33 million people have been displaced, with nearly 1,550 people losing their lives and more than 12,000 having been injured. Also, there has been a considerable economic loss in terms of damages to property and infrastructure. The loss to agriculture and livestock — especially amid soaring global food prices — must be enough to alert the authorities about a looming food crisis.

Pakistan ranks 92nd out of 116 countries on the Global Hunger Index. We have been facing chronic food insecurity, with appalling implications for nutrition and health of children. Approximately 43% of Pakistanis are confronted with food insecurity, 18% of whom are acutely insecure, as estimated by the World Food Programme (WFP). The incidence is twice as high among the rural population, with three out of five households being food-insecure. Similar is the case with malnutrition among children. We have 82% of children who are deprived of a meal when they need one, as shown in a recent WFP survey. Moreover, 18% of children under five suffer from acute malnutrition and 40% in the same age group suffer from stunted growth. According to WFP, affordability is the greatest barrier in achieving a nutritious diet, as a majority of Pakistanis are incapable of affording nutritionally satisfactory food.

It goes without saying that the recent floods will worsen the situation as regards food security as they will cause supply chain disruption amid an already existing inflationary pressure. According to initial estimates, the floods have affected a sizeable proportion of the crop land across the country. The International Rescue Committee says that crops over 3.6 million acres have been damaged, which includes 65% of Pakistan's main food crops. Similar is the case with fruits, vegetables, other staple crops as well as cotton. Likewise, there has been livestock loss of around 3 million which, combined with loss of crops, would seriously affect the supply of food items in coming months.

The floods have also adversely damaged wheat and sugar cane crops. With 90% of Pakistanis depending on wheat for food, the floods are sure to cause ample disruptions in supply chains of wheat products. In case of vegetables, we have already seen an unbearable rise in the prices of tomatoes, onions and other vegetables in the domestic market.

Moreover, around 45% of the agricultural land has been spoiled, with waters still standing

in the fields. This, along with damages to reserves of fertilisers, would have adverse consequences for the sowing of kharif crops, specifically wheat as wheat plantation is to start in October. Finally, the damages to more than 375 bridges and about 12,735 km of roads would make transportation costlier, thereby having an impact on prices.

Before the floods, food inflation in the country was around 26%, triggered mainly by supply disruptions due to the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia-Ukraine war, internal economic crisis, and rapid depreciation of the rupee in recent months. Similarly, Pakistan's cotton production accounts for 5% of the global output which implies shrinking global supply amid floods-driven losses to the crops of cotton. The loss to cotton crop would mean a decline in the country's earnings through exports. Further, shrinking domestic food supplies could boost Pakistan's need for imports of food products. This fall in exports and rise in imports will be a lethal blow to the current account balance and the rupee value — both adding to the inflationary pressures in the domestic market. To add to that, shrinking incomes due to the floods will leave more and more people food-insecure.

Thus the government needs to prepare an action plan, with the help of the world community, to rehabilitate the flood victims, especially focusing on provision of food and reviving sources of livelihood in agriculture and livestock.

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