



Collective for Social Science Research

# Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility

## Experiencing Hunger

Half of Pakistan's population consumes less than the officially proposed 2,150 kilo calories per day standard. According to the National Nutrition Survey (2011), 44 per cent of children under five are stunted, 54 per cent have Vitamin A deficiency and 63 per cent are anaemic. People continue to suffer from hunger and undernutrition as one third of households in Pakistan remain food insecure.

Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility is a four year research project spanning ten developing countries, and generated evidence on how high and unpredictable food prices affect the lives of individuals in poor and vulnerable communities. The Collective for Social Science Research, as the Pakistan research partner carried out qualitative research in one rural and one urban site in low income areas of Sindh for three years in a row, starting in 2012.

### Bread alone

We found that our urban and rural respondents alike thought of food security primarily in terms of their assured consumption of wheat flour bread (roti), which is the main staple food in these communities. In the poorest of households there is very little consumption of non-staple foods. These findings from in-depth interviews are in line with data from large-scale household surveys which show that the poorest obtain over 60 per cent of their energy intake from cereals. To make the simple roti palatable, there are additions such as tea, chutney made from salt and chillies, or potato curry. The poor rely on these low-cost accompaniments even as they know that such foods are of little nutritional value.

### Food economy

In-depth interviews showed that much of what the poorest do – work, social interaction and even migration – revolves around accessing and acquiring



Sample food basket in urban site Karachi

Aliya from Karachi said that she and her husband go hungry 2-3 days in a month, but she finds a pretext for sending her children to her mother's house to eat: "I do not let my children go hungry." Hungry days come when her husband, who is a rickshaw driver, is unable to earn a surplus above the daily rental for the vehicle. They would rather go hungry than have the rickshaw taken away.

food, primarily the main staple, for themselves and their households. While the rural food economy is based on the wheat harvest, urban households relied more on the market.

### Households and individuals

Public policy and large-scale surveys rely on the household as the basic unit of social organisation in Pakistan. Whether it is social programmes or large-scale surveys, individuals are reached and counted through the household. Our qualitative research confirms the primary role of the household in the way that individuals access and consume food. But in-depth interviews with poor households over a course of three years also showed that the boundaries of the household can be fluid, particularly at moments of crisis. On the one hand, the household can break down as a unit of food consumption on hungry days as individuals are forced to fend for themselves. On the other hand, tensions and disputes within families can bring about the onset of hungry days.

### Prepared foods

In both rural and urban areas there is an increasing presence of prepared foods such as biscuits, rusks, and even portions of cooked curry bought from local eateries. Markets for raw as well as prepared foods, however, vary by price and quality. Foods easily available in poorer communities are generally cheaper and inferior in terms of freshness and quality.

### Coping on hungry days

Hungry days are often idiosyncratic in nature when sudden adverse shocks such as illness, injury, loss of employment, migration, or family disputes can push households and individuals into food insecurity.

In some cases these events can be related and may have linkages with the broader economic and political trends. People were also seen to equate food security and diet diversity with having reliable and multiple sources of income.



A woman cooks food in urban site Karachi

Zakia's household was struggling to make ends meet in 2012. She had had a relatively better life in the village before the floods but had moved to Karachi in destitution after her household lost its home and assets. In 2012 she was reliant on a number of families for her food, cooking food for herself only when her neighbours happened to be away. Her husband did not work, and her son had been recently dismissed from his job at a CNG station. Her landlord, who was also her uncle, was not happy with her household, as they were unable to keep up with rent payments. She was eventually evicted the following year and the household was unable to find a suitable place to live in the same neighbourhood. In the new place they no longer had access to alms since the neighbours did not know them. They subsisted by peeling garlics at home.

Households were able to stave off hungry days by relying on informal local support from relatives and neighbours in urban areas and the wider kinship groups as well as landlords and patrons in rural areas.

However, the food sharing between households is not always a response to adverse food shocks but part of the regular reciprocal exchange between people of similar status and some nonreciprocal charitable assistance.

### **The current policy landscape**

Pakistan's food security policy is focused on preventing price and market instability. Following a period of price volatility in 2008, the country did well to ensure that localized or general shortages and price spirals did not develop. Political and as well as administrative systems are geared towards preventing market breakdown, and this is in line with the poor's expectation of government. While ensuring market stability has been a positive achievement, it has not plugged other major sources of vulnerability to hunger and food insecurity.

Shahida's household was very poor and had been living on the local school premises for several years after their house was washed away in rains. In 2012, Shahida's husband worked at a bus terminal in Hyderabad (a major city located over 3 hours from the village by road), and Shahida would buy rations when he was able to send cash. In 2013, Shahida's husband had been recruited by the police and was on training prior to deployment. Although his initial salary was mostly spent on boarding expenses during the training period, the household had started to obtain items on credit from retailers who felt assured that they would be repaid. They were already eating better as a result. According to Shahida their social standing in the community had also risen and those who previously shunned her were eager to resume social ties with her. By 2014, Shahida was able to share food with her neighbours and relatives instead of just borrowing when she had nothing to eat.

In 2012, Juman, a young man displaced by floods claimed to have no home and slept in a shop. The shopkeeper and others helped him with food, and he worked as a labourer, sending most of his wages to maintain his family in the village. Juman's own marriage had broken down because his father-in-law refused to send his daughter to live in poverty. In 2013, Juman sent for his family from the village and they started living in a rented home in Karachi. He no longer had to send money home, and his brothers who had joined him also earned in the city. They remained very poor but he was able to eat at home. However, over the course of the following year, the family scattered to various urban and rural areas due to their inability to cope and pay rent. By 2014, the household had resorted to begging and informal support from an uncle in the village.



A wheat storage container in rural site Dadu

## Implications of key findings

- **Adequacy of non-staple foods in diet:**

There is a need to shift focus of food security interventions from staple foods to a more holistic understanding of a nutritious diet.

- **Focus on people's experience of hunger:**

The current food security policy paradigm is focused on prices and markets and does not address the actual hunger people experience. The current policies cannot protect the poor from hungry days, which occur due to various seasonal or idiosyncratic shocks. Besides ensuring the smooth functioning of markets (through reducing price volatility and preventing shortages) government systems need to effectively insure households and individuals against hungry days.

- **Hold the state responsible for hungry days:**

The state's focus on price stability and preventing shortages mean that people continue to rely on their informal support systems to prevent hunger and have not formed a political expectation from the state to ensure the provision of an adequate and nutritious

diet. Political demand-making for the right to food is therefore closely connected with realistic expectations of what might be achieved.

- **Focus on individuals:**

A focus on individuals instead of only households in analysis and policy making can help contribute to a more enhanced understanding of food insecurity and people's coping mechanisms. Household composition, particularly for the poor and food insecure can be relatively fluid in times of adverse shocks and can also contribute towards greater food insecurity. While households will remain a key unit of observation some focus towards individual experiences can also be useful.

- **Evolve data collection on hunger and nutrition:**

Changes in the way data is collected on hunger and malnutrition to include not just household level consumption and caloric intake indicators but a more inclusive understanding of diet, hungry days and their causes can help influence future discourse and policy making for food security.



A green grocer in rural site Dadu

### Further Reading:

Gazdar, H. (2015) Food Prices and Politics of Hunger: Beneath Market and State. IDS Bulletin. Volume 46, Issue 6, pages 68-75

[http://www.researchcollective.org/Documents/FPV\\_IDS\\_bulletin.pdf](http://www.researchcollective.org/Documents/FPV_IDS_bulletin.pdf)

Balagamwala, M. & Gazdar, H. (2014) Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility: Evidence from Two Communities in Pakistan. IDS Working Paper, Vol 2014 No 499

<http://www.researchcollective.org/Documents/Wp449.pdf>

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