

Stories of Change

Strengthening food security in Pakistan during the Covid-19 pandemic

Pakistan is facing numerous socio-economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, including on food security. Food insecurity, which is a long-standing issue, has become more visible since the pandemic. Covid-19 Responses for Equity (CORE) partner the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) – a leading policy research thinktank – has been supporting the Government of Pakistan to maintain essential economic activity and protect workers and small producers during the pandemic. One notable contribution has been the development of a Food Security Portal, which is being used by the government to better manage food security in the country. It is the first track and trace system from farm to fork for essential food items.



Muhammad Tariq sells vegetables at the Empress Market, a colonial era market that is one of the busiest and most popular for shopping in Karachi.

Photo: IMF Photo/Saiyna Bashir, [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#).

The challenge

The Covid-19 pandemic has severely affected the Pakistani economy. Declining incomes, disruptions to the informal economy, and the depleting state of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), caused by lockdown measures, have directly impacted on people's food security and livelihoods. Food insecurity, which was already posing significant challenges for decision makers before the pandemic, has been exacerbated since. The pandemic has exposed vulnerabilities in the food system – both on the supply and demand side, as well as key gaps in policies, institutional capacities, and response strategies. Decision makers lacked the necessary data on the food system to respond strategically. Covid-19 has provided an opportunity to develop new policies to ensure food security and economic recovery, and which are inclusive and aligned with the agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The research

SDPI is leading the Covid-19 Responses for Equity (CORE) project on [Supporting Small and Medium Enterprises, Food Security, and Evolving Social Protection Mechanisms to Deal with Covid-19 in Pakistan](#). As part of this project, the team has been documenting evidence on the impact of the pandemic, informing response strategies during relief and recovery phases, and strengthening local research. The project focuses on addressing the limitations of the social protection regime in Pakistan, and mapping formal and informal SMEs to generate evidence on the effectiveness of a stimulus package for SMEs. The research team has developed a Food Security Portal – a data visualisation tool designed to support the government to better monitor the supply and demand of essential food commodities and resulting changes in prices at district, provincial, and national levels.

“In the past, most decisions in the food and agriculture sector were based on assumptions or limited data, while now, thanks to timely data, the Food Security Portal has changed the way decisions are made in the sector to improve the lives of people in Pakistan.”

Guffran Memon,
Federal Secretary,
Ministry of National
Food Security and
Research

The impact

The Food Security Portal, which makes real-time data available to all levels of government, has become an essential evidence-based tool for decision makers to improve food availability and accessibility, and to ensure affordable food prices in the country. For example, early import and release of wheat by the Government of Punjab this year will help tackle wheat inflation.

Successful uptake of the portal can be attributed to several key factors. First, it was designed to respond to a clear need identified around the lack of information available to decision makers on the food system in the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. Second, it is the product of a close collaboration between the research team and government departments. Together, they set the objective of developing a tool to provide timely data to inform food security policies at the national and sub-national levels in times of crisis. Political will at the highest level enabled the portal to be institutionalised.

The SDPI team first introduced the idea of a portal to cabinet members, who approved the initiative in September 2020. This was followed by discussions with the Food Security Advisory Council, whose members mandated SDPI to materialise it shortly after. As a result, a technical working group led by the Ministry of National Food Security and Research (MNFSR) was created. In March 2021, SDPI provided technical assistance to the ministry to prepare a draft legal instrument for the cabinet to introduce it as the *Pakistan Food Security Flow and Information Ordinance 2021*. This ordinance was then promulgated in September 2021.

The ordinance empowers the government to fix prices and seek information about the supply and demand of commodities through a new National Food Security and Management Committee (NFSMC). The NFSMC, headed by the prime minister, is tasked with formulating the country's first National Food Security Policy and forming a National Executive Committee to implement it.

Meanwhile, cabinet members, who were kept up to date with the progress made, handed over the Food Security Portal maintenance and management to the MNFSR in June 2021. Since then, the SDPI team has been building the capacity of MNFSR staff to run the portal, and closely monitoring its progress. The portal is widely used by the ministry and other departments at various levels, who are responsible for providing data regularly. It generates daily, weekly, and monthly reports which are shared with key stakeholders. It is now expanding its scope to include projections, comparative analysis, and analysis over time.

This initiative has demonstrated how essential real-time data is for evidence-based decision-making. It was key for the research team to work closely with government actors from the outset to understand their needs and develop a useful, innovative tool enabling them to bring about positive change and improve people's food security.

Further reading

Thompson, J. et al. (2021) *The Impact of Covid-19 on Livelihoods and Food Security*, Covid-19 Responses for Equity (CORE) Research for Policy and Practice Report, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: [10.19088/CORE.2021.001](https://doi.org/10.19088/CORE.2021.001)

Zahid, R.J. (2021) *Scoping Study of Central Data Facility for Food Supply Chain Sustainability*, Islamabad: Sustainable Development Policy Institute

Supporting Small and Medium Enterprises, Food Security, and Evolving Social Protection Mechanisms to Deal with Covid-19 in Pakistan

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SDPI is documenting evidence on Covid-19's impact, informing response strategies during relief and recovery phases, and strengthening local research in Pakistan – with a focus on SMEs, food security, and social protection.

About this report

This Stories of Change was written by Dr Abid Q. Suleri, Dr Vaqar Ahmed, Dr Shafqat Munir Ahmad, Qasim Shah, Junaid Zahid, Sustainable Development Policy Institute, and Karine Gatellier, CORE Knowledge Translation Team, Institute of Development Studies.

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