

Local Solutions to Land Ownership and Food Distribution in Pakistan
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One of the things that's very difficult in this world is thinking about its problems. It's hard to realize that things aren't perfect, that, in fact, things are far from perfect. It becomes even more difficult once you are aware of these problems. The old saying, "ignorance is bliss," really holds a lot of truth. With ignorance, there is no accountability, no guilt. Once you know, the problem hounds and plagues you, and can leave you feeling guilty for anything as simple as having a good meal. After you are aware of the problem, then the facts come rolling in, and you see the massive tangled web of problems that are all affecting each other, and your mind is overwhelmed. However, through the tangled web, comes a bit of clarity. There's a small shard of light shining through the problems. The hunger situation in Pakistan is no exception. If you know nothing about the agricultural injustice and the starvation, you aren't bothered. Once you know, you feel guilty about being so privileged, and then you experience a sense of overwhelming desperation that you can't do help at all. Finally, you see that ray of light, peeking through the dark rolling thunder clouds covering the sun. Since the founding of Pakistan, agriculture has been a point of contention, causing problems both politically and more importantly, problems for the citizens of Pakistan. Malnourishment has reached a crisis level, and violence is ensuing across the country, inflicted upon others and upon one's own self in the form of suicide. This 60- year-old problem needs a solution. This solution is a long a difficult road. Taking the easy path will accomplish nothing. If we try to fix the problem all at once, at the national level, some citizens and communities will be overlooked, or even harmed. Solutions need to be on the local level and address the direct needs of the citizens. Pakistan needs local solutions to solve the crippling problem of securing property rights, improving farm marketing infrastructure, and addressing problems created by globalization for subsistence family farmers and urban poor.

For being a relatively young country, Pakistan's history is marred with the struggle of agriculture. In August of 1947, when Pakistan won its independence, the state of agriculture was in a sad array. There were numerous small family farms, but the land was dominated by the huge estates. In fact, at one point, less than 1% of the farms owned 25% of the agricultural land in the country. 65% of the farmers owned 15% of the farms. Overall, 50% of the farmers owned no land, but merely sharecropped or worked as tenants on the land (Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress "Country Studies Series"). Most of these people were in the severe lower class, were malnourished, had rights limited by the rich farm owners, and were uneducated. The landlord elite were tremendously wealthy, and never had to lay a hand on their expansive amounts of farm land. During the 1950s, the government attempted to make the system more equitable to all of those involved. This included trying to eradicate absentee landowners, and securing the work of the poor sharecroppers. The attempts, while noble in intent, did little to improve the situation. In fact, they aggravated the tensions between the prosperous landlords and the poor workers. After a study was commissioned on agriculture and land ownership General Mohammad Ayub Khan attempted further reforms. A cap was placed on the amount of land a particular individual could own (200 hectares irrigated and 400 hectares not irrigated). This system compensated those who lost land, but included so many exceptions that the land elite slipped through the cracks and ended up exactly as they started. In 1973 the roof on the amount of land an individual could own was lowered again, still with the exceptions that included the agricultural elite. The 1973 reforms did more to guarantee the rights of the tenant farmers (Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress "Country Studies Series").

This leads us to today, with no major agricultural reforms since the 1970s. The biggest barrier to Pakistani farmers is the politics and laws of farms in Pakistan. The typical Pakistani farmer today works for one of the landowners, with one-third working as tenant farmers. These families live on the edge of starvation, and despite the attempted improvements in the rights of tenants, lead a difficult life. The tenant farmers are required to give half of what they produce to the landlord, which severely limits the

amount of food they can produce for themselves to consume, or to sell and try to make a reasonable income. The farmers, other than the agricultural elite, are typically uneducated (Khan “Pakistan Farm Talks are Murky”). Despite low income, family sizes are more expansive than just the nuclear family. Family is an important part of Pakistani culture; oftentimes one or two sets of grandparents live with the family. It is also not unheard of for aunts, uncles, or cousins to live in the household. Since family is extremely important, a family approach is taken to almost any event or occasion. Most Pakistan farms require heavy amounts of irrigation. In 2000, 78% of farms were irrigated (Agricultural Census Organization Government of Pakistan, “Emerging Trends in Agricultural Practices in Pakistan”). Based on a study by the Library of Congress, “Country Studies Series,” Pakistani agriculture is more effective when done by small farms rather than the large farms. In fact, smaller farms are more productive per hectare and more productive per unit of water than the large elite farms. Even though the agriculture in Pakistan is swamped with difficulties of social class and equality, it accounts for the largest percentage of the country’s gross domestic profit. In the most current data, 21% of the GDP was agricultural related products. The fact that about half of the country is employed in agriculture contributes to the urgency of this problem. So approximately half of the country is engaged in what amounts to about a fifth of the GDP (Embassy of Pakistan, “Pakistan Agriculture”). More startling facts come to light when we look at how involved the country is involved with agriculture (the country has one of the largest irrigation systems in the world), and compare it to the amount of impoverished people. In fact, Pakistan is a net importer of food. Among the most important crops to Pakistani farms, cotton is one of the products that Pakistan imports more than it exports. Other key crops include wheat, rice, sugarcane, fruits, and vegetables (Economy Watch, “Pakistan Trade”).

Recently, Pakistan has had trouble with obtaining enough food at a reasonable price. Inflation was 11% in 2008. This has led to fewer people being able to afford food, causing hundreds of riots in the streets of Pakistan. Rising food prices are causing problems worldwide, but the effects are especially profound in Pakistan, with the added combination of the history of land ownership problems. According to Sarmad Khan, of The National, part of the problem is the complex amount of steps needed for the food to get from producer to consumer, which then leads to the prices increasing. If several steps were eliminated prices could be brought down between 20 and 25 cents. For example, this year, on September 14th, at least fourteen women and children were killed in an attempt to get food. In the city of Karachi, food was being handed out by a private group when the crowd got out of hand and fourteen people were killed, along with several more injured. This demonstrates the desperation that Pakistani urban residents are feeling towards food. Even more devastating is the number of Pakistanis committing suicide. These suicides are driven by the oppression that some feel, the desperation for food, and the stark poverty. A solution is needed that addresses both the hungry urban residents, and the poor farmers scraping by as tenant farmers (Husain, “Oppression and Exploitation”). As of 2001, 20% of Pakistanis were undernourished. In some estimates, more than half of Pakistanis are living under the poverty rate. If the poverty rate is defined as making less than two (US) dollars per hour, then 72% of the country is living below the poverty line. The percent living below poverty is unfortunately increasing. According to data from the United Nations, in 1996 the poverty rate was 6.82% and increased to 13.36% in 1998. The United Nations also has data showing a dramatic raise in the inflation rate. Between the years of 1999 and 2008 the number of Pakistanis living in poverty rose by 16 million people. In addition from 2007 to 2008 the number of people deemed “food insecure” increased by 28%, from 60 million to 77 million (Omar, “Creating an economically egalitarian Pakistan will take some doing”). In the urban areas, unemployment is rising, as well as the price of flour, a key ingredient to the diets of most Pakistanis.

It’s clear that the solution to this problem needs to be personalized to each local community but take action soon. The government is also having problems dealing with the crisis. Like most other countries, Pakistan is being negatively affected by the global financial crisis which is forcing them to cut back on their spending. This is leading to even less aid to the hungry and poor. Even if the government had enough money, a more permanent solution would be needed. The problem in Pakistan is two-fold; there

are problems with both land ownership and food distribution. Land ownership causes problems to the rural residents, and food distribution affects all of the citizens of Pakistan.

All of these factors illustrate the negative effects that are currently being felt and the ones that will be magnified in the near future. If nothing is done, Pakistan will fall even deeper into this troublesome cycle of starvation. If Pakistan simply secured land rights for the farmers that are currently being used by the elite businesses, they will be well on their way to solving many of the other problems. Starting with the most basic is the best way to fix the tangled mass of problems that all intersect each other in so many places all over the country's politics. Fixing the agricultural system would be like dropping a pebble into the pond that is the country of Pakistan. The initial impact would be just a tiny splash, but the effects of that would spread outward further and further, touching everything in the pond. If the small scale farmers were able to increase their productivity, more small scale farmers could start working, as opposed to the big-time land owners hiring cheap labor. This would ensure more jobs for impoverished Pakistani subsistence farmers. For this to happen, corruption in the government related to favoritism toward the elite would have to be corrected. These types of policy changes would also positively affect other sectors of Pakistan. When the farmers are able to increase their productivity, the number of malnourished Pakistanis will decrease. If the productivity growth rate were large enough, Pakistan could even make the move to be a net exporter rather than a net importer. The difference between this reform and reforms of the past would be the aid of other organizations, like the United Nations.

The easiest thing to say about the solution is that one magical spell or change in the government is not going to fix the problem. After that the details get a lot more hairy. To start with, there needs to be some sort of initiative taken by the government to restore land to the small family farmers. The favoritism toward the few elite landowners has got to stop. Once this has taken place, the next step varies from community to community, and region to region. A universal solution is not going to include everyone and all of the individual problems. There need to be community discussions between farmers, land owners, consumers, and government officials about the state of agriculture in that area. Things that should be addressed include what type of farming methods are working, what farmers are struggling with, how to get more food to the communities of people that are severely undernourished, and then helping to develop a system for exporting larger quantities of food in the future. Experts in increasing productivity should also visit the different regions giving recommendations for that particular type of land. Using crops that are more suited to farming in that particular climate or that are disease resistant are also other options that should be looked at by these farmers and other Pakistan citizens. For example, spreading the practice of using the genetically modified cotton seeds that are resistant to the number one cotton pest will help small farmers increase their yield (Harris, "Pakistani Farmers Look to Biotechnology to Increase Cotton Crop Yields"). As soon as the farmers that are currently tenant farming are able to have their own land, they will have the ability to keep and sell all of their crop, rather than paying 50% of it to the already wealthy landowners. This will start to lead to more economic equality among Pakistan farmers, instead of having a polarized system with extremely wealthy at one end and extremely poor at the other end. Once the small farms are more productive, productivity in agriculture as a whole will increase, making more food available in the country as a whole. This can thus begin to alleviate the starving urban residents, and lessen the recent violence associated with the lack of food.

For this plan to be successful, a long-term commitment from a large number of different people and organizations will be necessary. Since a large portion of the planning and work necessary can't be defined until the proposed solution starts working, the people and organizations will have to be extremely involved and committed to solving this problem. The United Nations should be involved. Their role in this particular case would be to help moderate the discussions among different parties. There are apt to be tensions between the different income level and size farmers about the various injustices that have been committed against them or that will be committed against them. The U.N. will also be necessary to be

educated on the agricultural methods to make suggestions of how productivity could be increased in that particular area (for example, a specific farming technique, or a hybrid breed of seeds that would increase the yields). Private organizations within Pakistan can also aid in these discussions, in their particular communities. Although this is an agricultural problem, people that are not directly connected to agriculture need to be included in these discussions because, as Wendell Berry once said, "If you eat, you are involved in agriculture." Getting rid of the disconnectedness between farm and food in these Pakistani communities will help to solve to social problems associated with agriculture currently. The Pakistani government is needed to contribute to these reforms. To urge them to do so, other countries with which Pakistan has a positive relationship need to help encourage this type of reform. Pakistan's major allies include both Afghanistan and China (U.S. Department of State, "Background-Pakistan). Pakistan's allies need to offer support through both resources in solving the problem, and as incentive to actually do some sort of reform. In today's world, globalization is rapidly changing our world from one in which every country stands independently to one where the relationships between countries are intricately tied together, thus requiring involvement from the rest of the world to help provide the local solutions necessary.

The convoluted problems contributing to poor rural and urban citizens of Pakistan are difficult to see through. The problem is two-fold, but can be solved with local, community action. Pakistan's poor farmers have struggled long and hard to make ends meet due to the monopoly held by a few over Pakistan's agricultural land. In order to help these poor farmers be able to sustain themselves it is necessary for the government to step in and redistribute land and try to equalize the two distinctive types of farmers. The other problem lies in the urban areas. Increasingly frequent riots have broken out in attempts to obtain food. Thousands are malnourished, and thousands are making less than a dollar a day. If land reforms are made in the rural areas, there will be more food readily available, and the transport will be much less than the current system needed to import food from elsewhere. The local solutions will be more effective since they are personalized and very relevant to the lives in the specific community, as opposed to one giant band-aid solution over the entire country. For example, a community largely composed of tenant farmers and a small town located in an irrigated area would work together with the outside groups and come up with a solution to help increase productivity on their land by using better irrigation systems and a specific genetically modified seed and setting up a network to transport their product to the cities. The difficulties with Pakistan's agricultural situation are tremendous and overpowering at first glance. But with knowledge, comes insight to how the problem came about, what causes lay at the root of the problem, and a peek into the future as we glance and see what Pakistan could become. It's time to break the cycle of tenant farming, elite landowners lording over the fields of Pakistan, and the violence breaking out in a struggle to survive. Starting small will ripple out across the fields of Pakistan and connect each and every person more deeply with the agriculture that sustains them.

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