



Role of Social protection in mitigating food insecurity: a proposed policy framework for Pakistan

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To cite: Butt, B. I., Qursam, S., & Ibrahim, M. (2026). Role of social protection in mitigating food insecurity: A proposed policy framework for Pakistan. *Journal of Pakistan Administration*, 47(1), 141–156. <https://doi.org/10.65755/jpa-20264701-127>

ABSTRACT

Conceptual foundation of social protection has a rapid growth academically, but still can be observed as an evolving policy agenda in many countries. Operationally the concept of social protection encompasses elements of social assistance, social insurance, social injustice and exclusion. The fundamental purpose of social protection is to address and manage vulnerability. Food insecurity is directly connected to poverty and vulnerability, especially in low-income countries where income and food crops overlay one another; Pakistan is one of them. Food security in Pakistan is characterized by a variety of challenges. These challenges include not only insufficient economic resources and inconsequential policies; but also increasing extreme weather conditions. In changing scenario of geo-political and geo-economic circumstances, the magnitude of food security has broadened across communities and the globe; thus, showing increased social risk. The objective of this review-based policy paper is to propose a policy framework for Pakistan in mitigating food insecurity through the role of social protection. Review of literature shows close relationship between social protection and food security, and this policy paper will identify several synergies and linkages between them, through a proposed policy framework. Results deuced from available data propose risk management framework for food security in the country. Proposed policy framework revolves around a three-dimensional risk management strategy i.e. prevention, mitigation and coping strategies. By giving interventions in these strategies at informal (family) and formal (public interventions, labor market & non-profit sector) level, social protection can play a catalytic role in mitigating food insecurity in Pakistan.

Keywords:

Social protection, food insecurity, social risk, risk management strategies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Social protection has been widely recognized as a key social development strategy by the international community. Social protection systems aim to protect individual against the risks of impoverishment in situations of poverty, illnesses, disability, unemployment, old age or death of a family member. The term Social Protection is defined by the experts in several ways.

These are the public or private actions, policies or programs, initiatives or interventions to address economic risks and vulnerabilities in order to reduce social and economic deprivations, and is both a human right and sound economic policy. It strongly contributes to reducing poverty, exclusion, vulnerability and inequality, and contributes to political stability and social cohesion. These can be grouped under three main headings: social insurance, social assistance and labor market regulation. Social insurance consists of programs providing protection against life-course contingencies such as maternity and old age, or work-related contingencies such as unemployment or sickness. Social assistance provides support for those in poverty. Normally, social insurance is financed from contributions by workers and their employers, whereas social assistance is tax-financed. Finally, labor and employment standards ensure basic standards at work, and extend rights to organization and voice; and aims at preventing or alleviating poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion (Sabates-Wheeler & Derveureux, [2007](#); Roelen & Devereux, [2013](#); Midgley, [2014](#); ILO, [2015](#), Drolet, [2016](#)).

Establishment of social insurance along with social assistance and labor market regulations system was observable in developed countries, but the case was different in developing world. In the developing countries, social protection has worked as a policy framework for addressing wide spread poverty and vulnerability among the masses. It was then defined as “*public actions taken in response to levels of vulnerability, risk, and deprivation which are deemed socially unacceptable within a given polity or society*” (Conway et al. [2000](#)). The paradigm for social protection was different in the developed and developing nations along with several features. As in developing countries, great emphasis was given on reducing poverty and supporting the poor (Barrientos and Hulme, [2008](#)); while income maintenance and



quality living was given priority in the developed countries. Here, social protection lays great emphasis on addressing the causes of poverty, and not simply its symptoms (World Bank [2001](#)). Social protection paradigm in developing countries also lay great stress on risk and vulnerability and reason out the cause of persistent poverty. Additionally risk-averse behavior among those in poverty is helpful for their long-term welfare. Social protection, not only emphasis on poverty reduction, but the magnitude of the actions taken play a broader developmental role.

One of the severe forms of vulnerability since centuries is the food insecurity around the globe. It was brought in developmental agendas by defining the term ‘food security’ in the World Food Conference organized by Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) in 1974. Food insecurity is defined as “*Food insecurity exists when people do not have adequate physical, social or economic access to the sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life* (Thomas, [2006](#)). Also, “*a situation that exists when people lack secure access to sufficient amounts of safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and active and healthy life*”. (FAO, IFAD. [2013](#)). It also distinguished the relationship between hunger, poverty and unemployment. This phenomenon has a range of factors that show variance among social groups; belonging to different regions across the globe. Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) has grouped the four clusters of possible vulnerability as; the socio-economic and political environment, the performance of the food economy, care practices, health and sanitation (FAO. [2000](#)). Global food crisis 2008 draw the attention of the public in food security and in July 2009 G8 heads of state (United States, United Kingdom, France, West Germany, Italy, Canada, and Japan) agreed to “to act with the scale and urgency needed to achieve sustainable global food security” (Barrett, [2010](#)).

Food security as an important agenda has been discussed in world development agendas like millennium development goals (MDGs) and sustainable development goals (SDGs). It demonstrates the importance of food security in both; the developed and developing countries. Following this, State of Food Insecurity (SOFI) report shows that undernourished population is still 815 million in the world (FAO ([2017](#))). It was also observed that majority of food insecure population is found in the underdeveloped and developing regions; Asia shows the maximum chunk of this population and is a serious threat to achievement of SDGs.

Reported statistics shows the contributing factors and underline the causes of the issue as economic growth, natural resources for food production, regional peace and security situation, instability and agricultural growth in the developing countries as they are unable to ensure food security for all (FAO, [2017](#); [2020](#); [2021](#)). Presently Food Security Information Network ([2023](#)) estimates that *over a quarter of a billion people were acutely food-insecure and required urgent food assistance in 58 food-crisis countries/ territories in 2022. This is the highest number in the seven-year history of the Global Report on Food Crises (GRFC)*. Pakistan with no exception is also one of those countries being a resource scarce and face food insecurity. Regional overview of Food Insecurity in Asia (FAO, [2016](#)) reports that after Afghanistan (−1.6 percent per annum) Pakistan has performed worst in Southeast Asia (−0.3 percent per annum), during 2011 to 2015 and Pakistan’s poor performance is ranked 77th higher than its neighboring country.

Currently, FAO Survey, [2024](#) highlights the vulnerabilities in Pakistan and states,

Food insecurity affected 35% of households, with Balochistan showing the highest prevalence of poor dietary diversity. Female-headed households, IDPs, and those reliant on non-agricultural incomes faced severe food insecurity, necessitating targeted interventions. Immediate recommendations include cash and voucher programs to enhance food access, while long-term strategies advocate for sustainable agriculture, improved water management, and diversified livelihoods to bolster resilience against future shocks.

Food insecurity is directly connected to poverty and vulnerability, especially in the low-income countries where income and food crops overlay one another; Pakistan is one of them. Food security in Pakistan is characterized by a variety of challenges. These challenges include not only insufficient economic resources and inconsequential policies; but also, the increasing extreme weather conditions. In the changing scenario of geo-political and geo-economic circumstances, the magnitude of food security has broadened across the communities and the globe; thus, showing the increased social risk. The literature gap shows that there is a need of preventive, mitigation and coping strategies in community life in the country. thus, the research question arises that what is the role of social protection in mitigating food insecurity in Pakistan? The objective of this review-based policy paper is studying the role of social protection in

mitigating the food insecurity and to propose a policy framework for Pakistan for the said issue

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Food security as a diverse concept, with varied nature and scope evolved with household well-being (Rizov, et al., [2014](#)). Relevant literature for food security can be found from the 1970s literature. Initially it was considered as an issue which relies on supply side; but it turned into demand side issues in 1980s (Maxwell and Frankenberger, [1992](#)). Currently, food security has explored four dimensions i.e. food availability, access to food, utilization and stability. Different experts explain the concept as

Food availability describes supply side of food security. Its determinants include local food production, net food exports (imports minus exports), level of food stocks, food stamps/aids or transfers (Wahab and Applanaidu, [2015](#)). Food access is defined as affordability and physical access to nutritious food. It depends on individuals' entitlements (income) that are rooted in their endowments (Sen, [1981](#)). These endowments are in control of individual and can be transformed through production and trade into some type of food or commodity, exchangeable for food (Applanaidu and Baharudin, [2014](#)). Food utilization determines nutritional status of individuals by satisfying his physiological needs. It is based upon quality of diet, clean drinking water, sanitation and health care. Stability of food security is determined by sustainable food availability and accessibility. All the four components jointly determine food security status at national as well as household level (Wahab and Applanaidu, [2015](#)).

Literature review lays great stress on food security issue at micro, mezzo and macro levels (Ahmad, [2009](#)). Different researches explain that food security assurance and poverty & hunger reduction are confronted by the governments by signing different developmental programs as part of their food security policy in South Asia. However, these efforts are unsuccessful in reducing food insecurity (Fayeye and Daramola, [2007](#); Babatunde, et al., [2007](#); Oriola, [2009](#)). As a matter of fact, Pakistan as a developing country, has certain socio-economic and political challenges since years. According to bilateral organizations, food insecurity in Pakistan has increased as compared to previous decades. Empirical data regarding food insecurity in Pakistan presents a troublesome situation in the country (Guha-Khasnobis and Hazarika, [2006](#); Bashir, et al., [2012](#);

Bashir, et al., [2013](#)); hence show a visible number of population that is more vulnerable and poor. This vulnerability creates an environment where they are poor and prone to risk at any time. While talking about the Pakistan's social protection landscape, it focuses on reducing poverty and supporting vulnerable groups through targeted cash transfers initiatives. Key initiatives include Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) and Ehsaas Cash Assistance program, which provide essential social safety nets through conditional and unconditional cash assistance, focusing on women empowerment, education, and nutrition.

At the conceptual level, this vulnerability is dealt under Social Protection (SP) policies. In twenty first century, the traditional SP approaches initiated a new conceptual framework for SP i.e. Social Risk Management (SRM), developed by Holzmann ([2001](#)). Latterly, it has been endorsed by other development institutions, bilateral development institutions, academic research centers, and other countries (Drolet, [2016](#)). East Asian crisis of late 1990s sensitized policy makers that high growth rates were insufficient for poverty reduction. Following economic shocks, informal safety net arrangements were worthless and new schemes seem difficult to establish during a prolonged crisis and risks.

Holzmann ([2001](#)) proposed definition explains, “*SP as public interventions to (i) assist individuals, households, and communities better manage risk and provide support to the critically poor.*” The said definition and Social Risk Management explains SP as

- *A safety net as well as a spring-board for the poor. While a safety net for all should exist, the programs should also provide the poor with the capacity to bounce out of poverty or at least resume gainful work.*
- *View SP not as a cost, but rather, as one type of investment. A key element of this concept involves helping the poor keep access to basic social services, avoid social exclusion, and resist coping strategies with irreversible negative effects during adverse shocks.*
- *Focus less on the symptoms and more on the causes of poverty by providing the poor with the opportunity to adopt higher risk-return activities and avoiding inefficient and inequitable informal risk sharing mechanisms.*
- *Take account of reality.*

The crust of the concept is based on two assessments, i.e. firstly poor are likely to exposed to more risks (ranging from natural to manmade

risks); secondly, they have few instruments while dealing with the risks (like insurance). More interestingly, important consequences of such assessments believes that the poor are the most vulnerable, therefore, should give access to SRM instruments; and being risk averse they are not ready to engage in higher risk/higher return activities.

Holzmann et al (2003) while describing the characteristics of risk states,

The capacity of individuals, households and communities to handle risk, and the appropriate risk management instrument to be applied depend on the characteristics of risks: their sources, correlation, frequency and intensity. The sources of risk may be natural (for example, floods) or the result of human activity (for example, inflation resulting from economic policy); risks can be uncorrelated (idiosyncratic) or correlated among individuals (covariant) over time (repeated) or with other risks (bunched); and they can have low frequency but severe welfare effects (catastrophic) or high frequency but low welfare effects (non-catastrophic). While informal or market-based risk management instruments can often handle idiosyncratic risks, they tend to break down when facing highly covariant, macro-type risks.

Hence risk management instruments can end risk as well as a ensure development for individuals, especially to the poor (Holzmann, 2001, 2003). The main elements of this new framework have been derived from the notion of asymmetric information during the diverse risks categorically than to describe it generally.

To deal with the risk of food insecurity in developing countries like Pakistan, there is a dire need to develop a SRM framework for dealing with the food insecurity issue.

3. OBJECTIVE AND METHODS

The objective of this review-based policy paper is to propose a policy framework for Pakistan in mitigating food insecurity through the role of social protection. Policy papers present a clear picture of an important social issue usually by utilizing the existing literature regarding the said issue and presenting a workable policy proposal which may be in the form of policy framework or a workable strategy for problem solution. A thorough analysis of secondary literature concerning the issue of social protection and food security was undertaken. The aspiration was to provide policymakers with valuable information to design fair and effective strategies, by proposing a policy framework, even in challenging

times. Review of literature shows close relationship between social protection and food security, and this policy paper will identify several synergies and linkages between them, through a proposed policy framework.

4. FINDINGS AND PROPOSED POLICY FRAMEWORK

Individuals and groups are highly affected by the risks of natural disasters, extreme weather conditions, health related issues and employment shocks. These risks give birth to the precautionary strategies by individuals in the form of informal exchange of goods, crop sharing with their community or crop borrowing from landlords. Majority of population still depends upon informal arrangements in developing countries while dealing with risk. With the rise of industrialization and urbanization, there was an obvious change in the breakdown of traditional values and informal risk management mechanisms. This changed atmosphere of the 19th century gave rise to a new situation for the governments and proved an initial point for the initiation of the social insurance programs as a social risks management. Social insurance system of end 19th century introduced provisions by the state to deal with risks of work-place injury, disability, death and unemployment for their populations. With the evolution of the modern welfare state and emergence of new states after the decolonialization, brought widespread risks for the populations arising from economic policies. Such risks revolved around the inflation and devaluation, technological changes and changes in taxation. It directly affected the welfare provision of individuals and communities; especially who are often poor.

Modern evolving trends for technology, trade and socio-political systems have given rise to the improved welfare provisions around the globe. Talking about developments, globalization, technology and prevalent political systems cover wide range of new opportunities through improved governance. Collectively, these trends provide a unique opportunity for social and economic development, resulting in poverty reduction among families. Contrary to this, welfare also improvements also heighten the various outcomes for society especially for specific groups.

There is no surety that improvements will be shared with the marginalized communities. Modern evolving trends can create a wider difference between the “haves” and “have-nots”; as it can create



opportunity for all only. In fact, these improvements (combined with marginalization and social exclusion) can increase the vulnerability of population groups. Globalization results in the reduced ability of governments to raise revenues and pursue independent economic policies and, thus, to have national policies to help the poor when they are needed most.

Social risk management as social protection measures, combat poverty and hunger and thus support as a key objective of development and food security. Risk management can occur at different levels i.e. before and after the risk occurs. Three functions of risk management strategies, can be distinguished by their effects. This includes prevention strategies, mitigation strategies and coping strategies. The goal of preventive measures is to prevent the risk from before it occurs. It is based on the notion that by reducing the probability of an adverse risk, peoples' expected income may increase and may reduce income variance. Public macroeconomic policies, disaster prevention measures, public health investments, environmental policies, and investments in education can serve as preventing or reducing the occurrence of risks. Preventive social protection interventions typically form part of measures designed to reduce risks in the labor market, notably the risk of unemployment, underemployment, or low wages due to inappropriate skills or malfunctioning labor markets.

While mitigation strategies help individuals to reduce the impact of a future risk event through pooling over other assets and time, e.g. a family unit may invest in a variety of different assets that may benefit at different times. A practical example is that a when a family harvest two kinds of crops in different seasons, it can reduce the variability in the household's income flow.

Coping strategies are intended to compensate the risk after it has occurred. It mainly relies on family savings, borrowing, public or private cash transfers. The government plays a major role in helping people to cope in cases where saving is not found or not enough to handle the unwanted risks. Such people are poor during their life span having no possibility of accruing assets. Even at the time of a smallest loss, they are destitute and virtually unable to recover. These measures are helpful in the inclusion of marginalized families and work in an overlapping mechanism. Hence, Social transfer directly influences the poverty-reducing effect, by the direct provision of immediate access to food and other essential consumer goods.

4.1 Preventive, Mitigation and Coping Strategies in Community Life- A case of Pakistan

Poor families in Pakistan are prone to a large number of shocks, which includes floods, hailstorms, earthquakes, illness, unemployment, inflation, political changes. They lack required preventive and mitigating strategies under such grounded poverty and vulnerability. In the absence of formal coping strategies aimed at dealing with these shocks, people are compelled to rely on short-term informal survival strategies. Such coping strategies depend on occupation, time, the household structure and the position in the life cycle at the household level. For example, some common strategies dealing with such shocks include:

- Borrowing money or food from relatives, neighboring locality or local community shops.
- Relying on cheaper or less preferred food.
- Purchasing food on credit.
- Asking for informal charity from own community in the form of Zakat and Sadqat.
- Begging for food at streets or shrines.
- School dropout students so that they can work in wage employment; causing child labor.
- Girl child marriages to decrease the number of family members.
- Giving child/children for adoption to an issueless affordable family.
- Reduction in food by consuming only one meal per day.
- Selling valuables like livestock or household items to buy food.

Such informal preventive, mitigation and coping strategies are common in community life of Pakistan; but with the rising inflation such informal strategies are hard to continue by the communities.

4.2 Role of Social protection in mitigating food insecurity: a proposed policy framework for Pakistan

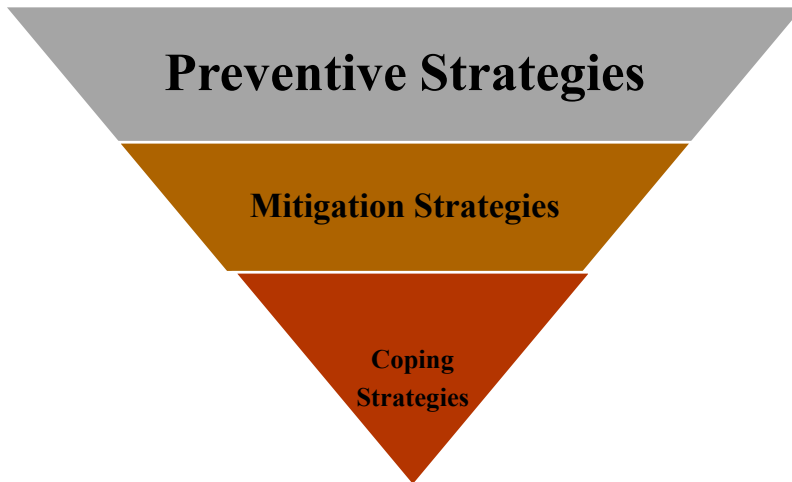
In the light of above said, poverty is dealt by social protection by following risk management strategies in different corners of the world. But in a developing country like Pakistan, the state cannot afford to cater all the economic and social problems single handedly due to multiple factors as eliminating the poverty gap through public transfers is beyond the fiscal capacity of most developing countries. Risk management strategies by the public sector only may not able to reduce the food security risk in the country. In this context, the country needs a proposed policy framework

for the said issue in Pakistan. Literature supports that policy frameworks are general structures, often encapsulated in documents or established practices, which provide institutions a guiding architecture for policy action across one or multiple policy areas (Lakhno, [2023](#))

Relying on the review of literature, this proposed policy framework revolves around a three-dimensional risk management strategy i.e. prevention, mitigation and coping strategies. By giving interventions in these strategies at informal (family) and formal (public interventions, labor market & non-profit sector) level, social protection can play a catalytic role in mitigating food insecurity in Pakistan.

Figure 1

Proposed Policy Framework: Inverted Pyramid showing proportional Interconnectedness



The proposed frameworks will help the state machinery for combating the said issue. It promotes a consistent approach to improve risk faced by the vulnerable population. In order to manage risks, the government might address it by giving great focus on preventive strategies, as per given diagram. In a developing country like Pakistan, preventive measures should be encouraged more than the coping and mitigation strategies. Prevention can lessen the risk of food insecurity and family and state resources can be saved on mitigation and coping strategies. Arrangement of social risk management can be explained as;

4.2.1 Preventive Strategies

Family Sector	Independent food production Family balanced budgeting	e.g. development of kitchen gardens in both rural and urban areas e.g. family savings and avoiding extravagance
Public Sector	Regularly assess potential risks Framing macroeconomic and microeconomic policies that will improve the income of people Social development investments	e.g. disaster prevention assessment e.g. encouraging small farms e.g. integrated research, teaching, and outreach activities in agriculture e.g. investments in health, education (of home science) and environmental policies
Labor market Sector	Financial market literacy for farmers, industrialists and poultry owners	e.g. Production of food which is cheaper, harvested in very little time and gives more production
Non-profit sector	Launch awareness campaign	e.g. Educating people on the importance of birth control e.g. Encouraging and educating people for independent food production e.g. awareness about family savings and avoiding extravagance

4.2.2 Mitigation strategies

Family Sector	Efforts aimed at improving the income generation	e.g. There can be more than one bread winner in a family
Public Sector	Strong check and balance system	on food prices on imported food items on smuggling
Labor market Sector	Investment in multiple food products	Investment in raw and prepared local food
Non-profit sector	Social development investments	e.g. disaster prevention assessment e.g. encouraging small farms e.g. integrated research, teaching, and outreach activities in agriculture e.g. investments in health, education (of home science) and environmental policies e.g. awareness about advantages of more than one bread winner in a family



4.2.3 Coping strategies

Family Sector	Entrepreneurship	e.g. provision of extended income sources e.g. extended variety and quantity of food
Public Sector	Conditional and Unconditional Cash transfers	e.g. Ehsaas Emergency Cash Transfer Program ²
Labor market Sector	Launching new business schemes	e.g. investment in new edible and non-edible products, hence family income will raise.
Non-profit sector	Launching new projects to cope food insecurity	e.g. Microfinance loans for food producers and entrepreneurs

Pakistan being a country facing major food crisis since 2017 has reached to the number of 8.6 million people in crisis in rural districts as one of the worst monsoon floods in 2022, causing devastation in the agricultural and livestock sectors. Multiple factors including extreme weather, armed conflict and economic shocks such as soaring prices are creating a food crisis globally. Food crisis as major social risk has produced an alarming situation for the government and the households. To handle with this situation, a new conceptual framework of SRM is proposed and may be productively applied in the developing and developed economies. Government might address the said issue by adopting the proposed policy framework. This framework offers policy makers for combating the said issue. It promotes a consistent approach to improve risk faced by the vulnerable population in the country.

² It includes Benazir Income Support Programme (AP) Individual Financial Assistance, Pakistan Bait-ul-Mal (AP) Individual Assistance Programme, Pakistan Bait-ul-Mal (AP) Guzara Allowance, Zakat and Ushr Departments (B, KP, P).

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