

Poverty across the Agro-Ecological Zones in Rural Pakistan

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Poverty is considered as a challenging phenomenon that restrains the economic development of the country. To combat this issue there is a need of poverty alleviation strategy at a national level. Historically, poverty is considered to be mainly concentrated in rural areas of the country in diverse forms i.e., climate, water availability, land fertility, population growth and skill levels.

During the 70s and 80s decades, poverty has declined mainly due to land reforms in 1972, growth in construction sector and remittance inflow from Middle East. However, this declining trend of poverty was short lived and increased in 1990's. Besides, the gap between rural and urban poverty has also widened. The estimates show that more than one-third of our population lives in extreme poverty, and around 70 percent of these unfortunate people reside in rural areas.

The results based on agro-ecological divisions of the country indicate that poverty is lowest in the barani areas of the Punjab because of better opportunities in terms of employment in other sectors, particularly, the services sector as well as overseas migration. The highest is observed in Balochistan may be due to non-availability of irrigation water and low rainfall making dwellers more vulnerable to droughts seriously affecting the crops and the livestock which are the main sources of their livelihood.

Poverty is widely spread in irrigated areas of the country particularly in Southern Punjab and Sindh where feudal system still prevails. Job opportunities outside agriculture are limited and migration within the country or overseas is not a common phenomenon in these areas of the country. On the one hand there is a need to carry out more research to understand better the phenomenon of poverty across the agro-ecological zones, and on the other, poverty alleviation programs should focus on those areas where the incidence of poverty is alarmingly high.

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Agricultural growth in rural Pakistan also does not benefit effectively the large majority of the farming communities because of the extremely uneven distribution of land and a large number of people even lack access to land. In such a situation it appears difficult to eliminate rural poverty only targeting the higher growth in the agricultural sector. Effective agrarian reforms would potentially be an important solution, but one should not underestimate the political difficulties involved in this process. Mass migration to urban areas is also an unappealing prospect; it would probably result in simply shifting the poor from rural to urban sector. A dynamic labor-intensive agriculture combined with a modernized non-agriculture sector can only lead to reduction in rural poverty through better employment and income opportunities and a resulting growth, and its egalitarian distribution.