

Nothing to Eat but Cherries and Apples: Politics of Wheat Subsidies in Ishkoman Valley, Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan

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Introduction

Food security is presented as a major challenge for mountain communities in the Global South. Foggin et al. (2018) argue that people residing in mountain regions are exposed to high risks and vulnerability due to climate change threats, globalization, difficult farming conditions and external markets. Spies (2018) adds the further dimension of social and political marginalization to the challenges faced by people living in high mountain regions. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), more than 192 million people in Asia's mountain areas are exposed to food insecurity, while particularly mountainous areas of Pakistan are experiencing the highest levels of food insecurity and malnutrition (FAO 2019: 253). In order to address food insecurity, the Government of Pakistan introduced the policy of subsidized wheat in the region of Gilgit-Baltistan (G-B) in 1970s. What has been the impact of this policy in the region over the past 50 years and how it has changed the local socio-ecological agrarian landscapes, food system and diet of people has remained unclear to researchers and policy makers. This research seeks to understand the impact of wheat subsidies on local agrarian landscapes, social-ecological change, and food systems.



Fig. 1: Landscape of the study area, center village Imit, Ishkoman Valley (Photo: F. Batool)

Field-site and research methodology

Ishkoman valley, a site of this research, was a former political district of the British Government and the Dogras of Kashmir, from 1896 until 1972, and one of

the many overlooked areas within G-B (Haines 2012). Today, it is sub-administrative unit of the Ghizer district and is located in the north-western reaches of G-B in the transition zone between the Hindukush and Karakoram mountain ranges. It is located at an elevation of about 2300m-3000m above the sea level. Overall, there are 33 villages in the entire Ishkoman valley. I have chosen four villages, namely: Chatorkhand, Imit, Mantramdan and Ishkoman proper, the hamlets within these villages are also part of it. These villages spatially cover the whole valley from the beginning to central part and then upper most, remotest part of the valley.

My research employs empirically grounded ethnographic research (Delamont and Atkinson 2021), since everyday life processes help to understand the local scale and wider social processes. I followed the agrarian calendar in my field area, for eight months in 2022 (August-November) and 2023 (April-July) and was hosted by local families in their homes. My fieldwork was not limited to the villages but also covered the pastures, which are an important component of the agro-pastoral economy. I maintained a daily journal of activities and observations along with over 90 interviews, which were conducted with different actors and stakeholders— state institutions, farmers, traders, and NGO's representatives, in the valley. I used the MAXQDA software to analyze the qualitative data.

Scale of subsidies

Subsidies in agriculture have been debated for long in the world (Bellmann 2019, Kumar 2020, Mgonezulu 2024, Salunkhe and Deshmush 2014) and have been viewed differently by economists, agricultural experts, and government institutions. Kumar (2020) defines subsidy as a form of financial assistance given to an individual, business, institution or an economic sector in order to achieve a certain policy objective, meaning, and any monetary exchange, which is not directly connected to paying for a service. Here, I engaged with 'benefit in kind' subsidies where government sells at lower than market price.

The subsidy on wheat has been in place since 1972 but has varied in terms of budget and wheat allocation. Currently the Federal Government of Pakistan allocates PKR 8-10 billion (approx. 36 million US\$) annually to the government of G-B, to

procure 1.6 million bags (1.5 million metric tons; MT) of subsidized wheat for the region. The wheat is acquired from Pakistan Agricultural Storage and Services Corporation (PASSCO) by the G-B Civil Supply Department and transported every month to G-B. According to socio-economic baseline report (2022) 35,000 MT of wheat is locally produced whereas 150,000 MT is imported from Pakistan's lowland. The price of a 120 kg bag by the government in 2022 was PKR1250 (4.50\$). The price of the subsidized wheat in G-B in comparison to national average price is 6-7 times less per Kg (Baig et al. 2024). This subsidy covers not only the price of the wheat procured but also transportation and incidental charges. Local production of wheat is only 19%, whereas 81% of wheat is imported from outside of the region (Fig. 1).

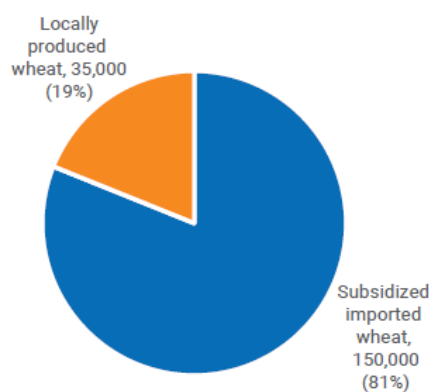


Fig. 2: Wheat production and imports in Gilgit-Baltistan (Source: Soni Jawari Centre for Public Policy, 2022, modified)

Changing agrarian practices and transformation in local food system and agriculture

Spies (2019) argues that the two most significant developments in case of G-B after joining Pakistan were the construction of the Karakorum Highway in 1978 and the deposition of last Rajas (feudalism). Although constructed for strategic purposes, the highway has significantly transformed the region and the circulation patterns (Kreutzmann 1993, 2024). Since then, the area has undergone tremendous changes such as the transition from subsistence economy to market economy and commercial agriculture (Kreutzmann 2020), the establishment of the fast growing tourism (Hussain 2019), the expansion of formal education (Benz 2013; 2014), a large flux of international NGOs and development agencies (Kreutzmann 2024), and rapid changes in people's way of life (Kreutzmann 2006; Anwar et al 2019) along with socio-ecological changes in farming (MacDonald 2010; Spies 2018) to demographic and land use changes in the region. Education and off-farm employment have tremendously increased over the decades and have changed the availability of labor needed to work on the farm (Benz 2014). Moreover, splitting of the household has led to continuous land

fragmentation and the construction of new houses on the fertile land is usurping the land further.

From food granary to begging bowl

Historically, the Ghizer region was known as the food basket of Gilgit since it used to supply wheat to all the other regions and to the garrison stationed in Gilgit (Dittrich 1998). It is clearly engraved in people's memory as one of the professors at the Karakorum University recalled:

"These days Ghizer district falls under food insecure region. Previously, it used to provide grain supply all over the region, not only to Gilgit but even to Pamirs." (Gilgit, 2022)

This transformation from excess to dependency is linked to the market-centric perspective and commercialization push of the state (Spies 2020) which has transformed the subsistence agriculture-based society into a modern, market and cash-oriented economy to "break with the past" (Edelman and Wolford 2017) and to follow the path to modernity. It can be clearly seen in the words of the director, agriculture research institute:

"We are introducing such packages which can generate more and more income and through that income people will buy other food stuff. So, when in future the subsidy is withdrawn, they can sell their produce to buy other food stuff." (Gilgit, Agriculture Department, 2022)

The provision of subsidized wheat by the state disincentivized and discouraged the farmers from growing wheat. Consequently, they shifted towards cash crop production such as potatoes (which was also sponsored by the state through subsidized seeds, credit schemes and agriculture mechanization) and later to other horticultural crops.

"Subsidized wheat is really cheap. If we grow on our own farms, it is costly, we have to bear much more expense. The question is why we should grow, when we can buy it so cheap from the state. (Farmer in Chatorkhand Village, 2022)

Horticulture - "the comparative advantage"

Interestingly, the Government of Pakistan did not devise any agriculture policy for the region of G-B for the past seven decades. However, the state has been the pushing towards horticulture since the 1970s, in particular, towards cherry, apples, apricot and almonds orchards. As early as 1972 (Abdullah, 1972), a report on agricultural development in Northern Areas clearly argues that the "correct approach to develop these areas would be to concentrate on the development of fruit orchards by bringing more area under them and increasing yield" (p. 12-13). Since then, all national and international institutions (JICA 2010, FAO 2015, IFAD 2015, GOGB 2018) and development agencies working in the region have followed the same strategy and have promoted horticulture and cash crops.

Only recently, in 2018, a provincial agricultural sector policy was drafted which was said to be approved by the cabinet after a small revision. This agricultural policy heavily focused on the promotion of the private sector, modernization of farming practices and further commercialization of agriculture through high value chain fruits, vegetable farming and horticulture for the “*economic growth*” (GoGB 2018). Within the policy document it is clearly stated that,

“The goal of a policy options is not necessarily to maximize growth of production in any particular sub-sector/commodity but to create the necessary and sufficient conditions for the agricultural sector/farmers to adjust to a more competitive environment and uplift their standards of living. The production structure as well as the agro processing industry and inputs delivery systems should be allowed to adjust rapidly to changes in domestic/foreign market conditions (output and input) and technologies, through changes in cropping patterns and farm structure as opposed to sticking with few crops, as has been the case” (p.3, emphasis added).

It is quite evident from the quote that the policy is not concerned with the food security and needs of the population in the region, but concerned with market requirements. This vision of the state continues to shape the local agrarian landscape in the valley. It is seen from this quote of an officer at the Agriculture Department in Gilgit:

“We are taking people towards comparative advantage. Our comparative advantage is in horticulture. Our climatic condition favours horticulture. So, we tell farmers even if there will be no subsidies then you can do trade. You can do commodity

trade. Once you will have cash in hand then you can buy it from anywhere” (Gilgit 2022).

The language use by the state officials is very much embedded in the neoclassical economist paradigm.

Disappearance of local grains and local seed varieties

The food basket of Ishkoman once consisted of variety of grains such as wheat, barley, buckwheat, fava beans, millets foxtail varieties, maize, peas, lathyrus and sorghum. These cereals were grown on rotational basis as it kept the soils healthy, and beans helped in the process of nitrogen fixation. They also provided a rich source of nutrition, proteins, dietary fiber, and essential minerals with high levels of antioxidants (Khan et. al 2013). It was a common practice to mix different type of grains, such as barley, maize and millet, for bread making and it was eaten with buttermilk and yoghurt. It was commonly consumed in different forms during different seasons (York 2023) in the area. However, the reliance on subsidized wheat has not only affected the availability of food produced locally (Fig. 2) but has also resulted in the change of the tastebuds, food habits and the historical food basket. It has affected the entire local food system and caused the disappearance of numerous varieties of wheat and other local cereals. Many local varieties of wheat with the names of *Ladakhi*, *Bachgallian*, *Safaidak* and *Jaldak* were once commonly grown and preferred due to their adaptability to local environment have completely disappeared now. Fig. 3 shows the decline in the production of local grains.

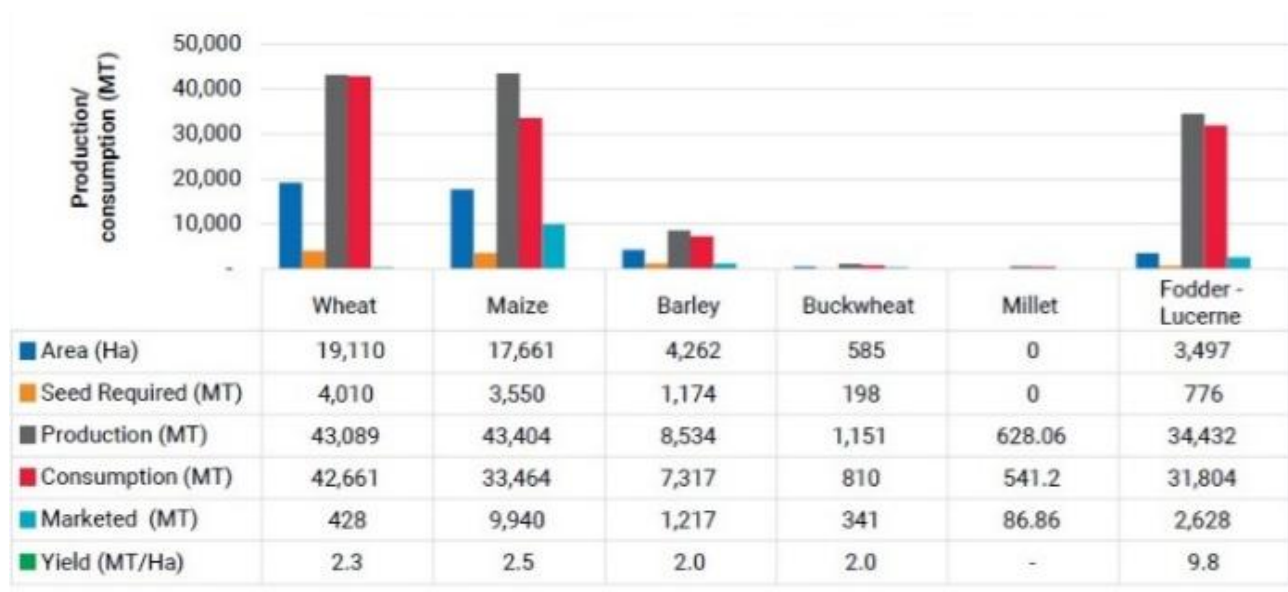


Fig. 3: Cereal and fodder crops production and consumption in Gilgit-Baltistan 2014

(Source: Soni Jawari Centre, 2022, modified)

It was quite surprising to note that whenever elderly farmers shared the names of the old grains, it always left young people surprised as they were completely unaware about these grains, which clearly indicates that along with the loss of nutritious cereals, local knowledge, ways of production, consumption and history is also being lost in the process (Fig. 4). The state and its institutions have no interest in recording the indigenous varieties of grains and seeds. This can be seen from the quote:

“What is the value of these grains in the market? Only if they fetch a good price should they be protected and promoted” (Agriculture Research Institute, Gilgit 2022)

In view of the state officials, it is left to the market to decide what is to be protected and “valued”.

Wheat subsidy - A consensus or contestation

Kanjwal (2023) in her latest book on Kashmir gives a detailed account of the role of subsidies on wheat and rice in remaking and shaping the sentiments of Kashmiris towards Indian state and providing legitimacy to the government at that time. She highlights that these subsidies heavily changed the diets of Kashmiris, especially in rural areas. A similar parallel was also observed in G-B, where subsidies have not only changed the social, economic systems, diet patterns and agrarian landscapes, but has also equally shaped people’s opinions, sentiments, and emotions towards the state. A farmer in G-B recalled the introduction of subsidies in these words:

“We get so many benefits because of the subsidy. Because it is available at very cheap price. Government’s good efforts should be equally appreciated. (Mantram Dan 2022)”

In contrast to this, some farmers, and the Awami Action Committee (AAC: a coalition of regional political, religious, and local parties) argue that state of Pakistan has used subsidy as a political tool after ending the feudal system, and for gauging the emotions and loyalties of people and for keeping the disputed region under its control.

A farmer in Chatorkhand village expressed the role of subsidies in these words:

“In one way, we have been deceived in the name of wheat subsidy, we have been made dependent on the federal government.” (Chatorkhand, 2022).

These quotes show the mixed feelings of the people towards the state and its policy. However, an interesting role that wheat subsidies have played is acting as an invisible social adhesive which has brought sectarianized society together. As a state official at the Soni Jawari Institute remarked:

“This subsidy on wheat, it’s a political hot potato, it’s a very touchy subject. On this question, communist, Mullah, Muslim league political party, PTI (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf), PPP (Pakistan People’s Party), all of them get united. Whenever there is discussion on revising the policy or rates, they all get together and oppose it” (Gilgit -2022).



Fig. 4: Diversity of grains once prevailed in the region
(Photos: F. Batool)

Conclusion

The introduction of wheat subsidies by the state in the region of G-B has tremendously transformed the local agrarian landscape of the region. Ishkoman valley of Ghizer district was well known for its wheat production and soil quality and used to export the wheat to the Gilgit region and Pamirs once, now have become quite dependent on the subsidized wheat. I argue that the wheat subsidies have had a profound impact on the local agri-food system. Different local grains—barley, millet, broad peas, buckwheat, broad beans, which are identified as “super foods” that were once grown and consumed excessively have now disappeared from the local food system. They have moved from diversity of nutritious grains to “wheatification” of diets. The readily availability, continuous consumption, and cheap price of wheat have not only changed the diet diversity but also erased the traditional ecological knowledge of

production, storage, and ways of consuming traditional crops and have created a social, ecological, and epistemic rift (Schneider and McMichael, 2010). The decline in crop diversity also caused a loss of species linked to these agri-food systems. Moreover, due to the supply of subsidized wheat for many years, the scattered and remote lands in the pasture have been abandoned for farming, which has also caused decline in overall household food production. The subsidized wheat has created a political dependence on federal institutions and has declined farmers autonomy over their own decision making for food production. On the other hand, the continuous push of the state toward horticulturalization (cherry, apples, and almonds) and cash crops has changed the local landscapes from farming towards orchards. It has made the remote and marginal region further vulnerable in terms of food security. The policy of subsidized wheat has legitimized the state and gauged the emotions of the society towards it.

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