Digitalising Inclusion and Social Protection in Pakistan

Social protection is commonly understood as:

All public and private initiatives that provide income or consumption transfers to the poor, protect the vulnerable against livelihood risks and enhance the social status and rights of the marginalised; with the overall objective of reducing the economic and social vulnerability of poor, vulnerable and marginalised groups.

There is a general consensus that social protection in Pakistan is the obligation of the State in order to provide basic human rights as mandated in the country’s constitution. Initially, Social Protection Programmes (SPPs) were implemented on needs basis, but Pakistan is gradually transitioning towards a rights-based approach, at least for programmes providing services in the field of health and education. However, given limited resources, the government tries to target as many people as possible even when the programmes are not universal. With budget and resource constraints, there is always a trade-off between adequacy of benefits and number of people covered. The first priority is to ensure that the programmes being implemented are focusing on the poor and vulnerable and are helping them to reduce risk and mitigate their vulnerability.

The social protection landscape in Pakistan is very fragmented. For example, in Punjab, there are 119 programmes covering risks such as healthcare, old age, survivors, disability, sickness, child or family benefits, unemployment, housing, labour market risks, poverty and social exclusion, being implemented by up to 23 departments or institutions. While the programmes cover all age groups across the life cycle, most cover only a small percentage of the target population under each.

The federal government remains constrained to invest in social protection due to their ongoing fiscal crunch. Despite difficulties to raise resources for targeted pro-poor subsidies, the government has tried to expand interventions through the Ehsaas program. These interventions also compliment the cash transfers, education and health services at provincial level, while active labour market programs such as skill and vocational trainings have also been expanded by both federal and provincial governments.
The GIZ Social Protection – Social Health Protection Programme (SP-SHP) supports the national, provincial and district level governments in designing, coordinating, implementing, and promoting SP schemes in order to increase awareness and access to them. Thereby, GIZ SP-SHP focuses on the harmonisation and coordination of existing SP schemes at provincial and district level in the provinces of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa with the overall goal to improve access to needs-based SP services for poor people and people at risk of falling into poverty. To achieve this goal, the project is supporting the design, set-up and implementation of tailor-made Single Window Service (SWS) models for SP in the two focal provinces.

In late 2018, the Poverty Alleviation & Coordination Council (PACC) was constituted under the leadership of Special Advisor to the Prime Minister. The mandate of PACC was to evaluate existing poverty alleviation mechanisms in the country and develop a roadmap for effectively bringing people out of poverty. During PACC consultative meetings, the Sustainable Development Unit (SDU)’s initiative was presented, namely the One Window Operation (OWO) for social protection and the Beneficiary Registry System (BRS) which was developed for the SDU, Planning and Development Department (P&DD), Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, implemented with technical assistance from GIZ.

Subsequently, as explained above, a poverty alleviation and social protection reform strategy (Ehsaas) was launched by the newly formed Poverty Alleviation and Social Safety Division (PASSD) with the purpose of creating a coordinated and integrated social protection system for improving efficiency and transparency to address the current fragmentation. A key policy action under this objective of Ehsaas is the ‘creation of a one-window social protection operation to assist beneficiaries of social protection and to reduce duplication and abuse.’

The purpose of this session is to discuss the way forward in developing a digital social protection system. The panel session will include discussions by GIZ and relevant government representatives on the following:

1. Single Window Service (SWS) model, Beneficiary Registration System (BRS) and bottle necks to digitalisation such as Business processes in departments; HR capacities; interoperability, data sharing protocol and data protection.
2. International Best Practices on digitalisation for social protection
3. Organisational routines and business processes in public sector organisations. How these are set and how these evolve over time
4. IT Policy and whether it addresses key issues such as interoperability, digital signatures and data protection.

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References