Role of Social Protection in Sustainable Development: Tackling Poverty and Vulnerability

Social protection can be defined as the set of policies and systems aimed at helping the poor and vulnerable of society in order to reduce their exposure to risks and vulnerabilities. It also targets non-poor to support them in managing risks in their lives in order to prevent them from falling into poverty. There is a growing consensus among the international development community that social protection is the key to fighting poverty, hunger and economic inequality, especially in developing countries. In other words, it has potential to contribute to long-term sustainable development especially when it is built under a broader and more integrated framework. Moreover, social protection has also been mentioned as an important tool to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1: eradicating poverty; SDG 10: reducing inequality, and other SDGs related to hunger, good health and well-being and education, etc.

Pakistan has introduced a number of Social Protection Programmes (SPPs) to address the growing challenge of poverty and inequality. There are a range of public programmes known as Social Assistance Programmes (non-contributory schemes targeting poor and vulnerable); Social Security Programmes (contributory schemes targeting the formal sector); labour market interventions (schemes that generate employment), etc. These include the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP), Pakistan Bait-ul-Mal (PBM), Zakat (charity) under social assistance etc. that are targeting specifically for the poor and vulnerable. Moreover, social security programmes such as Employees’ Old-Age Benefits Institution (EOBI), Workers Welfare Fund are targeting workers in the formal sector and labour market interventions such as People’s Rozgar Programme, Apna Rozgar Scheme aimed at enhancing employment levels in Pakistan.

Though the existing SPPs in Pakistan are offering different types of socioeconomic benefits to the target population, there are several challenges that need to be addressed to enhance their role. The lack of a national level policy framework to consolidate, coordinate and mainstream these initiatives is one of the major challenges in Pakistan as social protection has been transferred to the provinces after the 18th Constitutional Amendment. Planning Commission of the Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform developed a Draft National Policy Framework for social protection in Pakistan that has been approved by the provinces and its final approval at national level is yet awaited (Watson et al. 2017).

In addition to the importance of a national policy framework, there are also issues regarding implementation of SPPs highlighted by respondents in a study on knowledge, attitude and practices of people regarding social protection. The study was conducted by SDPI and Deutsche Gesellschaft für International Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). The lack of knowledge about existence of the SPPs among the public limits the number of programme beneficiaries. Moreover, there exists knowledge gap regarding eligibility criteria of the SPPs that is creating misconception about the unfair distribution of SPP benefits among public. The lack of comprehensive information is another issue that results in difficult access to programme benefits. In addition to knowledge gaps, beneficiaries also face issues while making complaints and getting satisfactory and timely response of their complaints.

To highlight the importance and current situation of social protection in Pakistan, issues being faced by the public in existing SPPs and to discuss the importance of a national policy framework, government representatives and experts on social protection will present their views
in this panel being organised in collaboration with GIZ. The basic objective of the panel is to discuss the following points:

1. Importance and impact of social protection in achieving sustainable development
2. Social protection landscape in Pakistan
3. Salient features of the national policy framework for social protection in Pakistan that has been drafted by the Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform
4. Knowledge gaps and existing practices of people regarding social protection highlighting the challenges being faced by them along with policy implications of these challenges.

The panel will provide a platform to public officials, experts and researchers to sit together and discuss the abovementioned points in detail and build a better understanding of the ground realities of the SPPs in Pakistan. It will also generate a comprehensive discussion on the ways and strategies to address the existing gaps and issues. The discussion on the features of the draft national policy framework by the Government of Pakistan would be another important outcome of the panel that is necessary to have a well-coordinated and sustainable approach for the provision of social protection in Pakistan.

References

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