

State of Social Protection in Pakistan: Need, Coverage, Legislative Status, Challenges, and Way Forward

The Social Protection System of any country is actually tested in the time of social crises and economic impasse. COVID-19 pandemic has drawn a disquieting scenario around the globe, mainly in health and economic sectors. One thing that has become clear in this pandemic is that countries that have effective health and social protection systems in place and that provide universal coverage are better placed to cushion their people from the risk posed to disruptions in livelihoods due to COVID-19. However, countries that lack a vigorous health and social protection system will need to establish policies in a provisional way, which is likely to lead to a defined and deferred response.

COVID-19 hit Pakistan on 26 February 2020. The pandemic had spread to all provinces, with over 115 districts affected, largely in Punjab and Sindh. The Government of Pakistan (GoP) with support from partners had responded to the pandemic by strengthening coordination, case management, disease surveillance, laboratory, community mobilisation and sensitisation. It formulated the COVID-19 Pakistan Preparedness and Response Plan in line with the Pakistan National Action Plan in consultation with Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) to support the Ministry of National Health Services Regulations and Coordination (MoNHSR&C), National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) and Provincial Departments of Health (PDMAs) under the overall efforts of the GoP. The primary focus of the plan continues to be prevention, preparedness, and treatment of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Moreover, the Government has taken prompt measures to assist the vulnerable class. The COVID-19 Relief Cash Transfer programme has been launched as *Ehsaas* Emergency Cash Programme planned in the context of the economic hardship being experienced by the vulnerable due to the ongoing coronavirus crisis. The currently stalled economic activity affects daily wage earners and piece-rate workers, the most. In addition, layoffs in the formal economy are pushing people below the poverty line. Financial assistance under the Programme is meant to help them buy rations so that they do not go hungry. This programme covers 12 million families, PKR 12,000 per family with the total budget of PKR 144 billion.

This reactive approach adopted by the GoP may assist the affected individuals on temporary basis, but in the end, there is a need to think of a sustainable and effective social protection programme in order to protect the economy against future crises and shocks. Hence, the Social Protection Resource Centre (SPRC) will launch its flagship report on 'Status of Social Protection in Pakistan 2020' and discuss the need, coverage, legislative status, challenges and way forward for social protection based on its findings, with special reference to COVID-19.

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