



Maintains

Research supporting social services to adapt to shocks

Towards shock-responsive social protection: lessons from the COVID-19 response in Pakistan

POLICY BRIEF | March 2021

Introduction

The Maintains programme is studying how Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Kenya, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, and Uganda have adapted and expanded their social protection systems in order to support households and mitigate the economic impact of COVID-19. This study aims to identify policy actions to better prepare national social protection systems to respond to future crises. Based on a [conceptual framework](#), the study analyses data from literature reviews, key informant interviews, and microsimulations. This brief summarises key findings from the Pakistan case study.

The first case of COVID-19 in Pakistan was recorded on 26 February 2020 and the country went into lockdown on 22 March 2020. As a result of the pandemic and the associated restrictions, Pakistan recorded a 0.4% decline in the real GDP growth rate during the 2019/20 financial year, against the previously projected growth of 3.3%. Estimates from our microsimulation suggest a significant increase in headcount poverty in Pakistan due to COVID-19. In the short term, the poverty rate is estimated to increase by over 35 percentage points in urban areas and by 32 percentage points in rural areas (see Figure 1).

How did the social protection system respond to the pandemic?

On 1 April 2020, the Government of Pakistan (GoP) launched the Ehsaas Emergency Cash (EEC) Programme as the primary social protection response to COVID-19. The EEC Programme built upon the existing structures and systems of Pakistan's main social protection programme, the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP), to provide additional cash benefits to 5 million existing 'Kafaalat' beneficiaries (vertical expansion) and 11.9 million temporarily enrolled new beneficiaries (horizontal expansion).

In addition, some provincial governments such as Punjab and Sindh also implemented specific social assistance programmes to support vulnerable households economically affected by COVID-19.

The Ehsaas Ration Programme connected donors and beneficiaries for the distribution of monthly groceries or equivalent cash through a government-led portal. Finally, a number of humanitarian agencies implemented humanitarian assistance programmes in alignment with the government social protection programmes (see Table 1).

While all responses were important, this case study and policy brief focusses its assessment on the EEC and UNHCR's cash assistance for refugees. The rationale for this selection is based on the extensive scope and size of those programmes and the significant amount of information that is available for them.

How well designed were these responses in mitigating the impact of the pandemic?

Shock-responsive social protection requires: (a) **expanding coverage** to those made vulnerable by the crisis; (b) **adequacy** of benefit levels that will address the new needs; and (c) **comprehensiveness** of benefits linked to longer-term rehabilitation and recovery. Given resource constraints in terms of meeting the scale and range of needs, no single response can meet all three criteria simultaneously while guaranteeing **inclusion**, resulting in difficult

trade-offs. In Pakistan, coverage was impressive but a low benefit value meant that, ultimately, the response had a limited impact in off-setting the poverty impacts of COVID-19:

- **Coverage:** Pakistan's social protection response achieved widespread coverage. The EEC, which was by far the largest programme in the response, reached 14.8 million families. This constitutes 72%

of those in need (according to our microsimulation) and around 47% of Pakistan's total population.¹

- **Adequacy:** The one-off transfer value of PKR 12,000 (£55) applied by both the EEC and UNHCR Cash Assistance Programme for Refugees was lower than lost income, the cost of basic needs, and routine expenditure. The transfer value is estimated to have covered 13% of routine expenditure and 3.46% of daily consumption for the poorest 40% of the population. The transfer value appears to have been decided on the basis of the available fiscal space, rather than an assessment of the cost of basic needs. The transfer value for the other programmes was even lower (see Table 1). As a result, Pakistan's social protection response only offset a small amount of the economic shock from COVID-19 (see Figure 1).
- **Comprehensiveness:** Responses were limited to subsistence support, without linking to interventions that address additional risks that vulnerable households might face. Such risks may be related

to issues such as gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health, childcare, women's safety, or livelihoods.

- **Inclusion:** The extensive use of technology in the delivery of the social protection response may have put some vulnerable groups at risk of exclusion. While approximately 61% of the EEC disbursements were made to women, women from rural areas are among the groups least likely to have a national identity card or access to information and communication technology, e.g. mobile phones, which were crucial for registration and enrolment (25% of women, compared with 68% of men, have access). The strong reliance on electronic and print media for awareness raising also meant that messaging is less likely to have reached disadvantaged households living in remote or nomadic communities, who have limited access to such media. These groups are also less likely to be included in the social registry.

Table 1: Summary of system adaptations to support new needs

Programme	Targeted coverage	Eligibility criteria	Benefit size
EEC Programme <i>BISP</i>	16.9 million families	Existing 'Kafaalat' beneficiaries; poor families identified through National Socioeconomic Registry (NSER) and provincial and district administrations; labourers who suffered income loss	PKR 12,000 (£55), one-time cash
Special Guzara (Sustenance) Allowance in Punjab <i>Zakat and Ushr Department, Government of Punjab</i>	200,000 families	Daily wage labourers whose income had been severely impacted by the lockdown	PKR 1,500 (£7), monthly cash assistance for an unknown number of months
Ehsaas Ration Programme <i>PASS Division</i>	Not available	Not available	PKR 3,000 (£14) or equivalent in food packs
Cash Transfer Programme in Sindh <i>Social Welfare Department</i>	Not available	Households economically affected by COVID-19	Cash assistance of unknown amount
Education support programme for girls <i>World Food Programme</i>	21,000 girls	Families with adolescent girls enrolled in Grades 6 to 10	PKR 1,000 (£4.6) per month for three months
Cash Assistance for Afghan Refugees <i>UNHCR</i>	75,000 refugee families	Afghan refugee households with 'specific needs' (see full report for categories)	PKR 12,000 (£55), one-time cash
Various cash grants <i>International Rescue Committee</i>	Multiple grants	Families who lost their income due to COVID-19; ethnic minorities or transgender communities	Multiple grants

How effective was the delivery of the responses in practice?

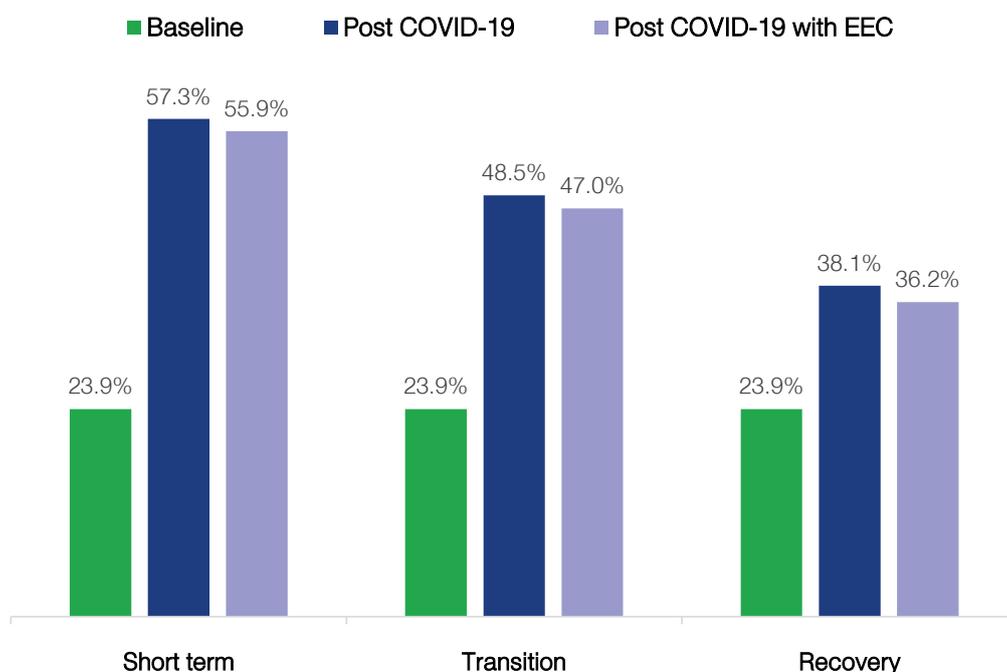
The EEC Programme, and the social protection response in Pakistan more widely, was rolled out in a timely and effective manner. The GoP launched the EEC Programme on 1 April 2020, within the first 10 days of the nationwide lockdown. Within a week of the announcement, over 7.3 million people were already enrolled and payment disbursement followed immediately afterwards. Key enablers and constraints to timely and effective implementation included the following:

- Government ownership and coordination:** The GoP, including the Prime Minister, showed leadership on the EEC, which was underpinned by a ‘whole-of-government’ approach to implementing the programme across the country. This commitment is also reflected in the financing of the response, which was predominantly funded from domestic resources from both the federal and regional levels. The National Coordination Committee (NCC) and National Command and Operations Centre (NCO) were established to coordinate the response between the GoP and provincial governments. The Prime Minister’s COVID-19 Relief Fund financed the support to unemployed labourers under the EEC and comprised donor contributions matched by federal funding (four rupees for each rupee donated).
- Leveraging technology for delivery:** All the

major steps in the EEC implementation benefited immensely from the systems that relied on technology. These included: seeking support from telecom service providers to connect with potential beneficiaries through SMS messages; running advertisements on television, radio, and print media; conducting background checks using multiple databases by the National Database Administration Authority (NADRA); and distributing money after biometric verification. While the use of technology made the roll-out more efficient, it may have perpetuated inequalities due to lower access and literacy by marginalised groups.

- Updated and dynamic social registries:** The social protection responses to COVID-19 re-emphasised the need for an updated and dynamic registry/database for shock-responsive preparedness. BISP was able to roll out the emergency cash transfer in a very short time span because there were existing systems to build on. However, in the absence of an updated NSER, it had to develop other mechanisms for enrolment and verification that involved an SMS service and website portal, which took some time and effort to set up. Similarly, UNHCR also struggled with the quality of the limited data available on the socioeconomic conditions of refugees and asylum-seekers in Pakistan, and relied heavily on information from community leaders.

Figure 1: Headcount poverty at upper national poverty line (percentage of population)



Source: Authors using 2015/16 Household Integrated Income and Consumption Survey data. For full details, see the microsimulations report.

Figure 1 shows that the EEC is likely to have only a marginal impact on reducing poverty. Our microsimulations estimated the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on headcount poverty under three scenarios: the ‘short-term’ scenario is based on the expected impact of containment measures; the ‘transition’ scenario assumes that over time some of the negative effects of the pandemic will fade; and the ‘recovery’ scenario assumes the impacts of the pandemic have almost faded away.

Preparedness actions toward a shock-responsive social protection system

The GoP has shown strong commitment and leadership to using social protection to respond to crises (including droughts, floods, conflict, and COVID-19). While there were considerable successes in the COVID-19 response, particularly in terms of its speed, there are a range of actions required to ensure that systems are well placed to respond next time (for full details, see the main report). These include the following:

- Coordination of the EEC Programme was unique due to being centred around the NCC and NCOC, which were constituted to lead and manage the overall response to COVID-19. Directives from the NCC and NCOC helped push forward the programme and ensure collaboration among government agencies. However, this also highlighted the underlying institutional reform challenges facing the wider social protection system in Pakistan. The devolution of social protection in Pakistan remains incomplete and a **significant reform effort has to be undertaken to clarify provincial mandates on social protection, disaster risk management and shock-responsive social protection. This needs to be accompanied by associated efforts to strengthen administrative capacity at the provincial level.**
- Despite budget constraints, **transfer values should be clearly linked to a rationale relating to meeting households' needs and maintaining resilience during the shock**, even if programmes are not meant to cover the full extent of household needs. Trade-offs between coverage and adequacy and their effect on poverty reduction should be considered when designing emergency responses.
- The EEC Programme showed that there is a need to think more deeply about the targeting criteria, to ensure those in need are not left out of the government's support. Through a consultative process with key stakeholders in social protection and DRM, the GoP should **develop a set of contingency protocols before shocks occur. Such protocols should clearly differentiate between different types of shocks and define the roles and responsibilities of the federal government versus the regional governments.** This may result in a more comprehensive targeting strategy that leaves fewer people behind, and may also be easier to operationalise during implementation.
- Over the years, NADRA has provided identity verification services across most shocks in Pakistan. Given how crucial possession of a national identity card is to accessing government support during a shock, **NADRA should proactively extend coverage to the most disadvantaged, marginalised, and remote communities.**
- The EEC response has highlighted the need to strengthen the mechanism for registering and resolving citizens' feedback during a shock. Moving forward, the GoP should **develop a robust and systematic appeals and grievance mechanism** that allows applicants and beneficiaries to register complaints. It should also ensure that information regarding the mechanism is communicated openly and clearly to applicants and beneficiaries.

About Maintains

Maintains is a five-year (2018–2023) operational research programme building a strong evidence base on how health, education, nutrition, and social protection systems can respond more quickly, reliably, and effectively to changing needs during and after shocks, whilst also maintaining existing services. Maintains is working in six focal countries—Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Kenya, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, and Uganda—undertaking research to build evidence and providing technical assistance to support practical implementation. Lessons from this work will be used to inform policy and practice at both national and global levels.

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For more information on Maintains:

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