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INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES, RESEARCH & ANALYSIS

National Seminar

Social Welfare Development in Pakistan

Successes, Challenges, and Pathways Forward

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INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES, RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS (ISSRA)
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INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES, RESEARCH & ANALYSIS

NATIONAL SEMINAR

"SOCIAL WELFARE DEVELOPMENT IN PAKISTAN: SUCCESSES, CHALLENGES, AND PATHWAYS FORWARD"

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INTRODUCTION

Social welfare in Pakistan has grown steadily, with programmes at both federal and provincial levels addressing poverty, health, education, and food security. These initiatives have played a crucial role in reducing vulnerability and providing safety nets for disadvantaged communities. However, the reach and quality of impact remain uneven, reflecting differences in priorities, resources, and implementation capacity across regions.

In this context, the Institute for Strategic Studies Research and Analysis (ISSRA), National Defense University, organized a seminar titled "Social Welfare Development in Pakistan: Successes, Challenges, and Pathways Forward". The seminar aimed to foster a constructive discussion to strengthen Pakistan's social welfare system through better coordination, integrated data management, and improved governance for more transparent, equitable, and sustainable human development outcomes.

The event comprised two sessions moderated by Ms Faiza Wahab, Food Security Advisor, Nutrition and Social Protection, GIZ, with Dr Abdul Bari, President of the Indus Hospital & Health Network, serving as the chief guest. The first session focused on the provincial perspectives regarding social welfare development.

1. Punjab's Perspective by Ms Jahan Ara Manzoor Wattoo, VC, Punjab Social Protection Authority (PSPA)

2. Balochistan's Perspective by Mr Asmatullah Quresh, Secretary, Social Welfare Department

3. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's (KP) Perspective by Dr Aneela Mehfooz Durrani, Secretary, Population Welfare Department

4. Sindh's Perspective by Ms Mahwish Qalbani, Director, Sindh Social Protection Authority (SSPA)

The second session focused on the perspectives of the United Nations, private sector organizations, federal institutions, and data management bodies.

1. UN's Perspective by Ms Coco Ushiyama, WFP Country Director

2. Private Sector's Perspective by Ms Shandana Humayun Khan, CEO, Rural Support Programmes Network

3. Federal Perspective by Mr Ali Kemal, Chief Employment and Research, Ministry of Planning

4. Data Management Organizations' Perspective by Mr Rahman Qamar, Chief Project Officer, NADRA

The seminar was attended by diverse participants, including subject matter experts, policymakers, civil society representatives, and students from various universities in Islamabad. Overall, the seminar provided a platform for the attendees to engage in an intellectually rewarding discourse.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Social welfare in Pakistan is framed as a moral, constitutional, and faith-based responsibility, rooted in dignity, inclusion, and compassion.

- Pakistan's welfare spending reached a historic high of Rs 4.26 trillion in 2024-25, with the two largest federal programmes, Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) and Pakistan Bait-ul-Mal (PBM), having annual budgets of Rs 716.37 billion and Rs 14.9 billion, respectively, covering beneficiaries nationwide.

- Zevar-e-Taleem Programme (ZTP), managed by PSPA, proves that a well-designed conditional cash transfer can break intergenerational poverty by keeping girls in school, as demonstrated by an 18% increase in girls' enrolment.

- The Social Welfare & Human Rights Department of Balochistan has a broad mandate, an extensive field presence, and oversees key programmes such as the Balochistan Awami Endowment Fund and KUMAK. Yet, it remains under-resourced, lacking updated data, adequate funding, and infrastructure to fully meet the province's social protection needs.

- Sindh is strengthening its social protection system with a focus on maternal and child health through the MAMTA programme, which provides Rs 30,000 in conditional cash transfers to 1.3 million vulnerable women during the critical 1,000-day period.

- Despite facing conflict, displacement, terrorism, and climate-induced disasters, KP demonstrates resilience. KP's Social Welfare Department supports families in poverty, women in distress, and persons with disabilities.

- Pakistan's social welfare system faces significant challenges, including overlapping federal and provincial mandates, inadequate coordination, limited budgets, and incomplete data resulting from parallel operations and poor integration between departments.

- Strengthening Pakistan's social welfare system requires better coordination and modernization, beginning with formalizing NADRA's database as the single foundation for all social welfare programmes. Alongside a unified national registry, stronger provincial councils, and wider digital and financial access, these reforms will advance equity, dignity, and coherent policy action so that all citizens are effectively supported.

SUMMARY OF THE PROCEEDINGS

- Pakistan has transitioned from a charity-based model to an inclusive, rights-based social protection framework, delivering financial, health, and educational support to millions, particularly women and children.

- The BISP has emerged as the backbone of Pakistan's welfare system, providing financial assistance to over 10 million women nationwide through direct cash transfers.

- Under BISP, the Kafaalat initiative delivers quarterly stipends to 9.4 million women, Taleemi Wazaif supports education for 9.7 million children, Nashonuma provides health and nutrition support to 2 million mothers and children, and the Undergraduate Scholarship Programme benefits about 10,000 students annually.

- Complementary efforts by PBM, Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund (PPAF), and the Trust for Voluntary Organisations (TVO) strengthen women's empowerment, vocational training, poverty graduation, and child welfare, benefiting millions across Pakistan.

- The federal government, through the Ministry of Poverty Alleviation and Social Safety (MoPASS), is moving toward digital transformation via integrated databases, mobile applications, and MIS systems to improve targeting and transparency.

- In Punjab, the ZTP, initially launched in 2003, is a successful example of gender-responsive, conditional cash transfers. The programme increased girls' school attendance and enrolment in poor districts through stipends linked to 80% attendance and grade promotion.

- ZTP has raised the likelihood of completing secondary education by 1.3% per year, delayed early marriages, and indirectly contributed to improving maternal health and reducing mortality rates.

- With 1.1 million student beneficiaries across 17 low-literacy districts, ZTP has achieved international recognition as a model for data-driven, education-linked social protection.

- There has been an 18% rise in girls' enrolment and a 15% increase among boys, alongside improved income levels for women in ZTP-covered communities.

- In Sindh, the Social Protection Authority outlined progress under the "Strengthening Social Protection Development System in Sindh" project (2023–2027), which targets 1.3 million beneficiaries in 15 rural districts with the highest poverty levels.

- The Mother and Child Support Programme (MAMTA) under this initiative provides Rs 30,000 in conditional cash transfers to pregnant women and mothers of children under two, promoting maternal and child health across 772 health facilities.

- MAMTA also includes a Contingent Emergency Response Component (CERC) to ensure assistance during natural disasters and crises.

- The KP government shared achievements under its Social Protection Policy 2022, which promotes institutional resilience through social care facilities such as Dar-ul-Amans, child protection units, and rehabilitation centres.

- Despite security and climate challenges, KP has maintained service continuity for vulnerable populations through an integrated and gender-sensitive welfare approach.

- The Balochistan Social Welfare Department covers rehabilitation and welfare for vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities, drug addicts, persecuted women, transgender persons, prisoners, and at-risk children.

- Balochistan's major initiatives include the Balochistan Awami Endowment Fund (BAEF), with Rs 7.5 billion allocated to support treatment for seven major diseases, benefiting over 4,000 patients, and the KUMAK Fund, providing financial assistance to persons with disabilities in education, health, marriage, and skills training.

- The Directorate of Literacy and Non-Formal Education in Balochistan runs 480 Alternative Learning Centres and 150 Adult Literacy Centres, targeting the province's 3.1 million out-of-school children, including 1.8 million aged 9-16 years.

- The private sector, such as the Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN), based on social mobilisation, poverty ranking, participatory planning, and separate community forums for men and women, has empowered rural populations through savings, microfinance, and local governance.

- Successful private-public partnerships demonstrated how public funding can integrate effectively with community-led mechanisms for livelihood support in agriculture, livestock, and enterprise development.

- However, the provincial social welfare programmes face critical gaps such as outdated population data, limited financial allocations, and non-functional welfare facilities.

- The NADRA serves as the backbone of Pakistan's social welfare infrastructure, ensuring transparent, data-driven targeting of beneficiaries.

- NADRA's National Socio-Economic Registry (NSER), launched in 2008, is the country's largest socio-economic database, covering 36 million households and serving as the main reference for all social protection programmes.

- NADRA's systems integrate demographic, biometric, and socio-economic information to ensure efficient and inclusive service delivery.

- NADRA has facilitated major initiatives, including BISP Smart Cards, bait Debit Cards, Watan Cards, and the COVID-19 Emergency Cash Programme, disbursing Rs 1.3 trillion to 9.3 million beneficiaries while filtering out ineligible applicants to save Rs 10 billion.

- During the pandemic, it processed 165 million applications and enabled cash transfers of Rs 180 billion to 17 million verified beneficiaries, demonstrating rapid crisis response capacity.

- Beyond social protection, NADRA developed the Sehat Sahulat Programme (covering 53 million families in 140 districts) and the National Immunisation Management System (NIMS) for digital vaccination records.

- The UN system has commended Pakistan's decade-long progress in developing social protection and resilience frameworks with support from UNICEF, WFP, WHO, FAO, and ILO.

- The UN advocated a people-centred welfare model, focusing on dignity, fairness, and continuity across the life cycle while urging integration of climate resilience and support for informal workers.

- It calls for the creation of a federal–provincial service integration to ensure interoperability, shared indicators, and mutual recognition of welfare entitlements nationwide.

- There is a need to institutionalise community-based poverty graduation programmes as part of Pakistan's national welfare strategy, transitioning from dependency to self-reliance.

- Pakistan's welfare architecture must prioritise integration, digital inclusion, and collaboration, bridging federal, provincial, and community systems to ensure sustainable social protection.

CONCLUSION

The National Seminar underscored Pakistan's shift from a charity-based to a rights-based, data-driven social welfare system. Federal programmes such as BISP, PBM, PPAF, and EOBI, alongside provincial initiatives like Punjab's Zewar-e-Taleem and Sindh's MAMTA, have expanded support in poverty reduction, education, health, and women's empowerment. With welfare expenditure reaching Rs 4.26 trillion, Pakistan has strengthened its commitment to inclusive and sustainable human development.

Data integration and institutional coordination have become key pillars of the welfare system. NADRA and the National Socio-Economic Registry have improved transparency and targeting, while community-based approaches have enhanced local ownership and sustainability. However, the system continues to face gaps in data quality, funding, and human resources, especially in underserved regions such as Balochistan, where facilities and outreach remain limited.

The path ahead necessitates enhanced institutional integration, technological advancement, and inclusive access to services. Priorities include developing a unified national registry, strengthening provincial social protection councils, and expanding digital and financial inclusion. Ultimately, an effective social welfare system must promote equity, uphold human dignity, and ensure coherent policy action, thereby safeguarding that no individual in Pakistan is excluded from essential support.

PICTURE GALLERY

Conversations @Foothills

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