

SDPI Online Roundtable

'Combating COVID 19: Policy Options for Pakistan'

An online roundtable titled: 'Combating COVID 19: Policy Options for Pakistan', was organized by the Sustainable Development Policy Institute on 19th March 2020. Federal Minister for Inter Provincial Coordination Dr Fehmida Mirza also participated in the roundtable on special invitation. The participants gave following policy recommendations:

Political and Institutional Harmony

This is a time when all political parties should set aside their political and ideological differences. We will have to face this pandemic as a nation rather than groups of people.

There is a need for federal and provincial political leadership to be on the same page. There is a dire need to call an urgent meeting of Council of Common Interest; it will send good signals among provinces and show uniformity and solidarity.

The National Disaster Management Authority, Inter Provincial Coordination Ministry, and Federal Health Ministry must jointly coordinate with all provinces and prepare a combined strategy to save the lives of people from COVID-19 outbreak in the country. The government needs to divert funds from different institutions like BISP, Workers Welfare Fund, PSDP, Baitul Maal etc., to finance such strategy.

NDMA and PDMA websites don't have information regarding the current situation in the country. NDMA should play a pro-active role, as it has a rich experience of dealing with emergencies.

Economy Matters but Life Matters More

It is difficult to manage economy and COVID-19 issue simultaneously. The priority should be to save people first and economy later.

Liquidity injection is needed for two groups; those which fall in poverty band and the small businesses/firms which have to pay their bills and salaries. The government will get some cushion to do so as it is expected to save US\$5 billion from oil import bill.

IMF, WB and ADB are making emergency funds available for developing countries. We have to build our case to get benefit from those funds.

The budget strategy document for 2020-21 is prepared in pre-corona context and has turned irrelevant. The National Economic Council should look into revising estimates for forthcoming budget.

Communication Strategy

A succinct communication strategy is required to communicate with people of Pakistan. Such strategy should focus on reassuring the people about steps taken by the government, while making them aware of the gravity of the situation.

Ministry of Information/ISPR should prepare uniform public service messages breaking different myths about COVID19 in vernacular languages. Mainstream media and FM radio stations should be asked to run these messages for educating the masses.

People of remote areas have little information about seriousness of the disease. Local NGOs, local leadership and local self-help groups should be contacted to create awareness in far-off areas of Sindh, Balochistan and Southern Punjab.

Religious scholars should be taken on board. Imam Masjids should be requested to promote volunteerism and local philanthropy.

Health Care

Testing and screening at mass level is required to contain the spread of this disease.

Safety concern of health care staff should be addressed on priority

Hospitals and medical facilities should start telemedicine for the patients who have ailments other than COVID-19. This would help people with compromised immunity system to avoid unnecessary exposure.

We not only require ventilators but also the trained staff to operate them. The government should do a need assessment of trained technical staff and get ready to fill in the gaps.

Along with big cities, the government needs to focus on remote areas where there are no health facilities. BHUs should be made operational there and their staff should be oriented about identifying the symptoms of COVID19 so that any potential cases in remote areas may be referred for immediate screening.

The retired and reserve paramedics should be called back and trained to look after victims in remote areas.

Containment as pre-cautionary measures

Social distancing and self-isolation are very important for the containment of spread of disease. Otherwise, we have to go for complete lockdown which is worst case scenario. There is a need to train people in social distancing and self-isolation. We should learn from Japan and focus on social distancing and isolation measures.

To protect our daily wagers, street vendors and the poor unemployed labour, we should not only make use of existing social safety nets but also mobilize private philanthropists.

To increase the economic resilience of existing BISP beneficiaries, they should be given at least two advance payments of their stipend.

It is difficult to target daily wagers for providing relief. However, a relief in utility bills may be provided for them using number of electricity units consumed as proxy indicator.

Volunteers in case of lockdown

In the coming days, an increased number of local volunteers will be required. Federal and provincial governments should declare their respective ministries/departments that may prepare the SOPs for such volunteers and provide them online trainings, where required, for self help community service in case a partial/complete lockdown becomes necessary.

The government should be ready for a complete lockdown if the situation worsens. To prepare for a complete or partial lockdown, besides volunteers, local institutions with some early response system must be identified. These institutions can help in distribution of food, medicine and other daily use items.

Supply of Essential Items

While people need to refrain themselves from panic buying, the government needs to control practices of price gouging and hoarding of food and basic survival items. Utility Stores Corporation may be used for uninterrupted provision of these items.

There is a need to prepare a list of required household items and medicines in case the disease spread out to whole of the country. Philanthropy groups and organizations should be asked to arrange their supplies as per that list.

SOPs for handling bodies

There are reports that Edhi staff shifted a body in Karachi without knowing that it was a Corona victim. The government should seek the help of religious leaders to announce an Islamic way of burying the deceased without compromising on safety and security of their near and dear ones.

Participants of the Roundtable

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