Policy Review

Socio-economic impacts of coronavirus on peripheral populations in Pakistan: A study of Swat district

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Abstract

The study aims to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Swat district taking economic stresses, social and family life, and mental health as the major indicators. Financial impact was the primary impact of the lockdown discovered during the survey. The survey finds that ban on public transport required people to utilize more expensive mode of travels that also added to their expenditures. Lockdown disrupted supply chains, hindering the availability of essential commodities, specifically in rural-urban setups.

Majority respondents said that online classes have largely been ineffective due to insufficient training of teaching staff, internet connectivity issues and lack of necessary gadgets to take advantage of the medium. Increase in domestic violence, impact on family life, growth and behaviour of children have also been found as an aftermath of the disease.

According to the findings, people have been hiding the status of their ailment which indicates the possibility of many cases going unaccounted for. This could have resulted in a bigger catastrophe had the condition of such patients deteriorated and/or resulted in deaths.

It is evident from the low percentage of inter-family transfer of disease that they are well-informed about the SOPs and the quarantine protocols.
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1. Introduction

Coronavirus shook the world in a way that every inch of life got impacted. Health sector was its first casualty followed by economy, education, and social life. What remains underexplored as yet is the pandemic impact on societies in general. It is no secret now that COVID-19 is not the last pandemic of its type to badly hit the world at this juncture, as numerous factors corroborate, we are likely to witness a number of epidemics and pandemics in the near future. The impact of the pandemic on the lives and livelihoods, general understanding of the public and their response to the outbreak will determine the failure and success of every country’s response to the current and future epidemics.

Estimates suggest that the pandemic would result in mass-scale unemployment pushing an additional 176 million people into extreme poverty, almost half of the which will be in South Asia (WorldBank, 2020). In developing countries, like Pakistan, the challenges of the pandemic become multiplied by the underlying weaknesses of the system, lack of resources to meet the needs and demands of the populations, and lack of education and public awareness.

To assess the intensity of the effects, SDPI conducted a pilot study in Swat district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, taking economic stresses, impact on social and family life and mental health as the major indicators.

2. Methodology

Through random sampling, a small qualitative survey was conducted in Swat district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Swat was chosen for the survey for its unique features. According to Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, about 14 per cent of the district’s population resides in urban setup while 86 per cent is rural population.

The respondents were presented with a set of close-ended questions with an additional option of an open-ended response with questions that could carry detailed information. The interviewer had in-depth discussions with various respondents to gauge their understanding of the questions and assess the impact at personal level.

A sample of 117 people was taken with a ratio of 51% males and 49% females. A conscious effort was made to ensure the representation of different segments of the society. A major chunk (36.8%) of the respondents was aged between 31 to 40 years, which was closely followed by the age group 18-30 years, i.e. 34%. The highest literacy rate among the respondents was 21.5% with intermediate level of education while 29% of the respondents were illiterate. Accordingly, 18% of the respondents were self-employed. 18% of the respondents were found to be the beneficiaries of the social protection programs like Benazir Income Support Program (BISP) or Ehsas programme.
3. Findings

3.1 Impact on Livelihoods

The pandemic had wide range implications for the services and informal sectors worldwide. A trend of the same could be witnessed in the findings of the survey where 65.6% reported a decrease in income, 19% experienced a temporary suspension of income while for 5.6% the income source had vanished. In 68.5% businesses, an increase in expenditure was reported. 76.8% reported an increase in the household expenses.

In a follow-up discussion, the respondents revealed that due to the lockdown, supply chains were impacted which added to the cost of material as well as interfered with the availability of necessities which eventually required them to get their required supplies from bigger stores located further from their local shops. The ban on public transport and additional measures to implement the COVID-19 Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) increased the commute and daily expenditures for households and businesses.

One far-stretching and alarming effect of the lockdown and disruption of supply chains, that the interviewers were able to derive from the follow-up discussion with the respondents, was the unavailability of pesticides and fertilizers in the local rural markets that is likely to impact the agricultural produce of the season. Reduction in agricultural produce means lesser money for the farmer, shortage of produce in the market resulting in increased prices, either reduction in export or further reducing the supply to the local market which would elevate the prices further.

Case Study

‘N’ (51) was diagnosed positive with COVID-19 earlier this year. He was the only breadwinner of the family. His diagnosis meant he was unable to leave the house for two to three weeks. The tenant family was compelled to borrow money to run the household chores. Because of his health condition, he was required to be fed with high nutritious value food, which also added to the family’s expenses.

A bigger challenge for the family was the social stigma associated with the virus, stemming from the negative propaganda. The social isolation level was such that shop keepers refused to sell to them and despite having money they were unable to purchase goods.

The fear of the virus, hopelessness, monetary issues, and social stigma had the family gone through a lot of psychological stress.
3.2 Impact on Lives

Though COVID-19 is primarily a health emergency, a social crisis emerged as well in an effort to avoid the physical implications. The primary implication of the outbreak was the mental stress due to the fear of contracting the disease. Closure of educational institutions and workplaces that also provide the opportunity for socializing has also impacted the life. For lower middle-class households, where large family units inhabit smaller spaces, this meant more people confined together for a much longer period of time than usual. This is where the phenomena of ‘emotional contagion’ (Barsade, 2002) comes at play, which implies that people tend to express and feel emotions similar to those around them.

As COVID cases increased rapidly, the fear of the disease caused stricter lockdowns and bans on public transport that resulted in many middle- and upper-class households suspending their household helpers. This not only complicated the situation further for the low-income households but reduction in household helpers coupled with the increased workload due to suspension of school and work resulted in an increase burden on the housewives also. Reduction in social interactions and recreational activities also a took a toll on the mental health.

All these factors contribute to the emotional contagion resulting in family life stressors and that was reflected in the survey findings as well where 35% suggested an increase in stress and 32% agreed to an increase in family life stress and hence deterioration of household environment.

The stats remain more or less the same in a gender-based analysis of the responses, suggesting that the brunt was felt almost equally across genders. However, 11.8% male respondents indicated a decline in family life stress while none of the female respondents took the option.
As we expect a rise in epidemics and natural disasters bringing life to a standstill across the globe more often, adapting to digital technology is seen as a survival mechanism in many areas. As the pandemic spread and the hopes of reopening of the educational institutions started dying the concept of online education was introduced as an alternative across the world. However, serious concerns rose around the productivity of the exercise when university students from remote areas started protesting against the practice due to lack of internet access in those areas, power supply issues and lack of trained teachers for the medium. During our survey in Swat, a majority expressed their disappointment in the system with 98% of the respondents declaring it as not only ineffective but also an utter ‘waste of time’.

**3.3 Public Response to Pandemic**

As much as pandemics are a global emergency, individual’s response to the outbreak holds as much importance as the government in slowing down the spread and properly treating the effected ones. The government of Pakistan took various measures to educate people about the virus and the measures they need to take. Special adverts were run on electronic and print media. Messages were disseminated through cellular companies, and voice messages in national language were broadcast before every call was connected.
3.4 Understanding of the Phenomena

71.8% of the survey respondents suggested that they are aware of the measures they are supposed to take in case someone in their household contracts the disease. However, a gender wise analysis of the data revealed that while 89.5% of the female respondents gave an affirmative response, only 55% percent male respondents admitted that they know how to respond to a COVID case in their house/ family. 67.6% of those who responded in positive were illiterate or educated below primary level.

When the respondents were asked if they are able to quarantine a family member suffering from COVID-19 in the house, 96% affirmed, and only 9.4% had either contracted the disease or had a patient in the family out of which 90% of the patients had recovered. 7.4% of the respondents had to hospitalize their patients while the rest home quarantined and adhered to the SOPs.

To a question if the virus was transmitted through an affected family member to the rest of the family, 67% responded that it did not, which implies that majority of the families indeed have adopted the quarantine SOPs once one or some of them were affected.

The interviewer’s impression was that due to a social stigma attached to the virus, people did not want to admit to have contracted COVID and either kept it to themselves or tried to portray it as a general flu or in extreme cases typhoid. Some of the patients known to the locals refused to take part in the survey.
### 3.5 Level of Satisfaction

When the systems in developed countries started crumbling under the burden of rapidly increasing cases despite having best healthcare systems, low population density and lesser economic constraints, it was not difficult to understand the level of impact the virus would leave on the developing and underdeveloped countries. It was thus assumed that the governments of developing countries will not be able to handle the crisis.

Pakistan was one of the countries that witnessed a rapid rise in cases in early June, however contrary to the analytics expectations, the number of deaths remained significantly low and the number of patients requiring intensive care did not reach a breaking point. As the experts are unable to comprehend the reasons behind the country’s successful handling of the health emergency, our survey conducted in a rural-urban setup suggest that 71% of the respondents showed satisfaction over the measures the government took. However, with the increase in level of education among the respondents, the level of satisfaction in the measures taken by the government declines. In response to a follow-up question, 34% urged for stricter measures, 27% found ease in restrictions appropriate. Those seeking an ease in restrictions were predominantly the respondents educated up to primary level.

![Satisfaction with the Governments response](image1.png)

![Satisfaction with the Govt Response vs Respondents Education](image2.png)
3.6 BISP/ Ehsaas Impact

‘Ehsaas’ is the Government of Pakistan’s flagship social security programme that took center stage in its preparedness for the COVID-19 health emergency. Through Ehsaas Emergency Cash Relief Program, the government of Pakistan allocated PKR 203 billion to be distributed among 16.9 million families that are at risk of extreme poverty (Nishtar, 2020).

People registered with the BISP or Ehsaas Kafaalat Program were provided the one-time monetary assistance at the first stage followed by the four million who registered themselves with the program post-COVID, as the number of cases started soaring and a lockdown had become inevitable (Nishtar, 2020). The survey data was analyzed from the angle of those who received social assistance from the government so as to evaluate the impact of the program on the populations. It is pertinent to mention that people benefitting from the programme are those who are already living below the poverty line.

With the outbreak of the pandemic, 63% of them experienced a further reduction in their income. For 22%, the income source was temporarily affected while for 11% either the income source vanished, or they were fired. In comparison, only 4.1% of non-Ehsaas beneficiaries lost their source of income post pandemic outbreak though the number with decrease in income remained higher at 67%. 60% of the BISP beneficiaries are among those who indicated about the rise in expenditure, attributing it to the reasons discussed earlier, i.e. interruption in supply chain resulting in inflation and unavailability of goods at local stores, ban on public transport that the low income population massively rely on, increased attention to personal hygiene and general cleanliness, and the care and treatment expenses in case of COVID patient in the household.

In comparison to the non-Ehsaas beneficiaries, presumably the more affluent segment of the society, many have expressed an increase in stress, degradation of household environment, and increase in domestic workload.
Despite their economic vulnerability, 43% of them favoured stricter measures by the government against the pandemic spread while 29% suggested restrictions on businesses should be eased.

4. **Policy Recommendations**

- Disruptions in supply chains have lasting impact. Mechanisms needs to be devised to ensure that they remain intact and are least affected by scenarios beyond human control.
- Effective price control needs to be put in place to control inflation in times where the people’s means of income are already stressed.
- There is a need for educating people not only on handling viral diseases but also on removing social stigma.
- There is a need to train teachers for the online medium, ensure better internet access, and provide necessary gadgets in far-flung areas.
- Minimum universal social protection is required in case of unemployment and health emergencies in areas such as Swat where even in normal circumstances, the sources of livelihoods are limited.
- Uninterrupted supply of agricultural inputs during the crisis times disrupting supply chains is essential to avoid another crisis that looms large if the production demands are not met.
- Mental Health issues are widely neglected specifically in low income setups. Family life stress has a potential to reflect in general social attitudes and has larger implications. Making emotional counselling normal and ensuring it during and after crisis need to be included in the goals for disaster management. Counsellors, and therapists can be trained at community level to ensure their access to far-off areas.