

# **Beyond poverty alleviation: crafting a comprehensive social policy for all**

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Muhammad Aqib Zardad | 20<sup>th</sup> June, 2025



**Social policy, whether taken as a sectoral policy or as a policy of issues depending upon the specifics of the relevant scholarship, inevitably lies at the core of political discourse and at many a time plays a decisive role**

**as a determinant of success or failure of political parties contesting against each other in much of the developed world.**

During Musharraf's time period, as Pakistan was experiencing somewhat significant economic growth, even though for a variety of reasons, the general public anticipated generous spending on social welfare. However, it is noteworthy that since Pakistan did not have and even today it does not have a comprehensive and well-rounded social policy, the efforts in the direction of ensuring social welfare remained largely scattered and did not bear the much-desired results.

Although a free market, which was the story back in the days of Musharraf, aids government in efficient delivery of public services since much of the same are outsourced to the private sector such as employment opportunities and etc., however, it acts as a double-edged sword also as reflected in increasing inequalities in the society. In such circumstances, the government needs to formulate a policy that is capable of mitigating the social inequalities while clearly defining the scope and range of public service delivery at government's end.

A sound social policy has an overarching nature and has the elements namely, a clear definition of what social services a government aspires to deliver; the choices concerning those services; the range of those services and most importantly how the government is going to fund them.

The housing policy of Pakistan, for an instance, aims at upgrading the existing housing societies in the country while engaging in capacity building of the marginalized sections of the society besides curtailing malpractices, inefficiencies, institutional weaknesses and mafia assaults adding to the miseries of Pakistani have-nots (National Housing Policy, 2001, p. 5).

The national education policy is focused on reducing the number of out of school children alongside introducing a uniform education standard, bettering the education quality as well as imparting training for educators and school administrators (National Education Policy Framework, 2018, p. 7).

Similarly, the national health vision targets increasing the access and affordability of healthcare services across the board especially for women and children as it promises to fulfill its global health responsibilities and adopting a universal healthcare model (National Health Vision Pakistan 2016-25).

A critical analysis of these three policies reveals that none of these has any remotest linkage with a social policy with elements pertaining to definition of services, their range and funding sources. Therefore, Pakistan needs to reinvigorate its existing policies so as to chalk out a plan for devising a viable social policy containing all the elements mentioned before. Moreover, a social policy should not revolve just around the idea of poverty reduction rather it should focus on a more general conception of improving the standard of living across the board which includes entertaining the middle class as well.

In Pakistani context, the social policy does not have to start from scratch. A new and broader vision can rather gel together the existing initiatives while addressing the institutional weaknesses and inabilities alongside the issues of financial embezzlement and governance which incapacitate the programmes to deliver on their goals. Governments, across the globe, follow different mechanisms when it comes to public service delivery.

Some pay directly, in cash, to the people fulfilling the eligibility criteria for such stipends and patronage while others just improve the system and process of service delivery depending upon the nature of services and funding sources available. Historically, Pakistan has been all- a financier

as well as social service provider, which is a persistent burden on Pakistan's financial resources.

As a low-income country, Pakistan for sure does not fall in the category of the countries having the capability of adopting a welfare state model since Pakistan has a resource-scarce national treasury and a huge population. Dr Sania Nishtar, former Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Poverty Alleviation and Social Safety, gives a plan as to how can a viable social policy be devised as per Pakistani dynamics.

She suggests formulating an overarching and comprehensive social policy clearly outlining the objectives, range and funding sources for various social services which the government plans to offer to the general public; building on the initiatives already underway, and acting as redistributor (besides as a regulator depending upon the need of the hour).

Even though it is in the greater public interest that the government outsources public service delivery to private entities to a larger extent, however, such outsourcing must not be confused with privatization rather the government must remain cognizant of the progress being made too. Furthermore, the partner in such cases does not necessarily have to be a private enterprise instead it can be the local government itself.

As far as funding sources are concerned, various avenues can be explored such as raising equity funds as well as private and semi-government channels like Trust for Voluntary Organization and Pakistan Institute of Philanthropy.

***All that Pakistan needs to do is to revisit its utopian ideals and rationalize its aspirations for bringing about a magnanimous social change. A change that results in an improved standard of living of its citizens taking on a pragmatic and real-time approach jotting down the existing initiatives and defining their scope and range clearly while taking care of the sustainability factor.***

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