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01 Both poverty and inequality vary across regions and provinces in Pakistan. Why the country has not succeeded to reduce poverty, especially in rural areas, on consistent basis?

There have been no dearth of programmes, projects and schemes, domestically and donor funded, over the last 7 decades. Yet, inequality has widened and poverty has increased. All statistics to the contrary are just statistics. Apart from poverty, there has been no perceptible improvement in literacy, enrolment, maternal, child and infant mortality, malnutrition indicators, and so on. Decent housing is unavailable for the poor, water quality is deficient, and there is no difference in how the poor and cattle are transported. Lack of positive results on all fronts can only be attributed to the fact that human and social development has never been the objective of the state.

02 Pakistan adopted different models for poverty alleviation, i.e., Social Action Programs in 90s, microfinance initiatives in early 2000s and social safety nets after emergence of BISP in 2008. Why these policies and initiatives have not brought desired changes to uplift the poor and marginalized segments?

Social Action Programs, Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, poverty alleviation funds, the discovery of the 'miracle' of microfinance are all donor fetishes meant to maintain their own relevance and to prop up the elite, which has enriched themselves through 6 to 7 figure remuneration positions in organizations thus created and through consultancies and enjoyed the perks of conferences and workshops in 5-star hotels and international travel for conferences and meetings. The poor have remained where they were, at best.

BISP, which I had the privilege of designing, was never billed as a poverty reduction measure. It was explicitly spelled out at the outset that 1000 rupee a month could buy 22 days of atta at then prices for a 6-member family, but cannot impact poverty. Conceptually, the need for such a programme was identified by Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto during my meeting with her in Dubai in August 2007. And that was in response to my presentation where I had shown that cumulative food inflation over the years 2000-2007 was 90%, which could mean that the purchasing power of the poor had reduced to half. Thus, BISP was designed to supplement low incomes and that is why the term 'Income Support'.

03 Please comment that up to what extent, social protection programs can be used as a tool for poverty alleviation and inclusive growth? What limitations currently they have and how they can become more effective?

Poverty is a macroeconomic phenomenon and cannot be addressed through micro measures. We cannot have, on the one hand, macroeconomic policies that undermine high employment-multiplier productive sectors of the economy and promote zero employment-multiplier speculative sectors and, on the other a social protection window that hands out welfare checks. Social protection programs, if effective and on scale, can only mitigate the sharp edges of poverty.

For growth to be inclusive, the structure of the economy will have to change. A study in the early 2000 showed that of every 100 rupees growth in national income, 37 rupees accrue to the top 10%

of the population and 3 rupees to the bottom 10%. Thus, more growth means more inequality.

04 Various NGOs are expanding their network on microfinance initiatives. Why the welfare impacts of these initiatives are still compromised and we have not achieved sustainable results as like Bangladesh?

NGOcracy is another layer that siphons off resources. And Bangladesh's growth is propelled by conducive macroeconomic policies. The government has invested heavily in expanding and improving economic infrastructure and in human development. It has developed industry as the backbone of the economy. Microfinance has contributed to mitigating poverty at the margins.

05 How you see the adverse impacts of COVID-19 on the poor?

The poor are certainly suffering. The resulting downturn has forced many businesses to close or reduce operations. There is a chain effect. Closure of marriage hall has unemployed up to 300 people, including suppliers of food items, decoration pieces, etc., for every event cancelled. If the employed and students are operating from home, rickshaw drivers are left waiting for passengers, and so on. However, the non-poor are also paying a price. Even those with close to 6 figure salary and now laid off are facing starvation after their meagre savings have eroded; retail shopkeepers are facing a reduced clientele and incomes, and so on.

06 Please suggest what sort of policies the government should adopt to reduce its rural and urban poverty as well as to minimize regional inequalities?

The economy will have to be restructured along socialist lines.

For addressing rural poverty, the key intervention is asset redistribution. Land reforms at two levels: one, ownership rights to tenants in Sindh, Naseerabad Division of Balochistan, and south Punjab and, two, land consolidation in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa.

For addressing urban poverty, the key intervention is employment creation via a programme of industrial expansion, with the state setting up industries under Public-Private mode. The structure of public finance will have to change. The state will have to invest in creating small serviced residential plots in all urban centres, ensuring clean water, running decent public transport services, and providing quality education and health care to all. These are the only legitimate rationale for the existence of the state. The provision of the above services will require fiscal resources, for which non-development and non-combat defence expenditures will have to be slashed.

The military economy has created a situation akin to a person wearing cement boots and asked to swim. It is crowding out the private sector and undermining the economy. All military commercial establishments in real estate, industrial and services sectors need to be disbanded.

Balochistan needs public infrastructure investment in at least two areas: roads to connect districts to highways and in mineral development – minus the economic colonization.

07 How the role of civil society can be enhanced in pooling the resources for poverty alleviation?

Poverty reduction is a function of state policy. Civil society can resort to political action to mobilize public opinion to force governments to divert fiscal resources from non-development and non-combat defence to productive heads and to adopt policies that increases the share of the poor in increments to national income.