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## A Review of COVID-19 Pandemic and Pakistan Public Social Sector Services Combating Capacity

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**Abstract:** *This paper was designed to evaluate the public social sector services of Pakistan combating capacity with the COVID-19 pandemic. In disasters and pandemics, the role of the stable and well-functional public social sector is of high importance and consequently, such systems could effectively decrease the aggravation of pandemics and disasters. Research findings observed that COVID-19 is a lethal unprecedented pandemic, that has challenged the social sector globally, particularly in developing countries. The findings of the study further revealed that Pakistan is also a developing country with a vulnerable social sector services system. Pakistan invests only 3.1 per cent of its total GDP in the social sector, far less than the average 4.5 per cent investment of contemporary developing countries in the sector. The worse is that a substantial breach between allocation and utilization has been observed. research study observed that vulnerable healthcare services, low-quality education, contaminated drinking water, poor sanitation and lingering poverty are the products of the neglected public social sector. Therefore on the bases of the findings of the study, it has been concluded that the combating capacity of fractured social sector services of Pakistan against the deadly COVID-19 pandemic is beyond its capacity.*

**Key Words:** COVID-19, Pandemic, Social Sector Services, Fragile, Malfunction

### Introduction

Social sector services refer to investment and facilitation in health care, education, water and sanitation, hygienic residential infrastructure, employment, subsidize nutritious food and eradication of poverty by the government to improve the quality of life and living standard of a marginalized portion of national community (Social Services, 2020). Alone economic growth is inadequate to prove socio-economic development. For long-lasting and sustainable development investment in the social sector is indispensable. The performance of the social sector in Pakistan is not so encouraging. It is on the list of low-spending countries since independence. According to Shumaila (2016), the share of social, economic and community services in the total GDP of Pakistan is 3.1 per cent, while the

average contribution to the social sector by developing countries was 4.5 per cent (Indonesia has 9 per cent) and this sector share in developed countries is 15 per cent of total GDP. The 2013 United Nations Human Development index revealed that the social sector performance in Pakistan is poor and couldn't match international standards. According to the report on social sector services, Pakistan ranked 146<sup>th</sup>, while India has 121 and Sri Lanka 92 ranks respectively in list of 187 countries (Ahmed S., 2016). Another study revealed that inadequate public sector investment is the main cause of the poor performance of the social sector in Pakistan. The expenditure in the sector is not only poor but has also shown negative trends for a few years. Further, the figures indicate a substantial breach between allocation and utilization\_ (Wasay,

2001). Moreover, Pakistan has had good economic indicators for the last few decades but unfortunately, the social development indicators could not catch the growth rate of the economy. The low social sector indicators also affect the sustainability in economic growth which automatically enhance the issues related to health, education, employment, food security, hygiene and drinking water. This report further revealed that a fragile social sector leads to severe poverty and social problems\_(Mahmood, 1998).

Human history is full of natural and manmade disasters and pandemics. But after the introduction of technology and industrialization, human beings are altering nature frequently which increased the occurrence of disasters and pandemics. Now people around the world are more exposed to various devastating vulnerabilities and pandemics. Pandemics and other natural calamities could occur anywhere and anytime and can beat the existing resources and the capability of social structure\_(Nahid Aghaei, 2018).

In the meanwhile, the world is confronted with the fatal Novel Corona Virus-2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic. The first case of a prevailing outbreak of novel coronavirus was reported in Wuhan city of China on 31 December 2019 and unprecedentedly spread around the globe within three months. Presuming the severity of the pandemic, World Health Organization (WHO) declared it a pandemic on 11<sup>th</sup> March 2020. Later on, the virus was called COVID-19 (CO stand for Corona, VI for Virus and D for disease). It is a transferable virus from an infected person through direct contact or through his spit droplet, cough, sneeze or contact the virus contaminated surfaces. As currently, the virus is incurable due to the non-availability of anti-virus so awareness, social and physical distancing, washing hands for 20 seconds on running water, other hygienic practices, strengthening the immune system through protein-rich food items and exercises are the measure through which the virus could be curbed to great extent\_(APP, 2020).

The United Nations (2020) report revealed that due to the unique and unprecedented nature of the lethal COVID-19 pandemic, badly affects the social structure of societies around the world. This is the most devastating debacle in recent human history which bamboozled the contemporary social sector

services around the globe. This disaster is beyond the health crisis as total human survival is at risk. Considering its uniqueness and magnitude the respective countries especially the developing countries are in hurry to incorporate and scale up their social sector services in a unique and balanced manner to cope with the existing lethal COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, another United Nations (2020) report revealed that the current pandemic affected a major portion of the population around the world but its severity is observed in vulnerable people i.e. poor people with devastating living conditions, unaware, destitute, older people and citizens with disabilities. Facts demonstrate that the virus will negatively affect the social and economic sectors of marginalized people of the world. The aftermath of the pandemic will be a big challenge for the social sectors of respective countries. If the mentioned sector does not come with effective policies the social crisis created by the prevailing pandemic may enhance severe health issues, educational challenges, food scarcity, discrimination, inequality, unemployment and poverty. Another study revealed that social life around the world has been halted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Epidemics and pandemics have bent the route of human history. Every time contemporary social sectors of societies are forced to respond quickly and rethink policies accordingly to mitigate the health and socio-economic impact of the new pandemic. Its latest example is the most recent round of eternal encounters between coronavirus and mankind (Rasual, 2020).

The severity of the lethal COVID-19 pandemic even perplexed the social sector of Advance countries like the USA, England and Italy. One can imagine what will be the situation in resource-scarce and developing countries. It may not be less than a nightmare. Consequently, Pakistan is a developing country with a huge population of more than 200 million. The present social development indicators of the country are well behind the average international social development indicators for developing countries. Below-average public social sector services and the vulnerable socio-economic condition of the people are the big challenges to confront during and after the devastating pandemic (Shaikh, 2020).

It is therefore keeping in consideration the

sensitivity of the phenomenon; the present research study was conducted to showcase the Pakistan public social sector combating capacity of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Statement of the problem

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The aim of the present research study was to highlight the facts about Pakistan's social sector services and its combating potential for COVID-19 pandemic control. The so far data about the ongoing pandemic indicates that the only remedy for the curing of the virus is the organized social patterns and services i.e. healthy livelihood practices. The social sector of Pakistan is the most neglected sector, with a variety of flaws and weaknesses that hardly facilitate the huge population of the country in normal conditions. The prevailing unprecedented coronavirus outbreak is a huge challenge for this fragile social sector. As the lives and livelihoods of billions of people in the country are mainly dependent on this sector. The coronavirus is a big threat to the lives and livelihood of a huge population of the country. It is therefore the present study has been carried out to evaluate the response and performance of the social sector services of Pakistan in combating and curbing the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Materials and Methods

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This research study was qualitative in nature. Relevant secondary data were collected and used to support the research problem. The data were collected from books, newspapers, reports and the internet. The findings of the study were described and the conclusion was drawn through the descriptive method.

### Result and Discussion

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This research study inquired about the public social sector of Pakistan and its combating capacity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Its core sub-sectors are education, health, water and sanitation, food security, hygienic living infrastructure and poverty eradication. This research analyzed these key elements of the public sector in the context of its ability to provide relief and ensure safety measures to a vulnerable portion of the population of the country during and after the contemporary fatal pandemic.

The key sectors of the social sector services of Pakistan have been discussed in detail below in the context of its combating capacity during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Health

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The health sector is considered the heart of the social structure of any society. Well, a functional health system meets the people's health needs in a proficient, effectual and equitable manner. The healthcare sector response mainly depends on social structure, socio-demographic, political, and economic factors and education level, the nature of the disease or pandemic, and the healthcare system of society (Shumaila Arshad, 2016). If the above-mentioned factors for the best utilization of health services and health system response in an emergency situation are applied to Pakistan's health care system and its social structure only vulnerability will be observed. A study further revealed that health issues in Pakistan are at raise with an alarming rate. While health care is very expensive and more than 60 million people in the country live below the poverty line. They hardly earn for subsistence purposes. Buying or approaching healthcare services is only a dream for them. This alarming situation may sink the health system if it confronts a pandemic (Khadim, 2017). Statistics indicate that Pakistan invests only 0.919 per cent of its total GDP in the health sector which is even low then India (1.407) and Srilanka invest 1.964 per cent of their GDP in the sector. Life expectancy in Pakistan is 66.6 while Bangladesh has 70.7 and in Srilanka, it is 74.3. Furthermore, there is only one doctor per 1073 people and for 1593 patients there is only one bed available in hospitals (Dr Ahmad Hassan, 2017). In another report, it has been explained that for low and middle-income countries the WHO per person recommended health expenditure is 34 US dollars. Unfortunately in Pakistan, this ratio is 17 dollars per person among which the people spent 13 dollars from their pockets privately. The research further revealed that only 33% of the people have the access to health facilities within a 5-kilometre radius. The remaining population of the country struggle to reach and gets health care in due time (BT. Shaikh, 2013). This is an undeniable fact that since independence the health sector of Pakistan is not included in the government's priorities. That's why before the

COVID-19 pandemic there were only 2200 ventilators in the country for over 220 million people, worse is that the bulk of them was not functional (Dwan.com, 2020).

After analysis of the health sector of Pakistan, it is concluded that this wing of the social sector is very fragile and fractured. The above figures indicate that even in normal situations its capability is vulnerable. Then what will be its response during a gigantic COVID-19 pandemic? Presently Pakistan struggles to combat the COVID-19 pandemic with a mounting number of cases. For curbing the wave of fast-spreading fast-spreading viruses a stable and well-equipped well-equipped healthcare system is one of the basic requirements. Unfortunately, the said sector in Pakistan is very vulnerable and addicted over the years to foreign aid. The country always looks to foreign social and economic support every time a natural disaster occurred. The Prime Minister (PM) of Pakistan while addressing the COMSTECH exhibition in Islamabad said that we have a "dependency syndrome" he extended his views that in past we never step forward towards a knowledge economy because we didn't invest in research (Ahmed A., 2020). Presently the major types of equipment required for controlling the existing wave of the pandemic are sanitisers, N-95 masks, test kits, and protective gear for doctors, paramedics and emergency staff. For all these kinds of stuff, the country is looking for China and other developed countries. A report exposed that even doctors and paramedics staff are not safe in Pakistan due to the lack of protective gear. Several doctors and other medical staff got infected during treating and facilitating the COVID-19-infected patients. Some doctors lost their lives in the process. In Karachi, the virus-infected Dr Furqanul Haq passed away due to the non-availability of a Ventilator. The report further revealed on the behalf of Dr Sajjad that if a doctor is vulnerable to the virus and expired while not finding a ventilator in several big hospitals in the biggest city of the country then what will be the fate of the citizens living in the peripheries? The doctors warned the government that a strict lockdown should be imposed in the country and protective gear should be provided to medical staff, the number of test kits should be increased and arrangements should be made to promote hygienic practices and social distancing among the people to curb the

pandemic, otherwise, the already fracture health care system may collapse because the prevailing health care system is vulnerable to the magnitude of the ongoing pandemic (Ali, 2020). Besides Ahmed (2020) extended his views that if the pandemic has not beaten initially, the weak health sector will face difficulty to bear the burden and mortality of COVID-19-infected patients and people with other critical diseases.

The above figures and facts indicate that the health sector of Pakistan is very fragile. Through this vulnerable healthcare structure, providing health facilities to a huge population of the country in a routine situation is beyond its capacity. Because the health sector has several serious deficiencies i.e. doctors, paramedical staff, scientific and hygienic infrastructure, medicine, tools and budget. These statistics become worse when it comes to basic health units (BHU). As the bulk of the people of the country relies on primary health (BHUs), especially in rural areas. But the conditions and facilities available in BHUs are critical and unhealthy. Millions of people daily visit BHUs for health care services these BHUs help in aggravating the COVID-19 pandemic because of the huge gatherings of patients in small buildings, shortage of medical staff and advanced medical types of equipment and further the arrangement of water, sanitation and other hygienic measures are very poor. So on the bases of the above-mentioned pieces of evidence, it is therefore concluded that the combating capacity of public healthcare services in Pakistan during the COVID-19 pandemic is weak. Its fractured health system may struggle to curtail the prevailing pandemic.

## Education

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The recent approach to pandemic, epidemic and disaster management is to manage risk by focusing on its alleviation and risk reduction. Pandemic risk is a result of contact with danger and the susceptibility situation of the society or elements uncovered. The modern approach is that the effects of any pandemic could be reduced through systematic efforts. In this regard, the role of education and educated people in society is of high importance. The research further revealed that an educated society can lessen the effects of any pandemic by following the required protocol and further they can play their role to help vulnerable people by training and guiding them.

Quality education and proper pieces of training can upgrade the understanding and knowledge of people to change their behaviour and pattern of life to cope with any undesired situation these facts indicate that education is the core faction of the social sector (Nahid Aghaei, 2018). Furthermore educated people's capacity for awareness, resilience, preparedness, and advocacy for vulnerable and changing behaviour during a pandemic is always unprecedented. Historically education and public awareness remained the key factors during and after natural calamities (IRC, 2020). According to Nelson Mandela "education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world". A uniform, well develop and organized education sector is the key to success for a nation. The effective education sector decreases the illiteracy rate and increases employment opportunities, reduces poverty and promotes social welfare (Ashraf, 2016). Education is the only mean of social development. Social development refers to improvement in health, education, hygiene, safe drinking water, safety, security and livelihood. It is the complete package of human well-being. The secret of the social and economic development of the developed world is a quality, creative and uniform education system. The education sector in the developing world is malfunctioning, overrated, expensive, uniform and inaccessible to people, therefore the education system struggled to match the international standard and fulfil the contemporary demands of people. That's why people are confronting with severe social problems i.e. unemployment, poverty, malnutrition, health issues and unawareness about the secret of quality life and hygienic practices (Venkatraja, 2011). Another research study revealed that education provides a corridor to social and economic development. People get awareness and prioritization ability about their social issues (Iqbal Ahmad, 2014). Furthermore as a key pillar of society education train and guide people to meet future challenges. It broadens the mind of people with effective knowledge and promotes creativity. Education sensitizes people regarding their surroundings. Educated people respond to a particular situation in their actual context. It strengthens their resilience and capabilities of confronting hard situations effectively and further educates people not only to minimise the risk of a

huge loss of their selves and families but also to help the vulnerable people of their society (IRC, 2020). Moreover, an effective education system provides knowledge, competencies and skills that can help in their preparatory efforts during pandemics. Further education can boost the attainment of knowledge, priorities and the ability to have a spent quality life. Further educated people are more skilful and target oriented and their priority is an investment in health and education. Thus educated people often have socio-economic stability, mostly they are prepared and organized, so they can play an effective role in combating the pandemics. Therefore quality education has a key role in promoting preparedness behaviours during pandemics (Muttarak, 2017). In addition, education enhances the social and mental strength of people. Its prime example is the developed world, where great importance has been given to the education sector. The evidence revealed that a good portion of their GDP is spent on the education sector from primary to a higher level. That's why their societies are very balanced and people's behaviours are crafted in a positive manner. So when any epidemic or pandemic occurred, the people follow the protocol assigned by the government that really helps in curbing the phenomenon (IRC, 2020). The above statement indicates how education and an educated population are crucial in Lessing the impact of epidemics and pandemics. Since Pakistan is a developing country and no importance has been given to the education sector since independence (1947). The government spends a meagre amount of only 2.4 per cent on the education of its total GDP which is even lower than Iran, India and Sri Lanka. The report further explained that Global Competitiveness Index (GCI) 2017-18 indicates that due to the weak performance in primary education and health-related elements ranked 129<sup>th</sup> in 137 countries. Further, the worse is that very nominal attention has been given to primary and secondary education. The share in total GDP for public pre-primary and primary education is 12.10 billion; 12.36 billion was allocated for public secondary education and a handsome amount of 46.7 billion for higher education in the 2018-19 budget. It is observed that around 10 per cent of people get higher education in Pakistan. Statistics show that majority of them belong to well-to-do families. The enrollment in primary school is 47 per cent. The

share of boys is 55 per cent while 45% of girls are enrolled in primary-level education in Pakistan. The huge difference in enrollment and in budget allocation badly imbalanced the education system of Pakistan. Further, the drop out from public sector schools is another big issue. There are question marks on the effectiveness of the syllabus. Public sector education system struggling to produce knowledge-based creative minds (Pakistan Education Statistics, 2017). Further, the hygiene facilities in government educational institutions especially in schools are not meet the WHO standard. Facts indicate that 33.9 per cent of schools are deprived of clean drinking water and 37 per cent have no proper latrine. Intentionally or unintentionally the education sector has been treated as a stepchild. The ignorance of education badly affects the whole social structure of the country. The health sector is one of them which pays the price for low quality and ineffective education system (Iqbal Ahmad, 2014). Though the literacy rate rises up to around 70 per cent the baseline of literacy is the person who can read and write will be considered literate. Therefore a major portion of the country's population is illiterate or nominal literate. This system of education struggles to develop the reasoning capabilities of people. That's why by and large people behave and respond traditionally to a new occurrence in their society.

Its prime example is the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of the people of Pakistan underestimate its magnitude and fatality. Due to a lack of education and awareness majority of them consider it the curse of God and many regarded it as foreign propaganda against Islam. Further due to reasoning and knowledge deficiency they don't follow the COVID-19 pandemic safety measures protocols properly.

The above statement indicates that the education sector of Pakistan is not that effective to develop the reasoning power of people. Therefore due to unawareness and illiteracy, a major portion of people in the country are vulnerable to the existing lethal pandemic. Furthermore, the situation will be more devastating after the opening of education intuitions, especially at the primary school level as the majority of schools are overpopulated and more than 30 per cent of schools are even deprived of clean drinking water and sanitation system.

It is therefore concluded that the education sector of Pakistan may not imprint any positive impact in curbing the COVID-19 pandemic. It may be more vulnerable to the prevailing pandemic when educational institutions will be reopened.

## **Water and Sanitation**

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This is another important sector of the human social structure. Water is life and sanitation is the guarantee of healthy life. Enough sanitation, collectively with safe water and excellent hygiene is essential to good health. Investment and improvement in the water and sanitation sector could significantly decrease the rates of mounting and severity of fatal diseases and enhance the quality of life of a major portion of the population particularly women and children in the developing world. The contaminated water and poor sanitation system alone caused 10% of the world's diseases. A further half of the urban population of Asia, Latin America and Africa have constantly confronted diseases caused by poor hygiene, sanitation and polluted water. (Duncan Mara, 210). Furthermore, a research study indicated that a proper and developed sanitation system has a major impact on health at the household level and at the community level. The research further revealed that about 2.5 billion people which is 35% of the world's population are deprived of the WHO standard sanitation system (Okanya Arinzechukwu, 2017). Moreover, about 884 million people around the globe lack sufficient water. Due to insufficient and contaminated water, poor sanitation and hygiene about 3.4 million people, mostly children die in the world every year. Its death ratio is high than people who die in wars. Being a developing country, the water and sanitation sector in Pakistan does not meet the WHO standard. Around 63 per cent of people have sanitation services available but this ratio is 71 per cent in rural areas. Further 33.9 per cent of schools are deprived of clean drinking water and 37 per cent have no proper latrines. About 80 per cent of the drinking water in the country is contaminated. Water-related diseases infect around 3 million Pakistani each year but still, the government allocates a meagre portion i.e. 1 per cent of the total GDP to this sector (Hakro, 2012).

On other hand, the only mean of curbing the Novel Corona Virus is social distancing, cleanliness and washing hands for 20 seconds on running water.

So water and sanitation is the second effective preventive measure after quarantine and social distancing to combat the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic as so far no antivirus is available for it. While the above-mentioned statistics of the water and sanitation sector of Pakistan indicate that 63 per cent of the population is deprived of a proper sanitation system, and 80 per cent of drinking water is contaminated (Hakro, 2012). On the bases of the above facts, it is concluded that the present weak system of water and sanitation may aggravate the ongoing lethal pandemic.

### **Poverty**

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Poverty is the root cause of all social problems. Poverty is a poor socio-economic condition. People could be considered in poverty when they have poor health, education, income, diet, material goods and infrastructure conditions (Chambers, 2006). Another study defines poverty as Poverty is multifaceted, manifested by conditions which include chronic ill health, malnutrition, fragile shelter, unhygienic living conditions, use of contaminated drinking water, illiteracy, widespread crimes and social discrimination. Moreover, research indicates that in 2015 about 736 million of the world's population lived under the international poverty line. While this ratio for extreme poverty was 10 per cent. The poverty ratio in women is high compared to men. The worse is that more than 160 million children will start living in extreme poverty by 2030 around the world (Cheung, 2005).

Pakistan is also a developing country and more than one-third of its population lives below the poverty line. Further, 73 per cent of the population consumed less than 2 US dollars per day. About 37 per cent of people in the country live below the poverty line. According to UNDP data, Pakistan is ranked 136<sup>th</sup> among 177 developing countries around the globe. These facts indicate that a major portion of the country's population cannot afford life-saving services health care, education, a balanced diet, clean drinking water and sanitation. As a result, this huge marginalized portion of the population is vulnerable to many diseases and other physical disorders (Miankhail, 2012)

It is therefore concluded that the poverty situation in Pakistan is very alarming and a major

portion of the population struggles to earn just for subsistence purposes. Through this weak socioeconomic profile, they may not fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Discussion**

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On the bases of the above narrative, it is therefore summarized that the social sector services are the key to developing the social and economic aspects of people. The main parts of the social sector are health care, education, water and sanitation, and economic opportunities. Developing countries spent a handsome portion of their GDP on the social sector to facilitate their people in essential life-making fields. That's why one cannot compare the health, education, sanitation and economic system of developing countries. Due to their huge investment in the social sector, the quality of health care, education and other life-making sectors are very high. Investment in this sector makes them able to cope with any undesired situation. Their social structure is capable of absorbing a shock of high magnitude. Its prime example is the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic. The developed world has enough infrastructure and resources to restrict this lethal pandemic. Though the prevailing pandemic also badly smacks the developed countries but their stable social structure combating the virus effectively on scientific grounds. Further, they support their people in an organized manner in their livelihood and the people are also responding accordingly. The COVID-19 pandemic is a big challenge for developing countries with fragile social structures and poor socio-economic conditions of their people. The situation in Pakistan is also not so different from other developing countries. Facts show that Pakistan invest a very meagre portion of their GDP in the social sector since its independence. All the social sectors like education, health, water and sanitation and the economy are very weak and incapable. Their capacity is very limited and even in a normal situation it is hard to meet the needs of a huge population, so one can imagine its function during a pandemic like COVID-19. Further due to consistent ignorance of the social sector, the poverty in the country is very high side. Therefore the affordability, accessibility and utility of social sector services are a nightmare for a major portion of the population.

Thus it is summarized and described from the

above discussion that the social sector of Pakistan is fractured and it is not easy to combat the fatal COVID-19 pandemic through this fractured social sector. That's why the government and doctors consistently insist on social and physical distancing and extra care to overcome the wave of the prevailing pandemic.

## **Conclusion**

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The findings of this research study concluded that social sector services play important role in the social and economic development of a country. Further, it provides a stable and well-functional structure during undesired situations and makes the people capable of confronting pandemics, epidemics and other natural and manmade calamities. This study further concludes that the social sector of developing countries collapses when a pandemic occurs which creates chaos in their social structure. While this sector of the developing world responds in a well-organized manner and keeps the social structure intact. This huge difference is due to the difference in investment and priority. According to the research

findings being a developing country, Pakistan's social sector is very fragile and fractured. Since its independence governments never give it a due status and keep it at the bottom of the list while allocating funds in budgets. Today this all-important sector of life-making is well behind when compared to even the contemporary developing world. The findings of the study further indicate that all the sects of the social sector i.e. health, education, water and sanitation, food security, and economic opportunities, are ranked at bottom of the list when compared to other developing countries like India, Iran, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. So it will be a big challenge for the social sector of Pakistan to combat the COVID-19 pandemic through that poor profile.

On the bases of research findings, it is therefore suggested that the government of Pakistan should rethink its priorities and keep the public social sector services on top of the list. Otherwise, the system will survive in the presence of visible opponents but may not afford the devastation of unseen enemies like viral and bacterial epidemics and pandemics in future.

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