



**Center for Global & Strategic Studies
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The National Health Infrastructure of Pakistan Amid COVID-19 Pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic has become the most distressing challenge of the current century, having drastic consequences on global economy, health and wellbeing of humans. The world is struggling to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus by taking

radical measures. It is not merely a global health crisis, but a serious social and economic catastrophe as well. Pakistan is the sixth most populated country in the world, and is hit hard by the pandemic with an increasing number of COVID-19 cases since February 2020. Pakistan reported its first 2 confirmed cases on 26th February 2020, originating from the pilgrims coming from Iran.¹

Pakistan's HDI was estimated to be 0.560 in 2018, positioning the country at 152 out of 189² countries of the world. This puts the country under the category of medium human development, indicating a



higher percentage of health inequality. Pakistan has a score of 35.5 in the Overall Health Security Index amongst the top 10 densely populated countries. Moreover, Pakistan faced a unique challenge of being sandwiched between the porous borders of two severely hit countries from the pandemic; China and Iran. In such circumstances, the limits and weaknesses of Pakistan's health system are exposed. This calls for an extensive review and policy consideration by the relevant health and government departments to assess the current state of health infrastructure in Pakistan and address the limitations and challenges faced by it.

¹ <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2020/02/26/sindh-health-two-coronavirus-cases-confirmed-in-pakistan-confirms-first-coronavirus-case-in-karachi/>.

² http://hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr_theme/country-notes/PAK.pdf



Current Situation of Health System

Pakistan is a developing country with limited resources and thus has a delicate health infrastructure. Owing to the mounting cases in the country, the health care system has faced unprecedented challenges including the lack of beds in hospitals, shortage of ventilators, medicine, lack of testing kits etc. Moreover, many cases remained unreported due to limited testing as well as fear of getting poor treatments in hospitals. In the initial phases, all the wards and intensive care units for treating COVID-19 patients were packed to capacity. In most of the cases, patients have been isolating at home after the hospitals excused of having no more beds for coronavirus patients.

With such dire situation of hospitals being overwhelmed and drastic rise in the number of cases, Pakistan's weak health system is bracing for the upcoming challenges. Along with the general public, doctors, nurses and paramedics are facing the potential risk of coronavirus due to absence of sufficient facilities. There has been a considerable increase in the positive cases among the health care workers in the country. Currently, limited health care resources are a major worrying sign for Pakistan. The authorities have realized the loopholes in existing health infrastructure, which had not been given the due attention in the past. The pandemic has inculcated a sense of realization that how important it is to have effective and updated health care infrastructure with a considerable budget for this sector.

Pakistan spends 2.90% of its GDP on healthcare³, far lower than the global average of 10%. According to the World Bank data of 2016, Pakistan spent around \$40 per citizen on healthcare. Along with these structural problems, issues like unequal access to health facilities remains one of the major challenges. Moreover, social protection is accentuated in times of emergencies, while in Pakistan the expenditure of social protection is below 2% of GDP, against the global average of 11.6%. These circumstances have led to the poor strata to suffer the most. The underprivileged, having no access to medical and health facilities are most vulnerable, thereby posing a major challenge to the health conditions of the entire population.

Measures taken by Pakistan Government

On the international level, the World Health Organization issued a Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan (SPRP) to halt the spread of novel coronavirus and outlined a three pronged approach of identification via testing, isolation of



suspected cases and minimization of social contact. Emphasis was laid on accelerating the efforts for the development of vaccine through priority research and innovation. However, these objectives require a multi-faceted approach of public health measures.

³ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.XPD.CHEX.GD.ZS>



Keeping in view the serious nature of the current health crisis, Pakistan government recently reinforced its efforts against COVID-19 pandemic initiating national emergency preparedness. The government authorities are trying to implement required measures with limited resources in hand and has taken appreciable steps in this regard. These include strengthening testing and diagnostic capacity, distributing Polymerase Chain Reaction kits to hospitals, mobilizing resources for setting up quarantine facilities in various cities and activating surveillance units to trace the patients, as recommended by the WHO.

Under the National Preparedness and Response Plan for COVID-19, Pakistan government immediately issued the SOPs for national socio-economic framework. Strategies were drafted for federal and provincial stakeholders to prevent, detect and respond to the confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the country. Risk mitigation measures were adopted that included closures of all academic institutions and banning public gatherings. A National Coordination Committee on Coronavirus was established to review the emergency situation. Field hospitals were set up for example, in the expo center Karachi, and maintenance of quarantine facilities was ensured.

The government of has allocated Rs. 1.13 trillion budget to effectively deal with corona crisis, especially on the medical and facilities including the procurement of clinical hardware etc. furthermore, Pakistan's lab tests capacity for corona testing has also increased.



Our social, economic and health systems have been put to an extreme test. However, this has not happened for the first time. There have been national emergency situations, both man-made and natural calamities, in the past as well, for example, dengue, hepatitis, HIV, polio, earthquakes, floods, terrorism etc. Therefore, having the experience of dealing with critical emergencies, Pakistan has so far demonstrated preparedness and made efforts to effectively deal with the pandemic. Yet there is a lot of room for improvement. There is a need to formulate effective strategies for efficient testing mechanisms, strong diagnostic capacity and risk management system. The government needs to reinforce public health capabilities, infrastructures and research to enhance the functioning of our health system.

Shortfalls in Pakistan's Health Care System and The Way Forward

Emergency situations expose the shortfalls of the government responses in socio-economic spheres such as healthcare, social protection, risk management etc. However, any strategy that counters unprecedented challenges must address underlying vulnerabilities. The challenges that Pakistan is facing in the current crisis are stark, and it is necessary to revise the shortcomings in our existing health system. A report by Pakistan Economic Survey 2015-2016 indicates that Pakistan was unable to meet its Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) on health.

Inspite of the efforts and reforms by the respective authorities, Pakistan's health care system faces many weaknesses and challenges. Although the health service facilities in the country have flourished but majority of these experience poor management, low



quality of health, insufficiency of resources, lack of trained staff, lack of incentives for medical professionals and so forth. For an effective and operational policy, it is imperative to have vigorous support of political administration. In Pakistan, there is very low participation of relevant stakeholders and individuals in formulation of health policies and health planning. Consequently, there is a huge communication gap between federal, provincial and district level authorities. This also owes to the grim reality that the people involved in making health policies lack the actual understanding and nature of issues faced on the grass root level.

Moreover, a very important factor is that at implementation level, policies are dealt by the doctors who manage the health system, but unfortunately, they do not have the authority to take action against any undesirable situation. Along with these issues, there is a lack of health education and research in field of medicine and healthcare. The government does not have sufficient health care data and a system for assembling it.

Thus following suggestions are proposed to improve the healthcare system in Pakistan;

- a. Promoting scientific research at national level along with research and information exchange at international level.
- b. Transparent and accountable health reforms are needed. Health policies, laws and organizational frameworks to be made public
- c. Public health awareness programs should be initiated
- d. Hospital infrastructures should be improved in remote areas
- e. Proactive role of Drug regulatory authority



- f. Skilled and Competent health professionals to be incorporated in devising health policies

Utilizing international platforms and organizations to contribute to the national health system.

Advance coordinated health approach, bringing together the social, economic, security and environmental dimensions of public health.

- g. An effective framework to prevent, detect, and respond to health issues and devising new mechanisms to prevent the failures we have witnessed in the past. Imposing better protocols for emergency preparedness and crisis management, inducing data sharing, and mobilizing all resources at disposal.
- h. Devising a systematic mechanism in which Pakistan should learn from the other countries healthcare systems.