

Expert Opinion

Future Impacts of COVID-19 Infection on Pakistani Population

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Introduction

Pakistan is facing serious economic slump as the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) rate of Pakistan was 3.29% in year 2019 which was less than previous GDP rate of 5.53% for year 2018. Moreover current outbreak of COVID-19 is estimated to further decrease GDP rate to a negative value of -1.55% in year 2020. There is a sharp jump in poverty ratio from 30.3% in year 2018 to 40% in year 2020. Currently approximately 69 million people are living in poverty in Pakistan.¹ Apart from these added burdens on Pakistan's economy are 1.4 million afghan refugees and 106000 internally displaced people.^{2,3} This declining economic trend is very alarming as it clearly indicates the difficulties that government is going to face in coming months.

Pakistan is a developing country and only a meager chunk of annual budget is given to human development and humanitarian programs. Most of the human development programs are run by foreign funding or by Non-Government Organization (NGOs).^{2,4} Main donor countries of Pakistan are United States of America, Saudi Arabia, United Kingdom, European Union and China. These countries provide direct funding to governments as well as fund different human development programs run by United Nations.⁴ Unfortunately all these countries are also struggling with their economies due to COVID-19 pandemic.⁵ This global economic crunch will surely lead to a sharp decline in foreign funding to Pakistan.

Till May 22, 2020 over 50,000 confirmed COVID-19

cases have already been reported in Pakistan. In past couple of weeks there is an exponential increase in confirmed cases and under current circumstances it could reach millions. Similarly death toll can also increase to thousands.⁶ Pakistan's poor health infrastructure with only 1280 hospitals and limited number of doctors cannot cope with the upcoming crisis. Current health care facilities are surely insufficient to cope with the upcoming crisis Table 1. This combat with COVID-19 will further shatter the already struggling health sector of Pakistan.¹

In coming months Pakistan's exhausted economy

Table 1: Province Wise Healthcare Facilities in Pakistan^[7]

Sr. No	Province	Population	Number of hospitals	Number of beds
1.	Federal	805235	9	2571
2.	Punjab	73,621,290	388	60119
3.	Sindh	30,439,893	473	39564
4.	KPK/FATA	17,743,645	277	22154
5.	Balochistan	6,565,885	132	7747

after covid-19 crisis and lack of foreign funds for different humanitarians programs could lead to another human crisis. As afghan refugee camps are mainly maintained by UNHCR and any reduction in funds could further worsen the lives of people living in these camps.³ Moreover absence of funds can affect vaccination programs which are already being neglected due to current pandemic. This could waste all previous efforts to eradicate polio and other diseases. Factors that can cause this human crisis are low standards of living, lack of space, insufficient healthcare facilities, high population density, and low

literacy rate.⁸

Now responsibility lies on the shoulders of government and general public to act smart in order to minimize the adverse effects of this pandemic in coming months. People from all walks of life should come forward and use electronic, print and social media to generate awareness about precautionary measures. Government should reform its policies related to human development and healthcare sectors. More facilities and budget should be allocated to education and health sector in order to minimize the crisis in future. Positive efforts in right directions can save many lives.

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