

Federalism and the COVID-19 crisis: A Pakistani Perspective



Author: Saleem Mandviwalla

Saleem Mandviwalla is a Director of the Forum of Federations. He is Vice Chairman of Senate of Pakistan, and previously served as an Investment Minister and Finance Minister in the Government of Pakistan.

Cases of COVID-19, the disease associated with the new coronavirus, are spreading quickly in Pakistan. The nation shares borders with two global epicenters of the pandemic – Iran and China. Pakistan reacted with alarm when the first case was confirmed on 26 February. Quarantine facilities were established in each of the subnational units and Sindh became the first province to shut down all educational institutions on 1 March. In addition to the health challenges faced by all countries, Pakistan is facing an acute challenge in maintaining the livelihood of daily subsistence workers in the informal economy given that a lockdown has now been imposed by federal government until the end of April.

Well-coordinated governance structures are critical for a quick and efficient response to such a crisis. As most critical services including health and social protection are now the responsibility of the provinces, each province is making decisions independently. However, powers concerning border control and aviation remain with the federal government and provinces lack jurisdiction to tighten surveillance at airports. Moreover, for countries as populated as Pakistan, local governments can play a pivotal role in reducing disease transmission and resistance to health providers by leveraging local networks.

The 18th Amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan, passed in April 2010, enhanced autonomy for the provinces. It made them exclusively responsible for healthcare. Consequently, as the pandemic has unfolded, provincial governments have been taking the lead in putting in place health and sanitation measures, including lockdowns. In most parts of the country, public gatherings have been banned, schools closed, and all shops other than those selling groceries or medicines shut.

Many religious scholars helped to close down mosques and other stakeholders also contributed to support the successful implementation of lockdowns. The Sindh provincial government, which took the lead in initiating lockdowns, has also been proactive in attempting to bring all levels of government onto one the same in terms of the response to the COVID-19 outbreak. As a result, other provinces have followed its lead. Sindh has also led the way in building quarantine centers. All the provinces have ensured that independent health bodies are operating in hospitals, with specialized wards and dedicated COVID-19 teams working to care for patients diagnosed with the disease. The provincial governments have also introduced a ration distribution drive and cut electricity and other bills to offer financial relief to the people.

The Government of Pakistan has taken a number of steps to tackle the evolving challenges and address the economic impact of the outbreak, through stimulating businesses in the urban centres, and agriculture in the rural areas. Early on, a massive plan of around PKR 30 Billion (USD 183 million) was unveiled for the construction industry in particular. Similarly, relief efforts are being bolstered with cash hand-outs to the poorest of families. On 24 March, the Prime Minister approved an economic relief package which provides PKR 150 billion





(USD 915 million) for low-income groups, while PKR 280 billion rupees (USD 1.76 billion) was assigned for wheat procurement. Loan interest payments for exporters were deferred temporarily, while a package of 100 billion rupees (\$63 million) was provided to support small industries and the agriculture sector. Extra facilities such as expo centers are being converted into quarantine centers for COVID patients. According to the Constitution of Pakistan - with the reference of clause 1, 2, and 4 of section 245 which involves all state institutions in time of crisis - the Army has been called to take part in the fight against coronavirus and control its spread across Pakistan. A national command and control center has been created to co-ordinate the response to COVID-19 cases in their quarantine. The government is also investing in research to enable Pakistan to produce more ventilators, PPE kits, and testing devices. This crisis cannot be overcome individually, but rather collectively as one nation. The Senate of Pakistan (which is a chamber of the provinces in Pakistan), for example, has discussed under its Business Advisory Committee the process for holding Senate Sessions via video conferencing.

The measures required to deal with the COVID-19 outbreak are actioned under the emergency rules and regulations which have been developed over the years in response to the natural disasters that frequently impact the country. Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) are now established for these emergencies – but not for pandemics. Pakistan is now undertaking the planning process to establish the

SOPs, training, and budgets necessary for disinfecting public places, providing public education, and distributing more equipment across Pakistan.

The biggest challenge that Pakistan will face is an economic one post-pandemic. The IMF has already predicted negative growth for the world economy this year. Because Pakistan is a federation, even after the pandemic is over it will be necessary for the provincial and federal government to work in harmony and across party lines to revive the economy. COVID-19 provides a lesson for countries to invest more in public health and improved health delivery. It remains to be seen whether the measures that the government has taken will be enough to mitigate the loss of life and economic hardship.

