

Policy Implementation Gaps and Institutional Fault-Lines in the Context of Social Protection Programs in Pakistan

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Abstract:

This report explores governance gaps and implementation challenges in Pakistan's social protection system, focusing on federal, provincial, and local roles. Despite efforts like the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) and provincial social protection authorities, poverty alleviation remains constrained by fragmented governance, overlapping mandates, and weak inter-agency coordination. Using a mixed-methods approach – combining field interviews, document analysis, and comparative case studies from Brazil, India, and Bangladesh – the study identifies key barriers, including the absence of integrated databases, political interference, inconsistent legal frameworks, and poor monitoring. Vulnerable groups, such as women, transgender individuals, and persons with disabilities, often receive inconsistent or inadequate support. While policy coverage has expanded, overreliance on donor-driven models and a lack of forward-looking strategies undermine long-term impact. The report recommends adopting a cohesive, non-partisan framework aligned with constitutional and Islamic principles, supported by a digital national registry, strengthened local capacities, and poverty graduation pathways. Community-based initiatives like Zakat can enhance sustainability, ownership, and resilience in the evolving social protection landscape.

Key words:

Social protection, governance, poverty alleviation, Pakistan, community-based initiatives

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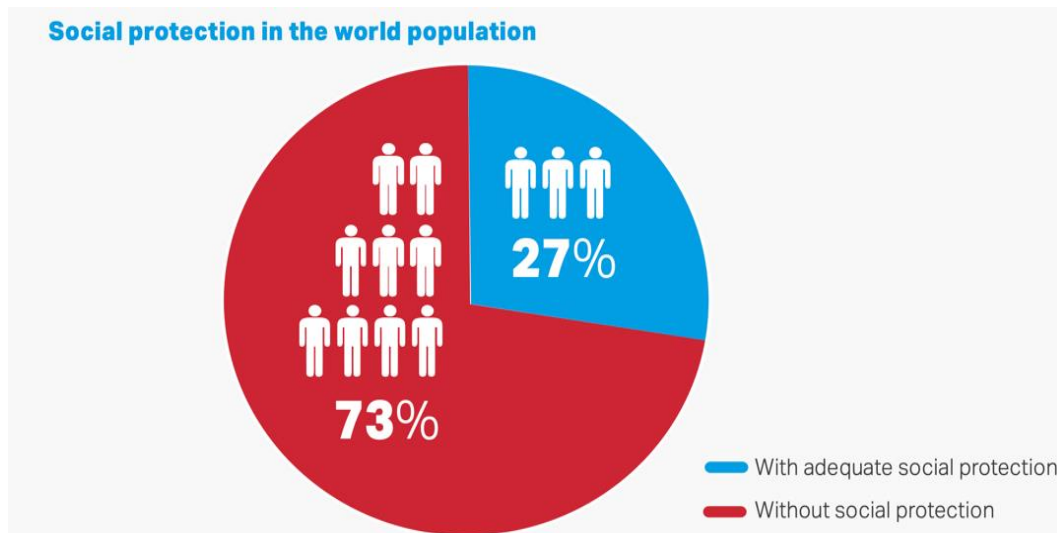
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Introduction

Pakistan, with around forty per cent of its 241.5 million population living in poverty and low human capital development, faces the challenge of multidimensional poverty. Stagnant economic growth, along with high food inflation, a rising population, and increasing climate shocks, raises risks and pushes people into poverty. To protect this vulnerable population, Pakistan's federal and Provincial governments provide a range of social protection and welfare services. Today, Pakistan has a large national protection cash transfer program, the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP), which was established in 2008 as a social safety net initiative aimed at consumption smoothing and reducing negative coping strategies to mitigate the impacts of food inflation.

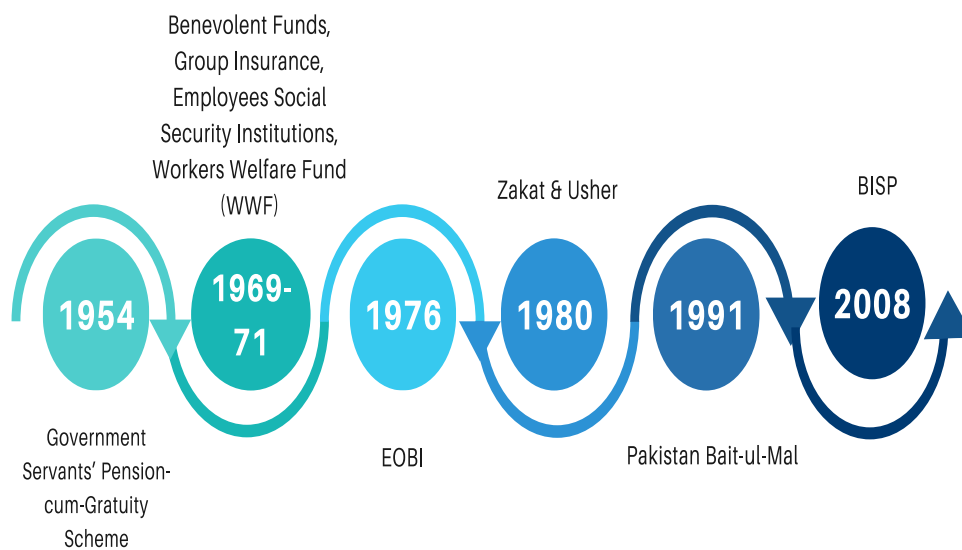
The protection and welfare of the poor, orphans, the sick, and widows are Islamic values as described in the Holy Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet (PBUH). Pakistan, being an Islamic republic, in the preamble of the 1973 Constitution stresses promoting equality and social justice by safeguarding the interests of the depressed classes. The principles of policy outlined in Articles 34, 35, 37, and 38 of the 1973 Constitution make the state responsible for ensuring the full participation of women in national life, protecting the family, promoting social justice, and enhancing the socioeconomic well-being of the people. Rooted in these foundations, the country has a comprehensive welfare system that has evolved, with multiple social welfare departments and organisations at both the Federal and Provincial levels.

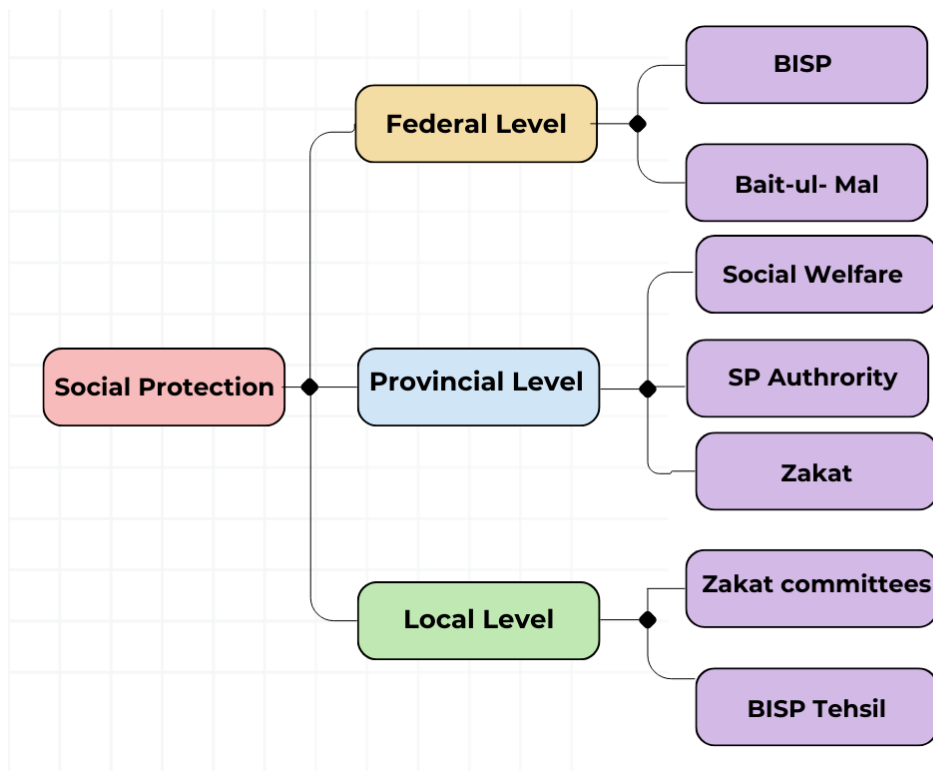
Pakistan adopted the SDGS as its national development goals by passing a unanimous resolution in the National Assembly in 2016. SDG Goal 1: aims to end poverty in all its forms. Achieving universal social protection is an SDG 1.3 target, whereby countries are required to "implement nationally appropriate social protection systems for all, reducing and preventing poverty." Moreover, Goal 10, which aims to reduce inequalities, in target 10.4, urges governments to adopt social protection policies to cover the eligible population and reduce inequality.



The historical evolution of the social protection institutions in Pakistan is detailed in Figure 1 (Rehman et al., 2020, p. 15).

THE HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL PROTECTION INSTITUTIONS IN PAKISTAN





Concept of Social Protection

Initially, in 1919, social protection policies were designed for the income maintenance of wage labourers to reduce their vulnerabilities by ILO. It is an umbrella term that refers to various institutionalised policies and interventions to protect vulnerable people from emergencies threatening their livelihood and well-being (ILO, 2011). "Social protection is defined as the set of policies and programs designed to reduce poverty and vulnerability by promoting efficient labour markets, diminishing people's exposure to risks, and enhancing their capacity to protect themselves against hazards and interruption/loss of income." (Rehman et al., 2020, p. 3). Another key definition is "public actions taken in response to levels of vulnerability, risk, and deprivation which are deemed socially unacceptable within a given polity or society" (Barrientos & Hulme, 2008, p. 3).

Midgley (2012) highlighted that there is no standard definition of social protection; rather, it is broadly defined. He explained the debates in the literature on social protection: the ILO focused on cash transfers for income maintenance; Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler emphasised contributory support programmes like commodity subsidies, minimum wage, and food-for-work; Barrientos highlighted labour market interventions such as protecting minimum wage and improving working conditions.

Morduch stressed micro insurance and community based projects (Midgley, 2012, p. 11). The concept of social protection has been marketed and promoted by the World Bank since the 1990s, and even today, social protection programs across the Global South are technically and financially supported by the World Bank and the IMF through their social funds. The World Bank based these social protection programmes on 'household-based risks' instead of a community-based approach, which is followed in Pakistan's rural support programmes.

Social Protection and IFIs

Even in the case of Pakistan, since its inception, BISP has received consistent support from the World Bank uninterrupted through Development Linked Indicators (DLIs) based technical assistance (TA) projects. In 2009, BISP received Development Policy Credit (US\$ 150) and Social Safety Net Technical Assistance (TA) Project (US\$ 60 million). The National Social Protection Programme (NSPP), with a US\$ 100 credit, started in April 2017 to implement nutrition-sensitive Conditional Cash Transfers, WeT for primary school enrolment thereby enhancing beneficiary outreach and updating the NSER database ⁶.

Crisis-Resilient Social Protection (CRISP) Program in started in 2022, providing US\$ 600 million for implementing a dynamic social registry at the Tehsil level, matching hybrid saving schemes for beneficiaries, nutrition-sensitive cash transfer, update of NSER data, enrolment of children in school under WeT, number of FATA districts covered with nutrition-sensitive cash transfer, bonuses for girls for completing primary education and transitioning and payment of flood cash transfers targeting through NSER database (World Bank, 2021).

Critique of Social Protection Programs

The social protection model is critiqued by scholars for its hidden goals. The Marxists and critical theorists have highlighted that the state promotes the interests of capitalists by ensuring access to consumption and creating financial inclusion for the poor, thereby bringing them into the banking sector. The focus on consumption, health and education is to develop an efficient labour force. Midgley (2012) critiqued the politics of insecurity bred by social protection programs which often provide short-term responses, often favouring those with stronger links to the administration and political connections. This policy of favouring creates 'new poor' and increases their vulnerability when the short-term interventions are discontinued (Barrientos & Hulme, 2008).

⁶ <https://www.bisp.gov.pk/SiteImage/Misc/files/TOR%20SSL.pdf>

Moreover, Midgley (2012) pointed out that the benefit is provided based on the head count of poverty, rather than focusing on the depth and severity of poverty, which presents varied needs. It is relevant to Pakistan since BISP provides the same cash transfers to those with PMT 30 and PMT 12 scores, even though their levels of deprivation differ in severity and depth.

The primary critique centres on how electoral politics influence social protection, with these programs typically crafted to fulfil electoral objectives through the promise of enhanced cash benefits. Hall (2006) mentioned that the electoral success of Lula da Silva in the Brazilian presidential election is related to the expansion of the Bolsa Família program. It has been argued that the social protection programs are expanded for electoral popularity and to suppress dissent by creating welfare dependency (Hall, 2006). Considering these critiques, it cannot be ignored that Pakistan's social protection cash transfer program often faces challenges of political ownership due to its politically charged name, which evokes an association with Benazir. Drawing from personal experience during visits to interior Sindh, many beneficiaries believed that the cash disbursed by BISP is insurance money from the late Benazir Bhutto.

Models of Social Protection

1. Bismarckian model - The contributory system to manage risks like insurance and pensions. It is premised on risk mitigation and rights with responsibilities.
2. Beveridge model - Rooted in a rights-based approach, it is a non-contributory system financed by tax revenue. It includes cash transfers and welfare payments.

A successful model requires a combination of both models to balance rights and responsibilities, protecting citizens against risks and reducing vulnerabilities. The social protection allocations are often criticised for being expensive, inefficient, and creating dependency (ILO,2019)

Social Protection Approaches

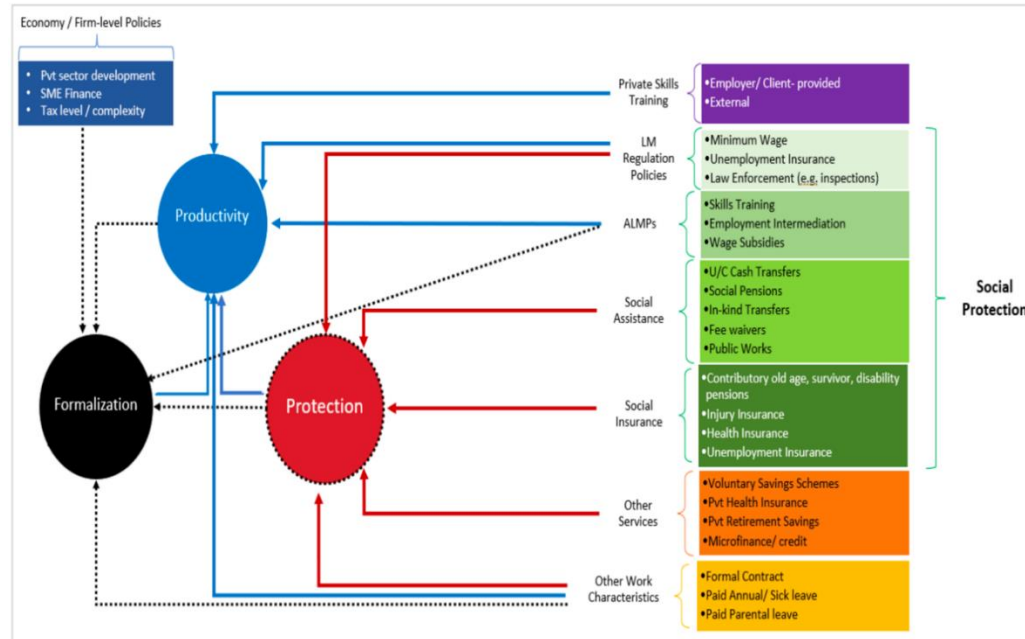
Antipoverty Programmes

Supported by the World Bank and the IMF, targeting people living in poverty with digitised, efficient and targeted cash transfer programmes. It focuses on human capital development (Khattak,2023). The antipoverty approach is used in African and Latin American Countries.

Lifecycle Approach

Supported by the ILO, it focuses on providing social protection based on different life cycle stages, including children, youth, and the elderly, through integrated social protection. It focuses on developing a social protection floor to provide benefits to all eligible individuals (Khattak, 2023). The lifecycle approach is adopted in the Philippines and many Pacific Island countries.

Fig. 4. Protection, Formalization, and Productivity: Conceptual Linkages with Social Protection



Statement of Problem

The social protection system in Pakistan has evolved with sophistication over the years, supporting vulnerable households across the country. However, there is a perception that the impact of these programs on poverty varies due to implementation gaps and institutional fault lines. Therefore, detailed research is needed to analyse the existing social protection ecosystem at the federal, provincial, and local levels to address the challenges of poverty.

Scope

To critically analyse the implementation and institutional framework of social protection in Pakistan at the federal, provincial, and local levels since 2008, identify issues and challenges that call for reforms, and suggest feasible solutions.

Limitations

Field visits were only conducted in Peshawar as travelling to other cities was not possible. Several attempts were made to contact the Punjab Social Protection Authority (PSPA), but we were unable to connect despite calling the available telephone numbers. However, documents available on the PSPA website were studied. Moreover, no data were found regarding provincial social protection programs in Baluchistan.

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was employed, utilising both quantitative and qualitative methods. To collect qualitative data, budget documents from the federal and provincial governments were reviewed, and information on beneficiaries was gathered from BISP. The qualitative data collection involved field visits in Peshawar, interviews with key government officials and beneficiaries, as well as a review of documents. The offices examined included the BISP regional headquarter KP, the Social Welfare Department of KP, and the BISP Tehsil office in Pishtakhara, Peshawar.

The interviews were conducted with BISP officers at the regional office, including the Director General, Director, Deputy Director, and Additional Director, to understand the federal setup. A Deputy Director of Pakistan Bait-ul-Mal was interviewed via telephone. Officers and officials from the KP social welfare department were interviewed to gain an understanding of the provincial system. BISP Tehsil office was visited to assess operations at the local grassroots level. The members interviewed BISP beneficiaries present in the Tehsil office. A questionnaire was prepared to conduct interviews, and the collected data was analysed thematically to identify various themes. The analysis tools provided in the TORs were utilised.

Analysis

The detailed analysis based on the collected data is presented in detail below:

Concepts of Poverty and Poverty Landscape of Pakistan

Pakistan's poverty landscape remains complex, with 38.3% of the population living in multidimensional poverty. Provincial disparities are stark: Baluchistan faces the highest multidimensional poverty rate at 71%, followed by Khyber Pakhtunkhwa at 49%, Sindh at 43%, and Punjab at 31%. The Human Development Index (HDI) for Pakistan stands at 0.544 (2021), ranking 161 out of 191 countries. Human Capital Index (HCI) data shows children born today will be only 41% as productive as they could be with full education and health. These indicators highlight deep-rooted inequality and underinvestment in human development, particularly in education, health, and regional infrastructure.

GAP Analysis

Federal

Current State	Existing Gap	Desired State
Welfare, women, labour and education are devolved subject but Federal government is maintaining organisations	Duplication and redundancies since devolution	Devolution and transfer of existing programs to provincial governments
Functional devolution is not practically implemented	Centralist tendencies	Complete functional devolution
Political labelling of social protection program such as Benazir Income Support Program compounds the problem of policy consistency and continued ownership	Politicisation nomenclature of social protection programs	Adopting apolitical nomenclature of social protection programs
BISP is focused on cash transfers	Policy practise is non-inclusive in terms of objectives entailed in the BISP Act, 2010	BISP to expand its working sphere by including skill development, vocational training and insurance
Low literacy of beneficiaries compounds exploitation by POS agent and BISP Tehsil staff	Financial leakages and corruption	Complete transfer of cash to the target beneficiaries
No data sharing and coordination between BISP and PBM for targeting and provision of services	Lack of unified system	Data sharing and coordination among provinces
Politically appointed In capacitated Human Resource	Pecuniary interests	Non-political interference and meritocracy
The policy and programs are designed and financed by IFIs	No independent policies	Local resource mobilisation to prioritize economic growth
Resource constraint	manual operation system	Digitization of Institution and operations

Provincial

Current State	Existing Gap	Desired State
Overlapping initiatives in silos at provincial level	Lack of unified strategies	Cohesive and effective policy framework in consultation federal govt.
Data bases at provincial levels not maintained	Weak controls	Data bases at their level should be maintained to enhance efficiency
Misuse of financial resources	Current budget is more than developmental or welfare budget	Accountability and third-party audit
Underutilised and underperforming work force	Low work out put	Meritorious recruitments, trained and efficient work force and right sizing
Lack of coordination among various provincial departments (Baitul mal, Social welfare, social protection authorities, zakat and usher)	Duplication and overlapping of work and services within the province	Strong coordination and data integration and unification within the province

Local Level

Current State	Existing Gap	Desired State
Women and children beneficiaries in local offices but fewer female staff	Sociocultural insensitivity and no gender mainstreaming	Posting female staff at local level to deal with women
Non-participatory approach and Marginalised groups are excluded	SP must cover most vulnerable. Not all poor are same. Minorities and people with disabilities should have higher coverage.	Pro-poor, gender responsive and inclusive approach based on intersectionality
Limited administrative presence of social protection organisations at grassroot level	Implementation and beneficiary mobilisation challenges at grass-root level	Increased grass root level footprint
Lack of resources. No provision of electricity backup	Poor service delivery	Solarisation and backups according to geographical realities of GB and south KP
Beneficiaries are not well-informed and aware about existing available programs and no referral system	Lack of communication and beneficiary outreach	Beneficiary committees and selection of leader for community mobilisation to bring social change

Institutional Fault-Lines

- Fragmented Inter-Institutional Coordination - Governance Dimension: Consensus Orientation, Effectiveness and Efficiency
- Weak Legal and Regulatory Framework – Governance Dimension: Rule of Law and Consensus Orientation
- Weak Accountability Mechanisms – Governance Dimension: Transparency and Accountability
- Capacity Deficit at Local Level – Governance Dimension: Responsive and Effective
- Chronic Fiscal Constraints – Governance Dimension: Effectiveness and Efficiency
- Political Interference and Inconsistency – Governance Dimension: Consensus Oriented
- Inefficient Resource Allocation and Inadequate Targeting – Governance Dimension: Equity, Inclusiveness, Effectiveness and Efficiency
- Limited Community Participation – Governance Dimension: Participation and Responsiveness

BISP Fault-Lines

- Focus is on poverty head count instead of severity of poverty
- Lack of Coordination between the Federal and Provincial Government
- Kafalat is the main component and is an unconditional cash transfer
- Politically motivated nomenclature
- Lack of coordination with other agencies operating under the M/O of P&AAS can establish an ecosystem for welfare, as BISP provides income maintenance and education, while PBM can support the differently abled and sick individuals in that family. Meanwhile, the Poverty Alleviation Fund can provide access to capital and assets for poverty graduation.
- The vertical program and its implementation require the extensive involvement of the provincial government (departments, agencies, and district administration) beyond their provincial priority obligations.
- No exist strategy, there is an incremental increase in the number of target beneficiaries
- Lack of infrastructure and female staff at the Tehsil level
- Limited outreach at the local level to create awareness among beneficiaries about available support services.
- Lack of coordination between the Federal & Provincial Governments to avoid duplication of efforts/resources and imposition of the vertical program of Ehsaas Kafalat through the district administration
- Pakistan Bait-ul-Mal (PBM) Fault-Lines

- Although PBM and BSP are under the same Federal Ministry, there is no coordination among the departments, and both are working in silos. For instance, during the 2025 Ramadan, PDM was distributing iftar while BISP was also distributing Ramadan Rashaan.
- Absence of link with the dynamic National Socio-Economic Registry for efficient identification and effective targeting of potential beneficiary groups
- Lack of coordination with other social protection safety net implementing agencies to provide unified services to the targeted population. While PBM provides funding for the treatment of life-threatening diseases, it is not linked with BISP. Therefore, if a beneficiary requires treatment, they must register separately with PBM. Resource constraints result in a small assistance allowance.
- Lack of Validity of beneficiaries' data and a difficult registration process involving verifications from the local district administration and the Imam Masjid.
- The targeting mechanism is arbitrary. According to World Bank (2013), only 45 per cent of the beneficiaries of the PBM were in the lowest two quintiles; roughly 40 per cent of the recipients are in the top two quintiles (Asad syed,2015)

Provincial Departments' Fault-Lines

- The roles and responsibilities of social protection departments are not clearly defined, creating duplication of work. As social welfare departments, PBM, zakat and usher Department and social protection authorities are all working in silos.
- Lack of funds availability for various ongoing programs, while new initiatives are being introduced, creating redundancies in the system. Lack of focus on strengthening existing initiatives
- Lack of integration and coordination among social protection implementing agencies
- Lack of a dynamically updated Socioeconomic Registry and centralised data. However, it can be compiled by collecting information from the local offices of various organisations working at the grassroots level.
- Lack of digital integration of departments as they do not have access to the assistive functions of NADRA, PTA, and FIA for real-time filtration, which are currently managed by the Federal government.
- Limited institutional capacity because of a lack of training and modernisation efforts.
- The new social protection policy is widely delinked from the existing social welfare department

- Initiatives of one government become a burden for the next government because each government pursues De novo programs for social protection benefiting their own political manifesto.

Case Study of Education Stipend - Duplication of Incentives

The BISP Waseela-e-Taleem (WeT) program provides a conditional cash transfer to school-going male and female children of beneficiaries, subject to a minimum 70% school attendance rate⁷. Currently, 3,164,860⁸ enrolled children of beneficiaries, both boys and girls, in primary, secondary, and higher secondary schools in KP are receiving education stipend payments. However, in parallel, the Elementary and Secondary Education (E&ES) Department in KP under the Girls Stipend Program is also providing education stipends to all girls with 80% attendance in government schools. Moreover, the provincial government verifies attendance through the education monitoring authority and provides them with motorbikes, mobile phones and fuel. At the same time, BISP has also hired more than 1000 social mobilisation officers across Pakistan on a contractual basis and provided them with motorbikes and tablets to visit schools for attendance verification. While the government schools, where attendance is checked, remain the same, it is a duplication of efforts and resources. Coordination and cooperation with local and provincial education would have presented a cost-benefit option for BISP, leading to improved accountability at both levels.

Challenge

There is no mechanism to verify and ensure that the stipend is not paid to the same students from both the BISP and the KP government, as there is no data sharing mechanism.

International Best Practices

Social protection cash transfer programs first gained popularity in Latin American countries in the 1990s, as various initiatives were implemented to protect the vulnerable population from inflation caused by IMF structural loans and to safeguard national human capital development. However, social protection programs exist in various forms across Latin America, Asia, and Africa today, including cash transfers, food-for-work programs, insurance, and other benefits.

⁷<https://www.bisp.gov.pk/Detail/YzNIY2Q2ZGYtNjIwZS00MjNiLWFhMmEtZGM5NWNNkMjZhMjQ3>

⁸ Data provided by KP Regional office of BISP

Country	Program Name	Type	Target Group	Key Features	Impact / Outcomes
India	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)	Public Works / Employment Guarantee, social insurance and health	Rural unemployed families, old age women, youth	100 days of guaranteed wage employment per year	SP coverage doubled from 24.4% in 2021 to 48.8% in 2024 ⁹
Bangladesh	National Social Protection Strategy	Social Pensions, trainings and micro-credits to ensure access to capital and assets.	Elderly, widows, disabled below poverty line, women and transgender. Reduced gender gap	Focuses on capacity building of ultra-poor by linking them to BRAC and ensuring self-employment through micro-credit, coaching and mentoring.	50% population benefits from at least one program ¹⁰
Brazil	Bolsa Família	Conditional Cash Transfer	Low-income families	Conditional on education, health, inter-sectoral and decentralization	26% Brazilian population with \$ 33 billion budget ¹¹

⁹ <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2115391>

¹⁰ <https://socialprotection.gov.bd/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Bangladesh-CODI-Country-Report-9.4.pdf>, pg-7

¹¹ https://policybasket.endhungerandpoverty.org/index.php/Brazil:_Bolsa_Fam%C3%ADlia

Policy, Project, Program and Finance Analysis

Dimensions	Federal Level	Punjab	Sindh	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	AJK
Annual Funds 2023-2024	404.48 B	29.52 B	165.88 B	17.97 B	9.0 B (seed money)
Legal Framework	BISP Act (2010), Pakistan Bait-ul-Maal Act of 1991, Zakat and Ushr Ordinance 1980	Punjab Social Protection Authority Act, 2015	Sindh Social Protection Authority Act, 2022	Child Protection and welfare Act 2010	Azad Jammu and Kashmir Social Protection Vulnerable Population Ordinance, 2024, AJK Zakat U Usher Ordinance 1980
Policy Framework	Multiple national strategies (PBM, BISP)	Punjab Social Protection Policy (2015)	Sindh Social Protection Strategy (2021)	KP Social Protection Strategy (2021–2030)	AJK Social Protection Vulnerable Population Ordinance, 2024
Key Institution	M/o Poverty Alleviation and Social Safety, BISP, PBM	Punjab Social Protection Authority (PSPA), PHCIP, Punjab social welfare Dept, Punjab Zakat & Ushr Dept	Department of Social Welfare, Sindh Social Protection Authority, Sindh Zakat and Ushr Dept.	Social Welfare Dept, KP Zakat and Ushr Dept, KP Social Protection Policy Unit	Social welfare and women development dept.
Flagship Programs	BISP: Unconditional (UCT) and Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) education and health, PBM Langar Khana, treatment for life threatening diseases	Zewar-e-Taleem: Conditional transfers for girls' education Ba-himat Buzurg Program, Nayee Zindagi Program for Acid Attack survivor, PHCIP: Health and nutrition (WB-funded)	Mother & Child Support Program Disability Cash Transfers	Zamung Kor: Support for orphans KP Ehsaas (provincial): Cash transfers Sehat Card: Universal health coverage	Poor/Transgender, Widow/Divorced woman and elderly over 65 years of age, who is abandoned and has no ascertainable means of support or begs on street for living

Technology & Tools	NADRA integration Biometric verification Mobile payments Dynamic registries (NSER)	PSPA's own MIS, biometric data collection Collaboration with NADRA limited	Weak MIS Limited biometric/IT tools Fragmented data systems	Sehat Card uses NADRA; Limited Zakat MIS, other schemes fragmented	Data collected from BISP
Coordination with Federal Level	No coordination among BISP, PBM, and Poverty Alleviation Fund though under same Ministry	Limited data sharing BISP, but overlaps and data silos	Poor coordination: programs run in silos	Limited cooperation but data gate keeping by Federal govt	Limited coordination
Monitoring & Evaluation	BISP M&E Dept exists but lacks provincial feedback integration	Weak M&E at district level; minimal independent audits	Weak M&E and accountability mechanisms	Minimal M&E especially in tribal districts	Weak M&E
Inclusion of Vulnerable Groups	Once married women and transgender for BISP and need and program-based inclusion in PBM	Focus on elderly and girls, differently abled, acid attack survivor	Focus on women, differently abled, transgender	SP: Senior citizen, women, children, differently abled. Sehat Sahulat for all citizen	Transgender, elderly, women

Stakeholders Analysis

Stakeholder	Role	Interest	Power	Gaps Identified	Reform Role
Federal Government (e.g. Ministry of Poverty Alleviation, BISP, Pakistan Bait-ul-Mal)	Formulate policies, oversee programs, allocate budgets, coordinate with provinces for implementation	High (poverty reduction, political credibility, SDGs)	High (Controls policy, funding, design)	Policy incoherence, centralization of funds, resources and data, limited coverage	Lead unified framework, establish coordination mechanism, increase funding, decentralization, technological integration
Provincial Governments	Implement devolved programs, manage local delivery, adapt to regional needs, provision of welfare services	High (local poverty alleviation, political support)	High (implementation in field, main beneficiaries are in provinces).	Lack of coordination within institutions and with Federal government, limited institutional capacity, weak delivery due to non-sharing of data by Federal, limited funding, creating new institutions without strengthening existing structures	Align with national framework, strengthen capacity, tailor programs
Local Government Bodies	Facilitate last-mile delivery, enrolment, grievance redressed, social mobilization	Moderate (local development, implementation).	Low (limited autonomy, resource-dependent).	Implementation bottlenecks, weak institutional capacity, Corruption	Enhance training, improve infrastructure, increase participation, devolution of resources.
Beneficiaries (Rural Communities, Informal Workers, Minorities, Transgender Persons, beneficiaries' committees)	Primary recipients, provide feedback, community development, behaviour change	High (direct beneficiaries seeking inclusion resilience)	Low (limited policy influence).	Non-inclusive coverage, alienation in policy cycle, social and administrative exclusion	Engage via awareness, mobile enrolment, inclusive design, community mobilization, participatory approach

Implementing Agencies (NADRA, BISP, local government, Provincial SP authorities and social welfare departments)	Manage enrolment, verification, disbursement s, outreach.	High (operational efficiency, funding).	High (impleme ntation).	Limited data coverage, financial leakages, corruption, weak monitoring, limited facilities, fewer female officers/official s	Leverage digital tools, capacity building, improve databases, expand outreach, ensure transparency
International Donors and Development Partners (World Bank, WHO, ADB)	Provide funding, technical assistance, governance frameworks, policy guidance, monitoring and evaluation	Moderate (effective fund utilisation, implementation on international goals).	High (influence via funding, recommendations)	Aloofness from local sociocultural realities, setting national policy direction	Negotiation of agreements by the Federal govt must consider local realities and need for self-reliance

Issues and Challenges

After detailed study, visits and analysis, this groups considers that the root cause of all issues and challenges is political interest. Hickey (2008) explains politics in development as the lives of people, especially the large population of vulnerable poor, are shaped by politics, which aggravates their vulnerabilities and weakens their sense of dignity. The use of social protection programs for political goals in Brazil has been explained above. The issues and challenges identified are detailed below:

Federal Level

1. Tug of war between the federal and provincial governments
2. Social welfare, women's empowerment, labour, and education are devolved subjects that are the focus of BISP.
3. Zakat is a devolved subject, but it is collected federally and distributed to provinces.
4. The duplication of authorities and departments at the federal and provincial levels after devolution, like Zakat Council are resource burden on state
5. Data gatekeeping by strict data sharing protocols impacts service delivery. Thus, no database integration pushes provinces to build their own databases.
6. Duplication of programs and parallel initiatives at the Federal and Provincial levels
7. Absence of poverty graduation programs.

Provincial Level

1. Fail to manage and organise their own data, despite multiple activities ongoing in the field to provide services and information to households, which are maintained locally at various levels by different institutions. However, this data is never compiled and organised in a uniform way to operate in an organised manner. Represents the lack of will and reluctance in providing services in a data-driven way, as that reduces discretion and favouritism. There are intended loopholes in the system.
2. There is a trust deficit between federal and provincial governments, as well as among various institutions.
3. Sidelining existing social welfare and zakat departments with the creation of new social protection authorities, while welfare departments struggle with resource deficiency
4. Redundancy as existing institutions are neglected while new ones are created. No money to provide support for old age benefits by social welfare department after all data collection but new social protection authority has been created
5. Competing political interests and political labelling of social protection programs

Local Level

1. Limited grassroots level footprint, causing high cost of time and travel for beneficiaries
2. Absence of a gender-sensitive and inclusive approach, as there is a fewer number of female employees to deal with many female beneficiaries.
3. Centralisation of resources and decision-making hinders devolution to the local level.
4. Financial leakages and corruption in the cash disbursement delivery system at the local level.

Conclusion

While social protection and state welfare safeguard the vulnerable, they have remained highly politically contentious subjects, even in the developed Global North, including the United States, Britain, and other European countries. Pakistan employed a combination of contributory and non-contributory approaches towards welfare through pensions, insurance, EOBI, and zakat services. However, the social protection cash transfers were initiated by establishing the BISP in 2008 with the support of international financial institutions (IFIS). Although it provides support to millions of households, its impact on reducing poverty is limited, as its scope is primarily focused on consumption smoothing, safeguarding against negative coping strategies, and breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty through education and nutrition support.

Provincial governments are now introducing the same social protection cash transfer model through social protection policies and social protection authorities. However, this newly developed fascination with social protection has side-lined the existing social welfare departments, zakat departments and other initiatives which were already struggling after devolution. Thus, creating duplication of work and wastage of resources with limited to no impact on poverty reduction. Regional office BISP KP, informed that there are 52 similar projects and initiative in KP by provincial government in parallel with BISP. Issues and challenges exist at the policy, administrative, and implementation levels, with no unified policy, strategy, or plan in place to address poverty reduction. However, even when studying international best practices, many reports have concluded that expectations for cash transfers to pull people out of poverty have remained overly ambitious (Borga & D'Ambrosio, 2021). This has been particularly true in Latin American countries and many parts of the Global South, where it has led to increased government indebtedness.

The adoption and implementation of social protection cash transfers should not rely solely on IFIs like the World Bank and IMF; rather, for sustainability, they should be informed by the Islamic concepts of equality and fair distribution. Islam established the sustainable social protection cash transfer system, Zakat, 1400 years ago, which does not merely burden the state but emphasises individual responsibilities to provide for the needy and vulnerable people, ultimately promoting social cohesion without bankrupting the national economy. Even today, the zakat system is administratively in place at the village neighbourhood council at the grassroots level, whereas even BISP offices have only a tehsil-level administrative setup.

Recommendations

Federal Level

1. Economic development for poverty reduction. Poverty cannot be reduced solely through cash transfers and welfare programs, as this requires sustained economic growth. China did not pull people out of poverty through social protection, but rather by creating work and job opportunities in a growing economy.
2. Incorporate crisis resilience in social protection programs at all levels. The Pakistani vulnerable population has high risks of climate-related disasters and man-made disasters like terrorism. These disasters push people back into poverty, and all the gains made over time by the departments were lost. Hence, incorporating risk factors in social protection planning and implementation at all levels is compulsory. Social insurance and saving schemes are critical to building the resilience of these communities.
3. Poverty graduation planning, and initiatives for cash transfer beneficiaries. The missing link in poverty graduation is crucial for reducing poverty. It requires skill training, financial literacy programs, asset transfer, and access to capital, along with continuous mentoring and support. Cash transfers are temporary measures, but real transformation requires poverty graduation initiatives.
4. National Social Protection coordination framework for the implementation of unified strategies under M/o PASS
5. Complete unfinished devolution agenda to streamline resources and remove duplications and redundancies.
6. BISP programs should be transferred to provincial social protection authorities/departments. BISP KP regional office informed that Nashonuma is already being transferred to the provincial government in Punjab.
7. Nationally integrated socio-economic database by integrating NADRA and all provinces. The CNIC could be a social protection identification number.
8. Remove political labelling to improve ownership of social protection programs for the collective social development of vulnerable people.
9. National dialogue to streamline efforts and resources by planning poverty reduction policy with HDI and SDG targets in consultation with provinces

Provincial Level

1. Establish standardised provincial data hubs for all social protection and welfare services which is also then linked with nation database.
2. Optimal utilisation of existing resources, rather than mobilising new resources, is required, as various departments have existing structures and personnel that are underutilised.
3. The commitments and targets of the SDGs and HDIs must be integrated into the KPIS of social welfare and social protection departments to evaluate impact and progress.
4. Strengthen the social welfare and zakat department with financial, technological, and human resources, along with enhanced oversight and monitoring, to improve service delivery at the grassroots level.

Local Level

1. Invest in local training, infrastructure, and community participation, and clarify legal roles.
2. Strengthen Monitoring and Evaluation by involving other provincial government and zakat department officials with grassroots-level presence to develop real-time databases and robust evaluation frameworks.
3. Posting of female staff at local offices.
4. Prevention of corruption and leakages by creating awareness and imparting digital financial literacy training at the community level, such as beneficiary committees.

Operational Plan

Actions	Responsibility	Timeliness	Resources Needed	KPIs
Nationally integrated socio-economic database	Federal govt, provinces, NADRA, and health dept	8 - 12 months	Existing budget, support from WB as NSER was built with their support	Checking existing databases, unifying those and link with NSER, Provinces update data to their extent.
Transfer BISP programs to Provincial SP authorities	Federal govt	12- 18 months	manpower transferred to provinces along with building and finances	Linking the existing database grassroots level, Phase wise transfer like CCT Health
National dialogue poverty reduction policy road map	Federal, provincial and AJK	4-8 months	Political will	Identify all current operational programs at all level, setting agenda with SDG

				targets
Remove political labelling to improve ownership	Federal and provincial govts	4 – 8 months	Federal and provincial govts	To remove overlapping and redundancies
Poverty Graduation Program by developing synergies	Federal and Provincial govt	12-18 months	Agreements with government entities to prevent fraud, strengthen TEVTAs, PAF resources	Training of 1000 beneficiaries across Pakistan and asset transfer in 6 months

Complete Functional devolution to reduce duplication	Federal govt	12-24 months		To have effective implementation to the grassroots level
CNIC as SP identification number.	Federal and provincial govt	12-18 months	Available budget	Benefit to everyone without any political patronage
Establish standardised provincial data hubs	Provincial govt	12-18 months	Special allocation by finance	Streamline data at 5 district level in 6 months as pilot
Streamline and strengthen all provincial departments and authorities of SP, welfare and zakat	Provincial govt	12-18 months	Existing budget and PND	Identify overlapping and similar programs in 3 months and streamline
Integrate HDI and SDG targets into KPIs	Federal and provincial govts	8-12 months	PND and Finance dept	Revise existing KPIs in 6 months
Posting female staff in local offices	Provincial govt	6-12 months	Social welfare dept. with concurrence of respective finance dept.	Hire female staff on vacant posts in field in next 6 months
Improve M&E to prevent corruption and financial leakages	Federal and provincial govt	6-12 months	Respective depts. of social welfare, zakat and SP	To work efficiently and in true letter and spirit as envisaged there in

Outreach to beneficiaries to increase awareness	Federal and provincial govt	18-24 months	Respective depts.	Digital and Financial literacy training to 1000 beneficiaries in each provinces in next 6 months
Strengthen human resource, infrastructure and facilities at local level	Provincial govt	4-8 months	Concerned dept. having financial concurrence	Ensure provision of electricity backup in all south KP tehsil offices of BISP in 6 months

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