



## Assessment Report

# Impact & Vulnerabilities of COVID-19 on the Marginalised Communities living in Pakistan



June 2020





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پا کھیل شوق کنی اور کھیل  
کشت و عمل کی بات ہے مومن  
ہو کہ سب کھلتے اور کھلے پھلتے  
کئی دلی سے اسے مومن ہو کھلتے  
تو کھیل شوقی اور بڑے چم  
شوقی اور کھیل کن اور شوقی



# Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Introduction and Methodology</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Section 1</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>COVID-19 and Vulnerability for Marginalised communities: Case Study of Religious Minorities in Pakistan</b>	
1.1 Nature of Jobs	6
1.2 Living Conditions	6
1.3 Economic Hardships	7
1.4 Challenge of missing data	9
<b>Section 2</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Including the Excluded — the Response Efforts</b>	
2.1 Government’s Efforts and Gaps in Relief Operations	12
2.2 Relief efforts by civil society	15
<b>Section 3</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>On the Receiving end — Community’s Perspective</b>	
<b>Key Recommendations</b>	<b>23</b>



## Executive Summary

**T**hough the effects of a global crisis such as the coronavirus pandemic are widespread, its impact is discriminatory against those segments of the population that are on the fringes of society. This study attempts to highlight the need to place greater importance on 'inclusivity' in preparedness before crisis, and relief and rehabilitation efforts during and after the crisis. It also explores how existing divides are heightened and the factors, specific to structural, physical, cultural and religious contexts, which in the first place led to the social exclusion and disenfranchisement of such segments of society make them more vulnerable in such crises.

This Assessment Report is an endeavour to assess this theory by analysing the impact of Covid-19 and successive relief efforts for marginalised communities living in Pakistan who are already on the fringes of socio-economic and political spheres. For this assessment, we engaged with and studied responses of the religious minority communities, district and provincial administrations responsible for pandemic response, relevant civil society stakeholders and provincial and national assembly policymakers across Pakistan. We chose Pakistan since it is a low-middle income developing country with limited health services capacity that was overwhelmed in the early days and that despite the economic challenges, the spread and impact of Covid-19 were managed successfully, especially compared with the neighbouring countries. The research identifies the socio-economic factors that make marginalised communities more vulnerable to health crises such as pandemics and also explores the structural barriers and societal behaviours that contributed to the lack of effective relief and a comprehensive response mechanism to meet their needs.

The Report is divided into three sections. The first analyses the factors that made marginalised communities most vulnerable to the impact of coronavirus. The second section explores the most crucial structural gaps, as well as opportunities, that affected the relief efforts and its effectiveness in the immediate aftermath of this public health crisis. Finally, it explores the perspective of communities to the impact and relief efforts to understand the issues of access to relief efforts.

The study details the key factors that have affected religious minorities and increased their vulnerability to Covid-19. These include the nature of their employment, living conditions, and acute economic hardships among other socio-economic indicators which are a product of their alienation. They are mostly poor, living in highly-dense Katchi Abadis or slums with dismal hygiene conditions and practices, and have non-technical, low income and daily wage jobs. Since a major proportion of the community is employed in mostly sanitary related public and private work, the impact of loss of livelihood as a result of the effect of coronavirus on businesses impacted these marginalised communities more than others. Usually, in developing countries, a well-functioning social safety net is missing and rather exists in the form of an inter-community transaction only. In such a scenario, when economic hardship affects the overall community, the social safety net for individuals within these religious minority communities also decreases in size, making them more financially vulnerable to impacts of a

health crisis. In addition, discrimination and structural disadvantages make such communities more vulnerable to the disease and to the impact of the pandemic.

The lack of data is a crucial factor that makes minorities more vulnerable and hinders their meaningful inclusion in planning or implementation of large-scale relief efforts. From government institutions to civil society organisations and private philanthropists to local community structures, no one has exact figures. People have estimates — accurate in many cases since the minority populations are mostly concentrated and live together but no record is maintained at any level and neither do we observe any evidence of use of such data by district administrations, even where some data on demographics and location was present.

Absence of local government systems in most areas, structural impediments in terms of policies and regulations and lack of data have been the most glaring gaps in government relief efforts which have led to marginalised segments of society being either left out or unable to access the relief goods. The role of civil society actors was not very encouraging either. A major contextual reason has been stringent policy for international development organisations, prior to the pandemic, which had resulted in many international not-for-profits to close their offices in Pakistan. This left a few organisations which made deliberate efforts to reach out to minority communities. There was a lack of action by national or international humanitarian organisations as well. Most organisations that were prominently working on the ground were faith-based charities and foundations. These also included faith-based organisations of minority communities, but such organisations have limited resources, technical capacity and are usually focused on their specific communities only. Moreover, there is lack of access to government relief efforts and instances of discrimination based on religion had further increased the negative impact of this pandemic on religious minority communities in Pakistan.

## Introduction and Methodology

COVID-19, the novel coronavirus disease, has affected every country on the planet after first rearing its head in Wuhan, China last December. Due to its proximity to ground zero, as well as neighbouring Iran which was one of the first countries to be badly hit by the virus, Pakistan could not have stayed immune for long. The first case was detected on February 26 this year from a citizen who had travelled to Iran.

With limited number of tests being conducted in the country, it is difficult to determine the exact number of positive cases. What is certain, however, is that the number of those affected increased exponentially at the time of writing of this report in early July. The initial lockdown by the federal and provincial governments appears to have helped slow down the spread of the virus and delay to better prepare the healthcare system for the expected onslaught. With partial/near-complete reopening of all sectors of the economy, there is a lurking danger that the government might be forced to re-impose a total lockdown if things get out of hand. While necessary, the restrictions pose immediate and long-term psycho-social and economic challenges for citizens. The marginalised communities across Pakistan, whose participation in public life is already limited with issues of access to services, economic dependence, and cultural barriers, are most affected. Incidents of discrimination during relief distribution have also been reported on social media.

This assessment study aims at assessing the impact of this pandemic on religious minorities and role that government and civil society has played to address their issues. It also identifies the socio-economic and cultural factors that affect the religious minorities most during this pandemic and proposes recommendations for short-term and long-term solutions.

A mix of desk and field research tools was employed to conduct this study. Online interactions were preferred; however, meetings in person were also carried out wherever required. The data collection methods were as follows:

1. Literature Review
2. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)
3. Case Study Collection

The following steps were involved in this methodology:

- Step 1:** After the required approvals, a list of key informants was prepared along with the documents that were reviewed. People from the media industry were identified whose case studies were to be collected to highlight their challenges and concerns.
- Step 2:** After preparing these lists, questionnaires for KIIs and guidelines for collecting case studies were developed. People conducting these interviews and collecting the case studies were oriented on these research tools.

**Step 3:** This step involved the collection of the required data through literature review, KIIs and case study collection. This data was analysed and presented in the form of findings.

**Step 4:** The last step was the writing of this report, consolidating of feedback and making required revisions.

The report has been arranged into three sections that deal with a) factors that effect the vulnerability and impact of COVID 19 on marginalised communities; b) the relief efforts carried out by the government and civil society for these communities; and c) Perception of these communities and their access to response efforts. Although, coronavirus effects are widespread, the focus in each section has been to identify dynamics that disproportionately affect the religious minority communities. Some key recommendations are also presented to guide an inclusive and egalitarian response from both government and civil society.



## SECTION-1

# COVID-19 and Vulnerability for Marginalised Communities: Case Study of Religious Minorities in Pakistan

After recording its first case towards the end of February, Pakistan has now crossed the 200,000 mark of confirmed cases of coronavirus, with the number increasing by the thousands every day. The virus — like in any other part of the world — has indiscriminately affected all provinces, administrative units, genders, ethnicities, and religious denominations in the country. There is no individual, race or community that is not prone to it or has an edge over the others based on its identity alone. However, the pandemic has sharpened society's pre-existing inequalities and presented its stark manifestation in the preceding months.

Like many other parts of the world, dealing with the pandemic has also been a consistent challenge in Pakistan where half-cooked and unscientific theories were talked about that led to miscommunication among masses. Moreover, similar to global trends, there were certain narratives promoted that thrive on excluding the marginalised segments of society and focused on religious differences. From first considering it a disease limited to those who eat



prohibited meat (pork delicacies in China), allow abortions (Western Europe and US), or do not adhere to the correct version of Islam (targeted at Shia religious ceremony in Iran during early days), the discourse about this pandemic started with religious arguments at the societal level. In the early days, this virus was also referred to as the 'Shia virus' since the country's first recorded cases were from pilgrims returning from Iran. Likewise, two government ministers were severely criticised for being responsible for the virus's spread owing to their association with a particular sect instead of questioning their professional shortcomings or identifying policy gaps. They both belong to the Ahl-e-Tashee sect and were involved in letting the Shia pilgrims go back to their native towns without spending the required period of quarantine at the Pakistan-Iran border. In later events, religious minorities, particularly Christians and Hindus, were discriminated against or asked to profess Islam to be eligible for relief such as rations and cash hand-outs. These are all separate and one-off events and have not led to any trend of systemic discrimination during this pandemic.

There are certain factors that lead to some segments of society more vulnerable to the short term and long-term effects of coronavirus. The findings of the literature review and KII's suggest that religious minorities in Pakistan have been equally exposed yet more vulnerable to the virus due to their poor socio-economic conditions, living standards and association with some high-risk professions like nursing and janitorial services. They also retain an equitable share of victims in the total tally of people affected from this virus. Some of the factors that contributed to the vulnerability of minority population vis-a'-vis coronavirus are as follows:

## 1.1 Nature of Jobs

Like in all other communities, those who were financially established or had the opportunity to work from home have been less affected compared to those working in 'essential services' or the ones who had to go out to earn livelihoods. The farming community in rural areas and sanitary workers, nurses and doctors from minority faiths were performing their duties outside their homes during the time of lockdown. Fortunately, the virus has not penetrated much into rural areas so far and the harvest season for farmers passes under normal circumstances. On the other hand, the situation in urban areas is bleak and appears to be slipping out of control. A considerable number of urban minority population associated with janitorial services, employed both by government institutions and private entities, has been working uninterrupted and thus fell prey to the virus.

Most sanitary workers in all major cities hail from minority communities. These people toiled away in hospitals, government offices and even on the roads during the lockdown period. In almost all cities where people were contacted for this study, sanitary workers were not provided any protective gear. They had been complaining about it since the beginning, but no satisfactory action has been taken in this regard.

Working in hospitals and dealing with the cleanliness of the place and patients makes them more vulnerable. On the other hand, minority women who work as domestic help in urban areas have been relatively safe, notwithstanding the impending economic hardships as most were asked to go on leave until the situation improves. They usually work in multiple houses in a locality and are thus considered to be 'spreaders'.

## 1.2 Living Conditions

These workers live in informal settlements or Katchi Abadis where the probability of virus spread is extremely high. Also, in some cases, entire families are associated with this profession so their exposure to the virus increases manifold.

The sanitary workers of municipal corporations and hospitals who are mostly Christians and Hindus have complained of unavailability of protective gear. They are the ones at the forefront and exposed in the battle against coronavirus, yet no protection or compensation was given to them. They had to perform their duties regularly and were not provided with any protective equipment — not even masks or gloves. These complaints were received from Peshawar, Faisalabad, Rahim Yar Khan, Karachi, Ghotki, Nankana Sahib and Bahawalpur.

The findings also suggest that there has been no awareness campaign to protect the vulnerable groups from the virus by the government or civil society/faith-based organisations. There has been no cleanliness or disinfection drive in minority community areas either. As a result, inhabitants were denying the existence of this virus in the beginning, like most people did, or had little knowledge about the precautionary measures to contain its spread.

Another issue reported in this regard that impacted the lives of minority communities was closure of OPDs in government hospitals. Since most of them could only afford government hospitals only, they were left with the option of self-medication or advice from compounders of medical stores. They were not able to get their ailment(s) accurately diagnosed or treated and may have fallen prey to this virus.

### 1.3 Economic Hardships

Along with suffering from the medical consequences of coronavirus, minority communities are struggling for their economic survival as well. Already poor and downtrodden minorities — particularly Christians and Hindus — are facing a severe hit to their livelihoods and finding it hard to sustain with such limited means. Like the majority population, they also lost jobs, got pay-cuts, and are receiving salaries late, if at all. Even people associated with janitorial services working for private entities were fired from their contractual jobs. Although this economic hardship was no different from what the majority population experienced, there are cases where people from minority communities were discriminated based on their religious identity.

Other than janitorial services, most of the people from minority communities in urban areas work with either private organisations or own small businesses. They are usually low-paid jobs. KIIs conducted in *Peshawar, Multan, Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad* informed that young people were working as waiters, delivery riders, beauticians, barbers, cashiers, and teachers. Almost all of them have lost their jobs since the outbreak of this virus and the subsequent lockdown. A considerable number of young men and women employed as sweepers and caretakers in private hospitals and shopping malls too have lost their jobs. Their case is more complicated since they are hired through a third party and private hospitals or shopping malls do not take any professional responsibility for them.

Another issue that minority population faces in urban areas is getting their salaries late or not getting them at all. In *Gujranwala*, a private school first delayed the salaries of teachers and support staff for two months and then informed them that they were being let go without clearing their dues. Some Muslim teachers were also fired without any compensation but most of them happened to be Christians in this case.<sup>1</sup>

In *Bahawalpur* and *Rahim Yar Khan*, Hindu and Christian women working as domestic help have also lost their jobs temporarily. Their meagre income, PKR 2,000 to 3,000 per household,

1 KII with Sikander Siraj, teacher and local community leader, Sialkot

from this employment has been temporarily halted as most have been promised to be rehired once the situation improves.<sup>2</sup> There are also some cases in *Islamabad* and *Karachi* where women have been given paid leave from their employers and they are being taken care of continuously in these difficult times.

There are some cases where minority workers were discriminated against as compared to other workers of the same organisation. This indicates the existing discrimination and divides on religious grounds at workplaces that have the potential to turn into such manifestations even during crises, certainly causing more harm to the marginalised groups.

In *Faisalabad*, about 30 Christian workers were fired from *Maqsood* Textile Mills without any prior notice whereas other workers were compensated in one way or the other. In some other factories in the city, Christian workers were abruptly laid off telling them that the work orders have been cancelled. Similarly, in *Lahore* and *Karachi*, many workers in textile sector have been laid off.<sup>3</sup>

At the factory outlet of famous clothing brand J., a discriminatory practice was observed: Of the ten employees who work at the outlet, two Christian employees were paid half monthly salaries of April whereas the remaining Muslim staff was paid full salaries. The only reason cited by the management for this cut was closure of business due to COVID-19.

A widely cited report by the Labour Collective states that 85% of textile workers are informal. In this crisis more than a million will lose their jobs. The government has responded by giving tax breaks, incentives, and bailouts to owners in the hope that some of this money will trickle down. But the ground realities do not support this approach.<sup>4</sup> This study further claimed that at Advance Fashion (textile exporter), *Lahore*, workers, many of whom are Christians, were asked to come to work on Saturday even though Easter was the next day and they were still not paid.<sup>5</sup>

Likewise, about 30 men and women working in Moli Soap factory in *Nankana Sahib* were not paid their monthly salaries and fired. Factories are closed and there is no way that the owners take any responsibility.<sup>6</sup>

This gets complicated and hard to defend in any court of law since most of them are either employed on contractual basis or are daily wagers without any appointment letters. These workers have not been hired back till the writing of this report.

The rural communities, particularly Hindus in *Sindh* and some parts of *Baluchistan*, had to face similar ordeals. The findings of KIIs suggest that most of the Hindu community living in *Mirpurkhas*, *Badin*, *Tharparkar*, *Tando Allah Yar* and *Umerkot* are extremely poor. Their only source of income is daily wage labour and farming. As the pandemic has made everyone nervous, landholders and growers are no exception. They preferred to store more food items for their own families. Hindus who work for them as sharecroppers had to compromise on the less percentage of crop this time. This also happened because some crops like tomato burnt due to unsatisfactory precautionary measures or perished due to delay in reaching the market because of the lockdown and transportation issues. Another misfortune for farmers this year

2 KII with Qamar Iqbal Advocate, minority leader, Rahim Yar Khan and Lazar Allah Rakha Advocate, Bahawalpur, May 16, 2020

3 KII with Irshad Parkash, Moderator United Presbyterian Church and Member, Peace Committee, Faisalabad on May 18, 2020

4 <https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/652599-laid-off-during-pandemic>

5 <https://profit.pakistantoday.com.pk/2020/04/18/over-1-million-textile-workers-set-to-lose-jobs-amid-covid-19-fallout/>

6 KII with Bashir Masih Bhatti, Member District Peace Committee and District Coordinator, Minority Affairs, Punjab Government, Nankana Sahib, May 18, 2020

has been the onslaught of swarms of locusts. All growers are worried as this will eventually result in less percentage of shares in crop and daily wages for poor Hindu agriculture workers.<sup>7</sup>

This may lead to food shortage for these communities in the near future. A comparable situation has been reported in south Punjab as well. For instance, Christians in *FatehPur, Layyah* are educated and do not work as sanitary workers. They are mostly farmers, daily wagers, or work in agriculture markets (*mandi*). Their livelihoods were also severely affected, and they suffered from food shortage too.<sup>8</sup>

“This season has been very cruel to small farmers, tenant farmers and agricultural workers of south Punjab and some parts of Sindh. We have had heavy rains just before the harvest of wheat — even hailstorms in some areas — that severely affected the crop. Amid this pandemic, farmers did not have any transportation to go to work. The already poor farmers will get a lesser share of wheat for this year. And all that happened when the work opportunities have already shrunk, and flour prices are rising. Most of the small and tenant farmers are Christians and Hindus in areas where we work, and they are facing food shortage this year.”

*Samuel Clement, Executive Secretary, Caritas Pakistan-Multan*

In addition to that, people from these areas who were working in *Hyderabad* and *Karachi* also returned to their native towns, particularly in *Mithi, Tharparkar* after the closure of their workplaces. This has not only decreased the overall income but also added people to feed at the household level. A considerable number of people were employed with water tankers in this district — they too have lost their jobs. In some areas, people have already started selling their livestock or seeking loans.

“Days after the coronavirus crisis took hold in Pakistan, Aamir Gill, a cleaner and member of the country’s Christian underclass was fired with no warning or severance by the wealthy family he had helped look after. ‘We were already untouchables and now due to corona, rich people think the poor might bring it into their homes,’ Gill told AFP ahead of an uncertain Easter. Along with two other servants, he worked at a large house in the capital — mostly to clean up after parties.

‘I have no idea how many bedrooms it had but it was big,’ explained Gill, who lives in Islamabad’s Christian slums in a cramped one-room home with his family of four. ‘My kids asked me for new Easter dresses and shoes, but I have told them we are not going to have Easter this year.’”

*(Arab News, April 11, 2020)*

## 1.4 Challenge of Missing Data

More than anything, the implications of missing data are huge to measure the impact and response of COVID-19 vis-à-vis religious minorities. From government institutions to civil

<sup>7</sup> KII with MukeshMeghwar, Rights Activist, Badin on May 17, 2020 and MyrahNarine, Oxfam, Islamabad on June 10, 2020

<sup>8</sup> KII with Asher Younas, Rights Activist, Layyah on May 19, 2020

society organisations and private philanthropists to local community structures, no one has exact figures. People have estimates — accurate in many cases since the minority populations are mostly concentrated and live together but no record is maintained at any level.

The representatives of district administrations across four provinces and government social protection schemes interviewed for this study do not have any data in this regard either. They do not even have any numbers for the assistance they have provided to minority communities. The only response these government officials provided was that religious minorities are equal citizens and they did not make any distinctions on these bases. However, they regretted the fact that minorities are excluded from the mainstream and they should have been provided relief in these challenging times through special means. Likewise, *Ehsaas'* cash emergency programme did not make any such distinction nor had data to ascertain how many people from religious minorities have benefitted from it.

The media also lacked coverage of COVID-19 related issues in minority communities which could have been a source of useful data. There was a dearth of reporting on the prevalence of coronavirus in minority localities, the discrimination meted out to them in their professional lives or how many have lost their jobs, etc. Similarly, social media was only effective in highlighting a few incidents where discrimination against minorities was reported.

NGOs that usually take a lead to flag such issues could not consolidate any data either. This is largely due to capacity problems of local NGOs, specially adoption of technology, and lack of preparedness for pandemic. A couple of NGOs contacted for this assessment, like their counterparts, did not have the exact number of minority households they assisted with relief items.

Some faith-based NGOs, mostly Christian humanitarian organisations, have some data but it is limited to their own work. Caritas Pakistan conducted a rapid assessment before they started their relief activities, but its findings are internal to their use. Also, it mostly covered the Christian community and conducted the study in the beginning of the lockdown. Another consortium of Christian humanitarian organisations, Pakistan Partnership Initiative, has commissioned a detailed study to assess the economic impact of coronavirus on minority communities which is expected to be completed by end of June.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) is planning a fact-finding mission to assess the impact and response of COVID-19 and religious minorities will be a part of this assessment.<sup>10</sup>

According to the Additional Deputy Commissioner of Jhelum, coronavirus has affected more than 500 villages. Religious minorities are not present in these villages except a few in Pond Dadan Khan where some Hindu families reside. The Christian population is also scattered and mostly in the city area. The district administration with the support of local NGOs distributed ration packs to 1,500 families, among them were 400 Christian families. This is the only district administration interviewed for this assessment that maintained such a record and presented it as a success story.

<sup>9</sup> KII with Sebastian Justin, Country Programme Coordinator, ICCO- Cooperation, Islamabad on June 5, 2020

<sup>10</sup> KII with Harris Khaliq, Secretary General, HRCP, Islamabad on May 29, 2020

## SECTION-2

# Including the excluded —the response efforts

As the coronavirus started spreading across the country preceding the lockdown in mid-March, various philanthropists and charity organisations prepared themselves for the gigantic task ahead. The provincial and federal governments, readjusting their existing budgets, also developed response plans and initiated their roll-out. *Sindh* was the first province to announce a lockdown and disburse living allowances worth PKR 600 million among 94,000 families through *Zakat* fund to deal with the economic impact of this pandemic.<sup>11</sup> Soon, Punjab followed suit and disbursed the same *Zakat* allowances amounting to PKR 1.5 billion among 170,000 families using digital technology.<sup>12</sup> Other provincial governments also ensured delivery of these funds within few weeks of the lockdown. The federal government, through its *Ehsaas* cash emergency support programme, has also disbursed PKR 118 billion among more than 9.7 million people under various categories.<sup>13</sup> Later, provincial governments operated ration distribution campaigns among poor families as well. However, like in other parts of the world, this assistance by both government institutions and civil society actors is falling short to meet the emerging needs of affected people. Besides, the support — cash or in kind — provided to religious minorities is severely inadequate and not considered a priority by both government and civil society. Reaching out to minorities and assisting them in these tough times also seems missing in the policy discourse.



This section presents the findings of the literature review and KIIs to assess the scale, outreach, and responsiveness of the relief efforts for minorities. Some case studies that were collected during this assessment are also part of this section.

11 <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2184808/1-sindh-govt-release-rs600m-zakat-funds-early/>

12 <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/641022-punjab-to-pay-zakat-via-easypaisa>

13 <https://dailytimes.com.pk/622535/rs-118-billion-disbursed-among-poor-under-ehsaas-programme/>

## 2.1 Government's Efforts and Gaps in Relief Operations

Governments, anywhere in the world, remain at the forefront while responding to such health emergencies. In Pakistan, the federal government, being responsible for international borders management, establishing quarantine centres and pandemic control, and the provincial governments being in-charge of health departments had a leading role to address this unprecedented emergency. There are three key challenges which globally, everyone had to face with varying degrees of success in tackling these challenges. These are designing the policy, implementing it, and lastly monitoring of the policy. In addition to these challenges, in Pakistan's case, the state of fragile economy also put more constraints for the policy makers as too much slowing down of economy could potentially be catastrophically detrimental for the country. Under the circumstances, the efforts of the government were encouraging, and it gives us a chance to learn from the success and challenges of these efforts. The findings of this study suggest that the efforts by the federal and provincial governments lacked affirmative and pro-active policy for the marginalised groups, particularly the transgenders and religious minorities. This lack of focus is stemmed out of both structural barriers and societal neglect that is usually seen while dealing with the religious minorities. Some of the gaps that affected government relief efforts to reach out to the religious minorities are as follows:

### **Lack of Local Government Systems**

Unfortunately, the local governments that are best suited to allow quick and real-time decision-making as well as providing reliable, factual and life-saving information are dysfunctional across Pakistan except *Sindh*.<sup>14</sup> There too, they have a limited role and shortage of funds to deal with this emergency. The lack of local government hurts relief efforts of both national and provincial government. The people in charge of planning at provincial and federal level lacked information and data on local context that resulted in mismanagement of disbursement mechanisms. On the other hand, it is also more convenient for people to gain access to their representatives of local governments and apprise them of their issues and seek help as compared to the district administration or people sitting in provincial and federal capitals.

### **Structural Challenges**

The first ever relief package announced by the provincial governments through its Zakat and Ushr department, as mentioned above, that benefited hundreds of thousands of families was reserved for Muslim households only. Later, the district Zakat committees also disbursed funds among poor people who were affected by this pandemic. It is the nature of this fund that restricts minority communities to be a part of this package because Zakat is a donation by Muslim citizens, collected by the government, required to be spent on fellow Muslim citizens. However, no special measure was taken to provide any such relief to the minority communities that are equally poor and eligible for such initiatives. Announcement of billions of rupees going to poor Muslim families, which have every right to this money, as compared to none for religious minorities made them feel more excluded and helpless.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> [https://democracy-reporting.org/dri\\_publications/how-local-government-can-strengthen-pakistans-fight-against-covid-19/](https://democracy-reporting.org/dri_publications/how-local-government-can-strengthen-pakistans-fight-against-covid-19/)

<sup>15</sup> KII with Samuel Clement, Executive Secretary, Caritas Pakistan, Multan, May 19, 2020

Province	Amount pledged/disbursed (in PKR)	Total beneficiaries
Punjab	600 Million	96,000
Sindh	1.5 Billion	170,000
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	1.2 Billion	100,000 <sup>16</sup>
Sindh	2 Billion	119,000 <sup>17</sup>

(Zakat funds pledged/disbursed in different provinces)

After the Zakat fund, while federal government planned to assist people through *Ehsaas* programme and *Pakistan Bait-ul-Maal*, provincial governments announced the distribution of ration packs to poor and deserving people. While Sindh and Baluchistan allocated PKR 1.08 billion<sup>18</sup> and 760 million<sup>19</sup> respectively for the ration schemes, the exact amount allocated by Punjab and KP governments has not been made public. Moreover, Pakistan Armed Forces also distributed 350,000 ration packs across four provinces purchased from the funds pledged from salaries of army employees.<sup>20</sup> District administrations across four provinces were given the responsibility to distribute these ration packs. Here again, no specific measures were taken to include minority communities in this scheme.

Media reports suggest that religious minorities were included in the ration drives carried out by the armed forces. They distributed rations among Hindu, Sikh, and Christian communities on various occasions. One such instance was Easter when the Pakistan Rangers (Sindh) distributed ration packs among the Christian community of *Mehmoodabad* in *Karachi*.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, Pakistan Rangers (Punjab) distributed 500 ration packs at St John's Catholic Church, *Youhanabad*, *Lahore* among the Christian community in the last week of April. On the same occasion, the rangers informed that they had also distributed ration packs at two other Christian colonies of *Lahore*.<sup>22</sup> During the first week of May, they again distributed ration packs at Guru Nanak School, *Nankana Sahib* and *Shawala Teja Singh Mandir*, *Sialkot*.<sup>23</sup> The KIIs conducted with representatives of the Sikh community informed that the armed forces also provided ration packs to Sikhs in *Peshawar*.<sup>24</sup>

Another window through which federal government is routing its response is *Pakistan Bait-ul-Maal* (PBM). It collaborated with different government departments and provided ration packs and financial assistance to deserving people. However, the interviews conducted with PBM officials informed that there is no special scheme or project launched to deal with coronavirus. All funds are allocated for *Ehsaas* programme. Therefore, no special allocation for minority communities was made.<sup>25</sup>

However, the media coverage – some of which went live on television – and social media posts inform that food and cash support was provided to thousands of people through PBM. One organisation working in *Multan* informed that they got five Christian families financial assistance through PBM in the wake of this pandemic.<sup>26</sup>

16 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1547053>

17 <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2202157/1-rs760m-set-aside-poor-families/>

18 <https://arynews.tv/en/sindh-provides-ration-families/>

19 <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2202157/1-rs760m-set-aside-poor-families/>

20 <https://www.geo.tv/latest/285538-army-distributes-more-than-350000-rations-among-coronavirus-affectedees>

21 <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2197948/1-army-soldiers-rangers-distribute-ration-bags-among-karachis-destitute/>

22 <https://www.ucanews.com/news/punjab-rangers-help-christians-amid-virus-lockdown/87889>

23 <https://nation.com.pk/06-May-2020/pakistan-rangers-punjab?show=preview>

24 KII with Sarjeet Singh Kanwal, Secretary General, Sikh Council of Pakistan, Nankana Sahib on May 18, 2020

25 KII with Assistant Director Projects, Pakistan Bait-ul-Maal on May 20, 2020

26 KII with Samuel Clement, Executive Secretary, Caritas Pakistan, Multan on May 19, 2020

The flagship programme of the federal government amid this pandemic is *Ehsaas*. Under various categories, it provides cash grants to the most-deserving people. As mentioned above, PKR 118 billion has been disbursed among 9.7 million people so far. These funds were disbursed in three tranches. The first tranche was released to women who are already registered with the Benazir Income Support Programme because of the poverty census conducted in 2012-2013. The second and third tranches were disbursed among people who registered themselves with the programme sending their CNIC numbers through a text message on the *Ehsaas* number. The district administrations and federal institutions including the State Bank of Pakistan, FBR, PTA and NADRA verified their credentials and produced a list of eligible people. Its criteria was made public and included various checks, such as that no one in the applicant's household should be a government employee, there should not be more than 10,000 rupees in the applicant's bank account, should not own a vehicle and taken foreign trips, etc.

Again, in this entire programme, no special measure (affirmative or pro-active action) was taken to include transgender people and religious minorities. Like district administrations, representatives of *Ehsaas* were adamant that this programme meant to reach out to poorest of the poor without any distinction of religion. It is important to realise that even though poverty is a good indicator to select the segment of population that need relief, it cannot be the only indicator. Indicators around gender, religion, location etc are equally important to consider since these not only have a direct effect on poverty but also are relevant for the level of vulnerability and impact of covid for these segments of population. The only tweet that came in this regard from *Dr Sania Nishtar*, Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Poverty Alleviation and Social Safety, talked about minorities benefitting equally from the cash transfer programme. In a tweet, she said many non-Muslim women in *Tharparkar* and *Umerkot* are beneficiaries of *Ehsaas* Emergency Cash Programme. She said the programme is designed to leave no one behind and anyone with a CNIC can apply for support under it.<sup>27</sup> Since this message was reported on April 14, it was the first tranche of disbursements and women who received cash were regular BISP beneficiaries registered through poverty census of 2012-2013. Also, majority of population of both *Tharparkar* and *Umerkot* are Hindus. The KIIs further inform that there are still no policy guidelines to include religious minorities in the newly launched programmes of *Ehsaas* ration and *Ehsaas* labour.

### Lack of Data

Findings of the KIIs with representatives of district administrations suggest that there was no mechanism in place to identify and reach out to people from minority communities. One standard response from all the representatives was that they believed in equality of citizenship and did not differentiate based on religion. However, they did not have any data to ascertain how many people from minority communities benefitted and were provided ration packs. Representatives from *Faisalabad* and *Jhelum* also regretted that minorities are not treated well and equally across the country. They admitted that minorities were not properly taken care of and were missed in most government schemes.<sup>28</sup> The representatives from districts in *Sindh* also acknowledged that Christians, Hindus, Sikhs and Parsis live in the province and most of them are very poor. They argued that in such emergencies, no criteria with regards to religion or gender is used rather everyone in need is catered for. They also did not have any data regarding the minorities who benefitted from the

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.radio.gov.pk/14-04-2020/ehsaas-emergency-cash-programme-equally-benefits-minorities-dr-sania>

<sup>28</sup> KIIs with Mohammad Qamar, Assistant Commissioner, Faisalabad City, on May 23, 2020 and Nazarat Ali, Add 'Deputy Commissioner, Jhelum, May 24, 2020

ration scheme. However, they informed that sanitary workers who are mostly non-Muslims were provided with the required PPEs.<sup>29</sup>

It is hard to believe that religious minorities are not benefitting from these programmes at all. The KIIs with community representatives also suggest that some have gotten this money. However, ignoring 'affirmative action' in such a large-scale emergency cash transfer programme and lack of data in this regard is disappointing. The least that could have been done was to consolidate and present data of religious minorities that have benefitted from such programmes particularly *Ehsaas*.

## 2.2 Relief Efforts by Civil Society

In addition to government relief efforts, various civil society organisations are present on ground to assist those in need. Within the civil society, there are various actors that have been playing their part. These include faith-based charities/foundations, national NGOs, and international humanitarian organisations. There are also community organisations and philanthropists who have either generated their own resources or become implementing arm of bigger organisations to provide relief goods to affected people. Below is the detail of relief efforts carried out by these organisations:

### Faith Based Charities/Foundation

The most prominent organisations that have come to public notice in this regard have been faith-based charities. As soon as the lockdown was imposed across country, *Saylani Welfare Trust* and *Jafaria Disaster Management Cell (JDC) Welfare Organisation* were seen distributing cooked food and ration packs among poor communities. Later, *Al-Khidmat Foundation (Jamaat-e-Islami's charity wing)* and *Falah-e-Insaaniyat* also initiated their ration drives and disinfection campaigns. Following a couple of cases where minorities were denied help by *Saylani Welfare Trust* in Karachi, *Al-Khidmat Foundation* took a bold decision to include religious minorities in their relief efforts. Workers of foundation visited churches, temples and gurdwaras in various cities of Pakistan and sprayed them with chemical disinfectants. The group also distributed rations among poor families belonging to minority communities. The move came after *Jamaat-e-Islam* chief Senator Siraj-ul-Haq issued a video message directing his party's volunteers and youth activists to look after minorities, transgender persons and sanitary workers affected by the ongoing lockdown.<sup>30</sup>

"The transgender people already face isolation. Sweepers are the most neglected section of our society and non-Muslims, whom I consider as equal citizens of Pakistan, are in a difficult situation. Our volunteers should look after them."

*Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer Siraj-ul-Haq*

Later, pictures of volunteers of *Al-Khidmat Foundation* visiting churches, temples and gurdwaras and distributing ration packs in minority communities were also shared on social media. The head of *Jamaat-e-Islami* also visited some minority communities and expressed solidarity with them. Following the footsteps of *Al-Khidmat*, JDC distributed ration packs among minority communities as well where they were refused by the other charity

<sup>29</sup> KIIs with Shahzaib Sheikh, Assistant Commissioner, Karachi on May 22, 2020 and Ameer Fazal, Assistant Commissioner, Larkana on May 26, 2020

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.ucanews.com/news/pakistan-islamist-group-wins-praise-for-covid-19-initiative/87596>

organisations. However, *Al-Khidmat* was the only organisation among this group of faith-based charities that made deliberate efforts to include minorities in its relief activities. Along with their regular volunteers, Christian and Hindu volunteers were taken on board to run the campaign more smoothly.

Some philanthropic initiatives and NGOs from minority communities were also active. Caritas Pakistan, a Catholic Church humanitarian organisation, has consistently worked with minority communities during this pandemic. Through its regional offices across the country, they provided ration packs to 3,640 deserving minority families, mostly Christians. A rapid survey was conducted in the minority communities before the distribution of relief goods and people who lost their jobs or businesses were prioritised. Caritas Pakistan also helped people to register with *Ehsaas* Emergency Cash Support Programme, Ration and Labour schemes. About 12,000 individuals were registered with the cash emergency support programme and 37% people finally benefitted. For the other two programmes, the registration has just started and its roll-out is expected in coming weeks.

Pakistan Partnership Initiative (PPI) is a consortium of Christian humanitarian organisations. They also supported minorities, mostly Christians, and provided dry food items, hygiene kits and cash grants. Till the first week of June, they have provided food aid (dry ration) to 32,692, hygiene kits to 7,825 and cash grants to 4,481 households.<sup>31</sup> They intend to continue this support and allocate more funds for cash grants especially to those who lost jobs or businesses during this pandemic. Here, about 95% people who benefitted from these relief efforts are Christians. The other five percent are either minorities from other faiths or Muslims.

Likewise, smaller organisations led by Christians, Hindus and Sikhs also provided relief packages to their respective communities. In some areas, the Sikh community helped each other by pooling in resources from wealthy members and made arrangements for poor people in their areas.

“There are about 280 Sikh families living in Nankana Sahib. There is no coronavirus case reported from this community so far. About 200 families are quite well-off and did not need any help. However, the other 80 families used to earn their living as daily wagers and their economic activity was badly affected. The Sikh community took care of them and provided them ration for few weeks. They also got sanitising gates installed in front of all gurdwaras of the city. Likewise, Punjab Rangers, an NGO from Gujranwala, and Sarwar Foundation (an NGO led by Governor Punjab) also provided ration to poor Sikh families. We also have reports that Pakistan Army has distributed ration among the Sikh community in parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The managing director of Pakistan Bait-ul-Maal also visited Nankana Sahib to survey deserving Sikh families with an intention to give them cash support. I believe NGOs must work in coordination with the government as there are many families who have got help from multiple entities whereas there are some who have not got anything from anyone.”

*Sarjeet Singh Kanwal, General Secretary, Sikh Council of Pakistan*

<sup>31</sup> Situation Report COVID-19 by Pakistan Partnership Initiative, Edition 7, issued on June 4, 2020

## National NGOs

Another category of organisations active on ground is of national rights-based organisations usually funded by international donor agencies. Strengthening Participatory Organisation (SPO) is working in Lahore to financially help the affected people. This initiative is funded by the Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) and plans to distribute 70 cash grants of PKR 3,500 each and 170 hygiene kits to the Christian community in *Youhanabad, Lahore*.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, South Asia Partnership-Pakistan, with financial assistance from Global Affairs Canada, has distributed ration packs to 140 families from minority communities in different parts of the country. Since they have already set a standard that five percent composition of any community structure that they support should belong to minorities, the same rule was applied here. They distributed about 1,000 ration packs of which 14% were for minority communities.<sup>33</sup>

*Hum Ahang Pakistan*, a project funded by the German Embassy in Pakistan, made deliberate efforts to reach out to minority communities particularly those that were either refused (like in *Karachi*) or not supported by any other organisation. They provided ration packs among 131 minority families and are still distributing masks and disinfectants in many communities. *Bedari*, another NGO implementing a COVID-19 relief project funded by the German Embassy, has distributed ration packs among 100 Christian families in *Chakwal*. In other areas, they are only assisting the communities where they were already operating. This help was only limited to the Muslim households since minorities are not present in those areas.<sup>34</sup>

The Punjab Development Network, led by Governor Punjab Muhammad Sarwar, and comprising leading NGOs of Punjab including *Akhuwat Foundation*, also claimed to deliver ration packs to minority communities. Only one such event was reported when the governor distributed ration packs among Christians at Central Church in *Shahdara, Lahore*.<sup>35</sup> No further detail of this network's efforts to reach out to minority communities was available. Moreover, KII with minority leaders and activists did not report any such assistance either.



32 KII with Shahnawaz Khan, Regional Coordinator, SPO Lahore on June 4, 2020

33 KII with Sharjeel Ahmed, National Project Manager, SAP-Pakistan on May 29, 2020

34 KII with AnbreenAjaib, Director, Bedari on June 4, 2020

35 <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2212800/1-lockdown-affected-minorities-get-food-rations/>

## International Humanitarian Organisations

International humanitarian organisations throughout this pandemic have remained less active on the ground. Some have already wrapped up their programmes in the country or are operating with an extremely low profile because of the stringent protocols in place by the government. Those still working, like Oxfam-GB, collaborated mostly with government institutions to provide relief to deserving people. Oxfam-GB regretted that they could not secure funding for religious minorities so far although they fully recognised that they are already disadvantaged in society and needed this relief the most. They have developed a few proposals that particularly focussed on the needs of minorities and are waiting for response from their donors.<sup>1</sup> Water Aid International is working in *Karachi* and *Hyderabad* mainly to raise awareness about this virus. One component of their project is to provide protection gear to 200 sanitary workers in these districts. Since most of the sanitary workers in these districts belong to minority communities, Water Aid considers it an indirect support to minorities.<sup>2</sup>

Other international humanitarian organisations contacted for this assessment informed that they were either still in the planning phase or did not particularly focus on religious minorities. They also maintained, similar to the government that they have reached out to the most deserving people without any discrimination. However, KIIs with the minority leaders and activists suggest otherwise. The UN agencies are also either collaborating with government agencies or in the designing phase of their community projects.



<sup>1</sup> KII with Myrah Butt, Programme Officer, Resilience and Climate Change, June 9, 2020

<sup>2</sup> KII with Raheema Panhwar, Water Aid, Karachi on June 9, 2020

## SECTION-3

## On the Receiving End — Community's Perspective

The data collection exercise also recorded the community perspective vis-à-vis relief efforts carried out by government agencies and civil society organisations. It was equally important to ascertain reasons for their exclusion and develop a framework for their successful inclusion in such initiatives in the future. The literature review and KIIs conducted during this study suggest that minorities felt completely dejected and ignored in the whole response effort. From the first cash grant in the form of *Zakat* fund to the comprehensive *Ehsaas* programme, respondents feel it is just sheer luck that they can benefit from any government scheme otherwise they do not have any expectations. They also feel that this pandemic has affected people indiscriminately and those compensated through government schemes genuinely deserve it. However, the government's lack of will, policy and priority to address the needs of communities already disadvantaged and discriminated against is disappointing. This section presents the community's experiences and perspective on this pandemic and its relief efforts.

### Access to Government Schemes

KIIs with community activists and leaders corroborate the findings of the literature review and KIIs with government officials. There are very few examples where minority communities were able to benefit from government ration or cash grant schemes. Since data is an issue at both ends, people shared anecdotal evidence or observations in this regard. Most of them thought of a few households (15-20) in their areas which received cash assistance through *Ehsaas*. Only Caritas Pakistan has maintained records of those registered with their assistance i.e. 12,000 and 4,440 (37%) who eventually received cash grants. Other than that, respondents informed of large settlements of minorities which they thought fulfilled the criteria but only a few households from them could benefit. It was the same story in all the districts whose representatives were interviewed.

“There are about 1,300 Christian families residing in Nawa Lane of Lyari town, Karachi. Majority of them are poor and qualify for the *Ehsaas* programme. However, only 7-8 families received the cash assistance and that too after waiting for a month to receive the confirmation message. Some families got the message that they are eligible, and their particulars are being verified but there was no communication after that while most have not received any message at all.”

*Pastor Shakeel Jeevan, Karachi*

Findings of KIIs also suggest that in addition to lack of interest for ‘affirmative action’ on part of the government, the awareness about *Ehsaas* emergency cash support programme is incredibly low. To be clear, the lack of awareness stemmed from the wrong perception of

transgenders and religious minority communities that they were not eligible for this program and a lack of affirmative action only further supported these mis-perceptions. Two other issues revealed in the findings are that a high number of people from minority communities are without updated CNICs which led to rejection of their request for the program and secondly, there was mismatch of fingerprints at cash centres which was contributed by the fact that during harvest times, the hands of the farmers are damaged. They also informed that there was a considerable number of people from minority faiths who do not have CNICs. In case of *Sindh*, there are hundreds of *Hindu* women whose CNICs are not updated since they got married and moved out of their home districts. These cases have been reported in *Rahim Yar Khan, Bahawalpur, Badin, Tharparkar, Umerkot* and *Ghotki*. In some districts, there are also complaints of mismatch of fingerprints. With reference to mismatch of fingerprints, some key informants reported that it was mostly due to women and men working in fields in the harvesting season that resulted in scars on their hands and mismatch on the biometric machines<sup>36</sup>

“More than 24,000 Christian voters (about 4,000 families) live in four union councils — 220, 221, 222, 224 — of Faisalabad. Only 25 families have received the subsistence allowance from Ehsaas cash emergency support programme. Many received the messages of their eligibility but did not get any cash, whereas a large number of people did not even qualify for this programme. Some people could not even register since they did not have CNICs. The Christian community here felt left out and met officials of BISP/Ehsaas who claimed they did not have any say in it.”

*Pastor Irshad Parkash, Faisalabad*

With regards to ration distribution schemes of provincial governments through the district administration, both Hindus and Christians expressed dissatisfaction. Sikhs however observed that they did not need much of this support since they pooled in their own resources to help the deserving among them. KIIs suggest that there was no satisfactory response from the relevant quarters even after the lists of the most-deserving people were submitted by community elders. However, they also observed that there was no ill-will on part of the district administration, but minorities just did not seem to be a priority for them since there were so many people who needed assistance.

“Hindus live in various districts of Sindh. Most of them are agriculture workers or daily wagers. They lost everything. There was no one to feed them. We heard on television and read in newspapers that the government was distributing ration, but we did not see it coming to the Hindu community, particularly those who were in villages. Some in the cities got it but there was nothing in the villages. There are so many people who needed food that we are being the last on the government’s priority list had to look toward other sources.”

*Mukesh Meghwar, Badin*

<sup>36</sup> KIIs with Samuel Clement, Executive Secretary, Caritas Pakistan, Multan on May 19, 2020 and MukeshMeghwar, Rights Activist, Badin on May 17, 2020

## Discrimination

While there is no evidence to suggest that any systemic discrimination was meted out to minority communities during this pandemic, the already prevalent social discrimination and neglect in policy realms continued. There is a strong feeling among minority communities that governments, provincial or federal, do not bother to listen to their issues and undertake any special measure even during such a deadly pandemic. The only option that they have is to vent out to representatives of their communities in the legislatures since they do not have any easy access to the administration at district or provincial levels. Even during this pandemic, dejected with the response from the government, community activists and elders went to see their representatives and secured some ration packs. People in the district administration also turned a deaf ear when minority MPAs or MNAs pleaded to provide ration packs to their communities.<sup>37</sup>

“There have been reports of incidents where minorities, specifically Christians and Hindus, are facing discrimination. At most places where relief is being provided by private foundations and trusts or religious welfare organisations, they often do not give relief to non-Muslims, stating that this fund is from Zakat so thus only Muslims qualify for it. A similar incident occurred in Sandha village in Kasur district of Punjab where an estimated 100 Christian families were denied food due to their religious identity. Later, however, a Muslim man arranged to distribute food among the community.”

*Cecil Shane Chaudhry, Executive Secretary, National Commission for Justice and Peace*

*(The Diplomat April 28, 2020)*

There were many instances reported in both *Sindh* and *Punjab* where philanthropists wanted to donate money to the minority communities, but they could not as *Zakat* is only given to Muslims according to the Islamic faith.

There were also cases where some charity organisations or philanthropists refused to provide relief goods to minority communities. On one such occasion in *Mian Mir* area of *Lahore*, boards were erected that discouraged non-Muslims from receiving ration. The notice up at the camp stated that non-Muslims should refrain from coming here for aid as this is for Muslims. On another occasion, some people were asked to convert to Islam if they wanted to get ration packs.

In *Mariam Colony Number 1* and *Christian Colony Number 2*, *Landhi*, *Karachi*, an Islamic organisation (*Saylani Welfare Trust*) distributed ration among poor people in April. Some Christian women in these areas were asked to convert to Islam in order to get ration for their families. Their videos also went viral on social media though they did not get much attention there either. However, another Islamic organisation, *JDC*, provided ration to the residents of these areas. They collected the lists of deserving people from religious leaders and community elders and provided them ration without any discrimination.

<sup>37</sup> KII with Father Imran Khurshid, Parish Priest, Holy Cross Church, Rahim Yar Khan on May 22, 2020

An important factor that helps explain the discrimination against religious minorities during a relief drive is the rising presence of religious extremists or intolerant groups in philanthropic organisations like *Saylani*, which are often religion-based but operationally pluralistic. Both in *Karachi* and *Kasur*, one common element of discrimination was the dominant role of local religious clerics who influenced volunteers and differentiated on religious grounds.<sup>38</sup>

In another case from *Faisalabad*, the ration drive by a local MPA completely ignored the minority communities of his own constituency. He felt embarrassed and later helped the Christian community after he was informed of this discrimination. It again confirmed the finding mentioned above that most of the government functionaries are completely unaware about minorities and do not consider their concerns to be added in policy decisions.

Faisalabad houses a high number of Christians. There are about four union councils in the city where Christians are in a majority. Since most of them are daily wage labourers or run small businesses, they were the most affected segment during the lockdown. A local member of provincial assembly (MPA) and well-off people of the area initiated a drive to feed the poor by distributing ration. Unfortunately, the ration was only distributed among the Muslim community and Christians were completely ignored. During the month of Ramadan, it was again witnessed that ration packs were delivered to Muslim families only. As a protest, a delegation of Christian community met with the MPA and complained about this discrimination. He was told that during the election campaigns, Christian votes are considered equal, but they are being discriminated in the present challenging time. The MPA felt embarrassed and promised to provide rations for 50 families. The community elders provided him a list of 66 deserving families, and 55 families were helped through ration packs.

Easter this year was celebrated during the lockdown. Respondents of the KIIs informed that Christian community has observed the lockdown and did not open the churches for Easter or the prayers during the holy week prior to Easter. Some clergy people reported that people were displeased when all mosques were open after a couple of weeks for the month of Ramadan. They also noted the Prime Minister asking Christians to pray at home on Easter and suddenly changing his stance a week later saying that the government cannot prohibit people to go to mosques as we are a free nation or mosques are not a cause of spread of this virus.

Other than policy gaps, no systemic discrimination was observed while disbursement of *Ehsaas* cash grants. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan also reported that it had not received any complaint of discrimination towards minorities at the cash disbursement centres.

However, there were some instances where minority communities were made to stand separately while receiving aid but how they feel about it can be understood by the following quote of a respondent in an interview:

*“In Neo Diplo area of Badin, Hindus were queued in a separate line at the Ehsaas cash centres. It has always been like that. One can easily figure what lines are for Hindus and what lines are for Muslims — you may call it discrimination but for us, it’s a simple norm”.*

<sup>38</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/covid-19-fans-religious-discrimination-in-pakistan/>

## Key Recommendations

- It is important to realise that the success of any relief effort depends on the identification process. Though poverty is a leading indicator, it is not the only one and other indicators, such as gender, religion, location also have correlation both, with poverty and with vulnerability and impact of covid 19. Exclusion of such indicators would inevitably lead to exclusion of such segments of population from the relief programs. Therefore, the government needs to have an 'affirmative approach' that is considerate of other socio-economic indicators as well.
- It is also important for policy makers to realise that the impact of covid-19 like pandemics is itself discriminatory against those individuals who are disadvantaged in the population and cannot access the public services and/or are on the fringes of socio-economic life. These individuals can be women, transgender people, religious minorities, among others. Since the impact of pandemic is discriminatory, so the relief efforts must also place special attention (affirmative action<sup>39</sup>) on these segments of population.
- There is a need to build the capacity of local administration and provincial administration in collecting, managing and using data that is inclusive of the relevant variables such demographics, gender, religion, geography(neighbourhoods), size, households and others, necessary for identification and relief efforts. For example; an up to date dataset on the population, distributed neighbourhood wise can become a very useful asset for provincial and national policy makers to design policies and identify vulnerable people and for local administration to implement the policies. Additionally, there is also an urgent need to increase civil documentation (CNIC etc) for those segments of the population that are still not documented such as women, religious minorities and transgenders in some geographical areas.
- There is a need for better coordination of efforts between government and civil society; including NGOs, INGOs and international donors, in dealing with such pandemics, whether in preparedness, planning, relief, or recovery phase. Better coordination between the two will allow more efficient use of resources, avoidance of duplication, transfer of knowledge and expertise and more comprehensive and inclusive approach of the efforts.
- Awareness campaigns on government relief efforts need to be more strategic. In addition to need for information, it needs to be inclusive by addressing unique misconceptions and needs of different segments of populations, including the vulnerable communities.
- Any effort to build preparedness, immediate response, relief or recovery need to address the economic factors that a) constrain the government options, b) limit the implementation and monitoring of policies and c) effect the impact of pandemic on different segments of population.

<sup>39</sup> 'Affirmative action' here means 'Positive steps taken to support and include those things/people etc. that are excluded'

- The political leaders in provincial and national assemblies, representing women and religious minorities, need to take more pro-active role and responsibility to bridge the gaps in policy design and implementation that directly effects their represented segment of the population. They are in the best position to coordinate between government machinery, at provincial and national level, and also with civil society to address the needs of these marginalised segments of population.





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