

COVID-19 in South Asia Workshop: Lessons from Pakistan

Brown University, Center for Contemporary South Asia (CCSA) & School of Public Health

September 10th, 2021, 12:00 pm – 1:30pm

~prepared by Shishav Parajuli

Report on the Talk by Dr. Sania Nishtar— Special Assistant of Pakistan's Prime Minister and Federal Minister

From the day's talks, it was evident that the impacts of Covid-19 in South Asia—at least in their data and statistical forms— were distributed unevenly across the different countries of the region. If one were to paint a spectrum including the different states, Pakistan/Bangladesh (perhaps Bhutan) will constitute the good (response by the state) flank and Nepal and India the bad. These are strictly relative terms, and human tragedies cannot be compiled by statistics. Nevertheless, governments and governments' actions in this emergency period need to be accounted for. And as a state that did manage to contain the worst of the pandemic, Dr. Nishtar's lessons from Pakistan should serve as examples to other regional governmental actors.

There is covid-19 virus and its biological effects on individuals, and there is covid-19 and its biopolitical as well as socio-economic effects on populations. They are intertwined phenomena and Dr. Nishtar credits Pakistan's relative success also to the interlinked, multi-sectoral approach to curbing the effects of the pandemic. Data driven decision making, government/military/civil/private societies coordination, as well as determined utilization of the infrastructures that were built for a different government scheme/safety program: Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP), all contributed to Pakistan's better performance in the face of the pandemic. Focusing her talk on the government's response to the social impact of the virus, Dr. Nishtar shed light on the efficacy of Ehsaas, an emergency program— ranging from emergency cash relief to long term focus on jobs, governance, and livelihood. With an immediate impact on more than half of Pakistan's population, Ehsaas has cushioned the blow from one of the most debilitating public health crises in recent times. In its technical design, Ehsaas uses preexisting systems that includes the national repository of identities, cell phone data, previous biometric payments, survey data etc.— a comprehensive data driven analytical process. In its political design, Ehsaas has successfully held together coalitions and partners whether it be public/private, federal/province,

or various citizen groups. Dr. Nishtar attributes this combination of technological innovation and government will to Pakistan's success during the pandemic.

Given the insensitivity of many governments around the world (and definitely South Asian countries), one of the most impressive aspect of Pakistan's efforts to tackle Covid-19 that is worthy of the spotlight is its grasp of the required speed of response and its sensitivity to time. Decisions were made in response to real time evaluation of the ground. In this time of protracted emergency, Pakistan, per Dr. Nishtar, has "the know-how in designing and implementing a massive national program in real time in a context of complexity and uncertainty with speed".

On the question of time, one of the participants raised the question of how long-lasting such multisectoral institutional coordination can be, since they seem to be adhoc or sovereign decisions rather than a deliberated/parliamentary product. Dr. Nishtar dismissed such concerns as the command and control center has its own mandate and does not need the recourse of democratic processes in the parliament. This is, of course, the nature of emergency. But the question raised by the participant does stand its ground— as Carl Schmit has theorized, it is the sovereign decision to not just decide what to do during an emergency, but also when to declare an emergency. Regardless of the long-term impact of the policies/institutions/adhoc decisions regarding Covid-19, Pakistan's response reflects the responsibility that many of its neighboring governments seem to have shirked from.