

PTI Government's Vision for Healthcare

In a country with a rapidly growing population, high infant mortality rate and a healthcare structure that is more disease oriented than health-focused, Pakistan requires thorough revision of its health policy to meet its developmental goals.

The current governing party, Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaaf, is in the process of initiating projects in this sector to fulfil its vision of universal health care. The Prime Minister himself has announced the launch of 'Sehat Sahulat Programme' to empower and improve the wellbeing of people with disabilities and of their families. This effort is mainly targeting the lower income segments of society to alleviate their financial burdens for major health treatments and protect households from economic shocks. The Minister of State for Health, Dr. Zafar Mirza, claims this initiative is under the umbrella of universal healthcare coverage which will instrumentalise prevention, rehabilitation, treatment and palliative care to improve the country's health indicators. Other projects such as *Bharosa Karein* have also been launched to train health-workers and rebuild respect and protection for their services. Consequently, this will improve the population's human capital development and prove favourable to future economic conditions in the form of higher productivity measures.

Moreover, the federal government aims to regulate improved healthcare facilities at every level possible from community to primary and even tertiary levels and to reduce the budget inequality of varying health facilities from big hospitals to basic health units. An allocation of Rs 200 billion has been placed in the budget for poverty alleviation and social safety programmes, vouching to the state's commitment to improving the conditions of Pakistan's health sector. Here, it is essential to note that spending for health (as percentage of GDP) has been very low in the country's recent history, averaging at 2.69 percent. In pursuit to increase funding and investments in the health industry, the Prime Minister has been promised a US \$40 million investment by North Shore Medical Labs, USA, and an organization that has previously allocated \$10 million in the Punjab province.

Where these regulatory and financial initiatives are much needed to improve the social industry and poverty conditions of the country, there are other issues at the provincial as well as international level that the PTI government must not ignore to fulfil its promise of universal health coverage and economic growth. While the restructuring, introduction and

revision of the health policy is crucial at the federal level, it is uniform implementation of these policies that will meet Pakistan's development goals.

At the provincial level, hospital and care facilities are promised to be improved but do not hold the same strategy as the federal government. The Punjab government, for instance, has suspended free diagnosis for all state-run facilities and imposed heavy fees on diagnostic services, a move that will burden the low-income and poor population of the province. The differing approaches to this industry across the country will prove a hindrance to achieving the goal of universal health coverage and ineffective in alleviating poverty among the Pakistani populace. Meanwhile, Pakistan-educated doctors in Saudi Arabia have been put out of jobs due to the newly declared ineligibility of their postgraduate medical degrees. Qatar, Bahrain and the UAE have also followed the ruling. This will not only prove immensely damaging to the incomes of these effected households but will shrink the figure of remittances coming into Pakistan, a situation unfavourable to the domestic demand and consumption in society.

The PTI government, to achieve true universal health coverage and its related goals for the health sector and poverty alleviation of the country, will have to prioritise implementation of existing and new policies across the national and provincial level. Where it is in majority across most provincial assemblies, ministers will have to arrive on the same page and identify the shortcomings in their province's health provision and performance and plan future action accordingly. Finally, where poverty alleviation and economic growth are concerned, the state must introduce macro-level pro-poor growth policy and pay attention to other sources of human capital development equally to improve the economy's performance.