

### **In Pakistan, pandemic could push millions more into poverty**

ISLAMABAD: Spiking COVID-19 rates risk overwhelming Pakistan's health system, slashing growth, derailing recovery, and pushing the country's most vulnerable further into poverty, a new UN impact assessment, coordinated by UNDP, finds, foreign media reported.

Pakistan's confirmed and reported COVID-19 cases, as of 10 June, topped 113,000. More than 2,200 people have died, including at least four provincial legislators. Pakistan is the fifth most populous country in the world, with dense cities where contagion spreads far and fast. This virus, alongside measures to mitigate it, poses major risks to lives and livelihoods with impacts that could last for decades, the study says.

Public health systems were stretched long before the pandemic, with a ratio of one doctor to 963 people and one hospital bed to 1,608 people. Its shortage of trained medical staff is estimated at 200,000 doctors and 1.4 million nurses, and universal health coverage is nonexistent.

While the poverty rate declined by 40 percent over the last two decades to 24.3 percent in 2015, the IMF projects a sharp reversal, with up to 40 percent of Pakistanis living below the poverty line in COVID-19's viral wake.

Real GDP growth is expected to slow by 3 percent, with downturns in services and manufacturing. Agriculture will also lag if lockdowns continue and disrupt needed transportation, logistical support, labor, and access to inputs for the next planting season.

Those most at-risk include people already living below poverty line, women, children, people with disabilities, the elderly, and other marginalized groups whose lives, livelihoods, nutrition, and access to basic services are least secure.

Nearly 42 million children are now out of school, while 17 million children under five are missing routine vaccinations. An additional 2.45 million people—beyond an existing 40 million—now suffer food insecurity, the study finds.

This assessment, which will inform policies and programs to help the country recover, argues for a "deliberate effort to reach out to the furthest and most vulnerable through economic relief packages and social sector services." But implementers and planners will face challenges in finding innovative technologies and credible partners to provide support efficiently and transparently, it says.

At the Government's request, UNDP established a COVID-19 Secretariat at Pakistan's Planning Commission to support the country's economic and social response to the pandemic. It also facilitated preparation of a socio-economic framework in

collaboration with other UN agencies. This framework will inform the Government's 2020-2021 budget and National Action Plan for COVID-19.

UNDP is also providing technical expertise to the Federal Ministry of Health to enhance communications, coordination, and data analysis and to the National Disaster Management Authority as it implements its Pakistan Preparedness and Response Plan COVID-19.

UNDP is meanwhile working closely with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Provincial Command and Control Center to strengthen its crisis management capacity. This support includes the design of a data collection system from districts, analysis and reporting to inform decision-making by the Health Department, and provision of strategic communications to the provincial authorities.

UNDP is, further, supporting a nationwide youth perception survey, Youth Innovation Challenges, and online hackathons to understand the views of young people and include their voices in developing COVID related interventions.