**COVID-19 and inequality**

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One must acknowledge that divine help notwithstanding, the government’s policy vis-à-vis managing the corona pandemic has been quite prudent where it has consistently tried to balance safety with employment and personal income sustainability. However, the challenge may not be as simple as that, as pointed out by two recent reports published on how the pandemic is quietly or rather discreetly affecting inequality and potential poverty traps in developing countries, especially South Asia. These reports reveal a lot about the significantly additional burden that has been put on the social and public policy requirements due to this fast spreading virus; something that requires heavy funding to address and thereby poses to be an even more daunting challenge for countries with limited resources—the South Asian region with its high population base being the most obvious victim in this category. A challenge, which if not quickly addressed will not only risk reversing any gains achieved over the last decade in poverty alleviation, but will also predominantly end up distorting the inequality levels, in-turn disturbing the present delicately poised social equilibrium in such countries leading to possible unrest and economic catastrophes. The Oxfam reports talks about the deep digital divide that the pandemic has clearly exposed in the developing countries, something that perhaps has always been known, but rarely acknowledged or has rarely assumed such destructive proportions in the past. It goes without saying that interruptions in schooling reduce learning opportunities and to make matters worse, the poorest of the poor’s marginal access to any type of other learning activity under the circumstances gets to be almost negligible, thereby simply compounding the problem of rising inequality. Inequality as we know has a direct and strong correlation with access to opportunity. Pakistan is named, as only about a quarter of the school children are accessing online education—the only educational platform available to them during the period the education institutions are closed. Additionally, less than 15 percent are able to take online classes despite a rather high density of smartphones per family and lastly, the most alarming, less than 1 percent of un-enrolled children under the age of 15, connect with any type of online learning activity. Naturally, the resulting colossal loss in developing human capital will carry long-term pain and economic repercussions. Like almost in the entire South Asian region, in Pakistan also inequality has risen registering a double-digit growth per annum over the last three years.

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The other report funded by the World Bank (WB and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) focuses on the status of education in South Asia and how gender inequality and violence towards women is fanning inequality. It points out that, “One of the most tenacious and pervasive causes of social inequality is gender. The deeply naturalised acceptance that gender has across cultures can make it impervious to struggles against inequality. This is also why the design of this study on gender inequality and violence against women starts at the roots of the issue: social norms.” It goes on to reveal that in India the problem is especially worse because not only the class and caste taboos exacerbate the issue, but also that the very way of measuring inequality in India is skewed—something that naturally misdirects targeted policymaking since to start with the very data it is based on tends to be flawed or biased.

In its latest prognosis published on the World Economic Outlook—October 2020, the IMF makes a pertinent observation: Even before the pandemic struck, inequality, even in some emerging market economies had worsened, for example in South Asia and especially in India. So post COVID-19, it is more of a situation going from bad to worse, which is why the challenge today of public policy in countries like Bangladesh, India and Pakistan is much greater than ever before.

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Finally, to conclude both studies emphasise that the pandemic is having particularly adverse effects on economically more vulnerable people (including young workers on the cusp of entering the job market), women and children. In fact, the brunt of the crisis, both in its magnitude and extent, is ironically being borne by women and children. With schools and educational institutions closed a large number of students/children who depended on them for their mid-day meals are suddenly finding themselves without food—something that in the coming days will show itself in the rise of malnutrition numbers amongst children. Moreover, given the brewing individual income crisis, a high inflation at such a juncture is not helping either. At home, the so far directed stimulus towards this struggling class of our population has proved to be inadequate, as poverty numbers have risen instead of remaining stagnant or preferably going down. Also, the economic hardships arising from the pandemic catastrophe are leading to some very stark choices: Between saving lives and ensuring equity. Pakistan cannot and should not look at this as an either-or. As the divide between the haves and have-nots widens, in a new, aspirational Pakistan there is no guarantee to believe that these frustrations will not come to a dangerous boil.