[**Charity and the state**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1745599/charity-and-the-state)

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VISUALS of long queues, crowd conflicts and general mayhem at government-sponsored wheat flour distribution points should weigh heavy on this country’s collective conscience. They underscore the unprecedented nature of Pakistan’s cost of living crisis, which finds its most destructive form in food inflation skyrocketing to levels never seen before. As the Household Integrated Economic Survey shows, families in the lowest three income quintiles spend upwards of 40 per cent of their total monthly expenditure on food and nearly 20pc on energy and housing. For the bottom-most quintile, food expenditure is almost 50pc of total expenditure. This makes the urban and non-farming rural poor particularly vulnerable to the crisis currently unfolding in the country.

Since 2019, researchers have repeatedly highlighted that food inflation in Pakistan can only partially be explained by global economic trends. In fact, no other country in the region comes close to the levels currently being witnessed in Pakistan, despite the country possessing a large agricultural base and labour force. This contradiction requires closer scrutiny and ultimately a serious rethink of how economic decision-making is carried out.

More broadly, adequate safeguards that help sustain the most rudimentary forms of consumption are now essential. Even in times of relative economic stability, working class families — rural or urban — struggle to meet caloric and nutrient requirements. Stunting rates and other related health concerns provide ample proof of this. These will catastrophically worsen in the current context.

Among the many cultural traits that Pakistanis identify among themselves, one frequently referred to is a high propensity towards charitable giving. Pakistanis tend to refer to themselves as a very charitable nation, and one that becomes even more so during the month of Ramazan. Some conversations go as far as suggesting this as a reason for why there is no large-scale and spontaneous political unrest.

No matter how widespread, charity-giving can’t sustain an entire impacted population through a time of crisis.

While linking unrest or its absence to charitable support is a flawed argument, there is some evidence of the propensity to give among Pakistanis. The Pakistan Centre of Philanthropy’s survey research from 2021 shows that nearly 84pc of all respondents give charity in some form, with average amounts of about Rs10,000 per annum. The act of giving takes place almost entirely regardless of income and employment status, suggesting a fairly widespread cultural practice. Forthcoming survey-based work with colleagues Max Gallien and Vanessa van den Boogard shows that upwards of 70pc of all eligible respondents report paying zakat in Pakistan, validating this larger trend.

Accurately assessing charitable giving in terms of actual amounts is much harder. Some charitable giving is in the form of cash support, other is in kind (such as through ration boxes) or through volunteering time. The process of giving also varies considerably. People prefer to give to people they know, or to organisations and charities they are familiar with. The state, while operating voluntary donation funds, especially for zakat, is not a preferred outlet due to reasons of mistrust and lack of accountability.

Given this context, there is some reason to believe that charity is helping those afflicted by the current cost of living crisis. Anecdotally, one hears of a range of charitable organisations that are running food ration drives, food kitchens, free iftars, and providing other, in-kind support. Such endeavours deserve all manner of support and appreciation.

Social solidarity that manifests itself through charity is noble and a key trait for societies that are trying to build resilience against adverse circumstances. But what we know for sure is that no matter how widespread the practice is, it can’t sustain an entire impacted population through a time of crisis.

Existing research — ours and PCP’s — shows that a large plurality of giving is directed towards poor persons or households that are personally known. We also know that this tends to be geographically concentrated in close proximity to givers. The PCP survey shows that only 30pc of giving is directed towards households or persons that are not known personally.

These trends suggest that there may be segments of society — located in peripheral regions, rural workers, informal settlement dwellers, and itinerant migrant populations — that may not be served proportionate to their needs. There are a range of other distortions that may be possible as well, such as the prioritisation of in-kind support where cash support may be more useful.

In such a context, there is an urgent need for two things. The first is better information about charitable practices, the geographic and occupational spread of potential recipients, and any possible mismatch between the two. The only entity capable of carrying such an exercise out is the government, through national and provincial statistical bodies. It managed to do something similar through a survey-based rapid assessment during the peak of the Covid-19 crisis that highlighted where aid was needed and in what kind. A repeat that looks at income and consumption erosion across the country is essential these days as well.

The second, and more important thing is that the state needs to step up in its role not just as a coordinator for charitable giving, but as the only entity that has the fiscal and administrative resources to provide social protection during times of need. Study after study documents the second-order effects of food and income shocks on educational attainment, future employment chances, and mental health. Yet, political events of the past year do not seem to suggest any degree of urgency.

Organizing a sasta bazaar or distributing bags of wheat flour does not constitute an effective response to what is an unprecedented crisis. Ultimately, there is a need to expand income support, improve the public distribution system, provide job and labour guarantees, and to pick up the slack on basic consumption expenditure for millions of households that are clearly struggling to put food on the table.

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