[Dr Sania Nishtar](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/dr-sania-nishtar)

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**Ending poverty, ensuring health**

As the latest increase in cases of Covid-19 appear to be dropping and vaccines, which are key to us and the world to get through the acute stage of this pandemic, continue to be rolled out across Pakistan, the country is finally starting to see light at the end of the tunnel.

At this critical juncture, we are working with communities across the country, as well as leaders at the national, provincial and local levels to save both lives and livelihoods and ensure the pandemic response is a foundation to tackle poverty and drive economic recovery.

While our immediate focus is to bring down the current number of cases, we are also preparing for future shocks and are further investing in a welfare state for Pakistan to tackle the foundational inequities that the virus exploited.

Many lessons have been learned from this pandemic, both in terms of what works and where we need to improve – lessons that are relevant for social protection and health systems.

The first lesson is the importance of ‘building systems’. We were able to deliver the emergency cash programme because of preexisting digital capabilities that Ehsaas, Pakistan’s groundbreaking poverty alleviation initiative, had already created. These digital capabilities, which included a biometric cash distribution system, were quickly adapted alongside an SMS based request platform and data analytics.

A recent report by the International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth found that the Ehsaas emergency cash transfer programme, which distributed $1.2 billion to 15 million families, was pivotal in preventing a catastrophic explosion in poverty during the pandemic.

Similarly, systems established by the Covid-19 National Command and Operations Center (NCOC) delivered results due to data-driven decision-making and coordination. Pakistan’s polio infrastructure was heavily utilized during the Covid-19 pandemic to track the virus, break chains of transmission and ultimately save lives. For the vaccine rollout, existing systems of immunization and its cold chain were augmented.

The second lesson is the importance of reaching the most marginalized and breaking the chains of poverty to achieve sustainable prosperity. Since Ehsaas was established in 2019, Prime Minister Imran Khan has maintained that its focus should be to reach the most marginalized communities, with the understanding that as well as being the right thing to do, it is also the smart thing to do.

We have seen from other health and development programmes that this is not always an easy task. Yet, while noting the success and critical role of the polio programme in the current pandemic, Pakistan is yet to eliminate polio. This is primarily due to the inability to reach some children, especially true of the Pashtun community, in certain parts of the country. We can’t accept this for polio, health services or social protection.

The philosophy behind Ehsaas’ efforts is to ensure that everyone can access quality health and nutrition services, that our children get a good education which opens their horizons for the future and a strong social safety net so that when needed the most disadvantaged groups have something to fall back on.

Third, innovations are only as good as the capacity to scale. In the wake of the pandemic, we have fast-tracked our work on building the social protection registry; we are expanding our social protections operations and are opening ‘one window centers’ for Ehsaas so that those accessing the benefits can do it all in one go. Hiring and training people to deliver Ehsaas services was key to being able to scale up quickly and effectively and responding to the acute economic challenges that ordinary people faced. And the same goes for strengthening our own health systems to end this pandemic and prepare for future ones.

The government of Pakistan is working to strengthen our domestic vaccine manufacturing. Nationally and internationally, we’re working with public and private stakeholders to encourage the sharing of licensing, technology and know-how, and waiving intellectual property through the duration of the pandemic. Pandemic proofing our systems is smart economics when you consider the trillions lost over the last 18 months.

None of this would have happened without the steadfast leadership of the prime minister. Embarking on the most ambitious anti-poverty drive in Pakistan prior to the pandemic was challenging but it was also critical to leverage key resources to help us tackle the acute need while laying the groundwork for a long-term recovery.

The pandemic has shone a bright light on challenges of inequity and we now have a window of opportunity to ensure that the people that are suffering most are helped first. That is my mission and I will continue to work with partners across the public, private and third sectors to build a safer, stronger and more inclusive Pakistan.

The writer is a senator and special assistant to the prime minister for poverty alleviation and social safety.

Twitter: @SaniaNishtar