**[Social safety and poverty alleviation](https://nation.com.pk/10-Jan-2020/social-safety-and-poverty-alleviation" \t "_new)**

Malik Muhammad Ashraf January 10, 2020

The outgoing year undoubtedly proved a tough period for the masses, owing to some harsh and much needed corrective measures taken by the government to stabilise the economy and putting it back on the path of sustained economic development. The burgeoning inflation not only was the inevitable result of the structural reforms put in place by the government but also the fluctuating global economic environment beyond its control. It is, however, satisfying to note that the government efforts have succeeded in stabilising the economy. The claims of having stabilised the economy made by the government are also corroborated by the assessment of the IMF and the predictions for the future.

Because of the foregoing reality, one tends to believe the Prime Minister when he says that the current year would be of growth and passing on the benefits of achievements of the government during 2019 to the masses. The first fulfilment of his promise has come in the form of Rs 7 billion subsidies on 1000 items at the Utility Stores including essentials like sugar, flour, pulses, rice and edible oil. The subsidy provided on the marked items would Range from Rs 7-40. According to the package announced on Tuesday, the consumers would get a subsidy of RS.50-60 on 20-Kg flour bag, Rs.30-40 on one kg of ghee and Rs.20-30 on per Kg of rice.

It is quite a substantial relief for the poor masses and indicates the sensitivity of the government to the difficulties faced by them. To make sure that this relief is not abused by some unscrupulous elements the government has also made it obligatory for the consumers to present their ID cards while making purchases from the Utility Store outlet. This way it would be convenient for the consumers to buy their monthly ration in one go and nobody would be able to abuse the system due to biometric record of purchasers with Utility Stores. Special Assistant to Prime Minister on Information Dr Firdous Ashiq Awan announcing the relief package along with MD of Utility Stores Corporation revealed that a separate package of subsidies for the month of Ramadan would also be announced later on.

The reality is that poverty alleviation and providing relief and safety net to the poor masses has been the top priority of the PTI government. It did not lose sight of this responsibility even when the going was tough and launched a multi-dimensional ‘Ehsas’ initiative.

The programme envisages to give saving accounts and mobile phones to 5.7 million women which will enable them to access their bank accounts; increase in cash transfers to women from Rs.5000 to Rs.5500; creation of 500 digital hubs at tehsil level where poor people could go to access their bank accounts as well as look for jobs; arranging legal assistance for the poor in difficult times; setting up call centres to provide legal assistance to the people as well as grants to children who want to study; organising money by the Tahafaz programme office for the people needing medical help who do not already possess Insaf health cards; building of shelter homes for the homeless; assisting street children through public-private partnership as well as helping transgender persons who suffer maltreatment in the society; facilitation of the daily wage workers through Tahafuz programme and initiating a movement against forced work from children under bonded labour; building of homes for one hundred orphan children through Baitul Mal in the next four years.

The programme further envisages initiation of policies to address nutrition problems purported to provide de-worming , iron, frolic acid as well anemia supplements at basic health units; creation of multi-sectoral nutrition coordination body at Prime Minister’s office for the purpose; provision of goats to women in the rural areas as well as desi chicken so that their children can have access to milk besides generation of some income; provision of seeds to rural women for growing vegetables to eat and sell; provision of special sticks, wheelchairs, crutches for disabled persons; setting up of 20 centers for disabled persons in the less developed areas; earmarking of Rs.5 billion for giving interest free loans to the poor who are too poor to build their own houses; increase in the EOBI pensions; building of five Ehsas homes for elderly people by Baitul Mal; creating awareness among the students from the underdeveloped areas about their constitutional right to receive education and provision of vouchers to the intending students of the areas where there are no government schools so that they can attend private schools; provision of internet service and mobile phones to the students from the remote areas so that they can benefit from e-learning; setting up of one-window operation for the labourers wanting to go abroad and posting of welfare attaches in all the embassies of Pakistan overseas to facilitate the Pakistani labourers; ending exploitation of labourers and workers in the villages and in the informal sector and employed as domestic workers by bringing them into the formal sector to protect their rights besides introducing a data-based pension scheme for them.

An incisive glance on the envisaged programme reveals that it is not only designed to help the poorer sections of the society and the needy but is also meant to elevate the people above cash payments and enable them to acquire skills and sources of incomes for themselves. The government envisages enhancing the allocation for the programme from Rs.60 billion to Rs.120 billion by the year 2020.

To make it a one-window operation and to coordinate the implementation of the programme, a separate ministry for social protection and poverty alleviation is being set up. The move is designed to bring all the organisations working on helping the poor, under one umbrella. The government, for transparency and efficiency purposes, is collecting required data through the help of the already conducted surveys and the new ones making use of the available modern technology. The concept propounded by the government is beyond reproach. It is indeed a revolutionary step towards poverty alleviation and providing social safety nets to the poor masses.

The commitment of the PTI government to poverty alleviation and changing the economic profile of the masses is also amply reflected by the fact that even in regards to CPEC it has decided to focus more on projects pertaining to the social sector during the second phase of its implementation. The Prime Minister wants to emulate the Chinese model of poverty alleviation. With the economy moving in the right direction, the goal seems very much achievable.