

STRESS TESTING PAKISTANI FEDERALISM

Lessons from the Covid-19 Pandemic Response

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Bismillah irr Rahman irr Rahim

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Stress Testing Pakistani Federalism:
Lessons from the Covid-19 Pandemic Response
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Executive Summary

Federalism is the defining structural and normative framework for how Pakistan is governed. Despite repeated political consensus on this governance system, it is also contentious and questioned constantly. A global and national crisis is the ultimate stress test of a governance system. This working paper attempts to examine Pakistani federalism (the constitutionally mandated system of governance in the country) during the first wave of the ongoing Covid-19 crisis. In light of the tensions in centre-province relations, both historically, and during the pandemic, we examine the Covid-19 response through four distinct but interrelated lenses, namely, coordination for the pandemic response, crisis and behavioural change communications, local level decision making, governance and operations, and finally, social

protection and cash grants to mitigate the economic impact of the pandemic.

In coordinating a “national” response to the pandemic, neither the parliamentary committee on Covid-19, nor the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) - one a representative body, and the other, a statutory body with the legal mandate to lead the response - had the requisite authority or capability to mobilise a whole-of-government, national coordination effort. The resulting establishment of the National Command and Operation Centre (NCOC) was a distinct and unique experiment in governance. It was immensely successful in collating and cohering information, data flows and generating real-time feedback on Covid-19 related decisions. However, this success was not rooted in the constitutional mechanism for “national” responses, (i.e. the CCI), nor in the administrative home for

such interventions within the federal government, namely the Ministry of Inter Provincial Coordination.

Pakistan's crisis communications, at the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic and through the first wave suffered from mixed messaging between key leaders, and between the federal government and some provincial governments. The lack of aligned messaging was not only a product of contested political space and party loyalties. It was also a product of genuine philosophical differences on the lives vs. livelihoods debate. Despite contestation and mixed messaging, several examples of coherent and effective behaviour change communications were also manifest as the NCOC helped cohere a national response — proving the system's capacity to generate the correct response to a crisis.

The adoption of local level lockdowns, and the need for enhanced information and intelligence about how the disease spreads within communities necessitated a robust set of tools for local level decision making, operations and governance. The absence of meaningful and empowered local governments in Pakistan resulted in a gap between the speed and efficiency of policies that the federal and provincial governments, as well as the military were able to generate through the NCOC, and the effectiveness of those policies at the grassroots. Exceptions due to high-performance bureaucrats posted as district administrators further underscore the need for representative

and participatory means of engagement between state and citizen at the local level.

Finally, Pakistan's long-standing success in establishing and sustaining a national social protection and cash grants instrument — the BISP / Ehsaas programme, proved a vital tool in the pandemic response. Despite the political stakes and the mixed mandate, from a federalism perspective, the success of the Ehsaas Emergency Cash programme is a symbol of the power of good service delivery and design as being capable of overcoming normative and political challenges.

Federalism in Pakistan is evolving and must continue to evolve. Lessons for federal design from the Covid-19 response include:

The immense potential of robust and real-time data for the public sector.

Crises create opportunity. The Covid-19 pandemic has created a major opportunity to deepen and expand the scope of open and transparent data and information for the public good that will forge a more perfect union, and more robust federal structure. This opportunity requires a sustained follow-up.

The limitations of short-term fixes. The expediency of solving an operational problem without the underlying institutional and legislative work, creates administrative gaps, and institutional overlap (and even, potential conflict). The government's plans to terminate the NCOC upon the end of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis should

be informed by an effort to invest more robustly in existing mechanisms for national action — namely the CCI and the MIPC. More political and legislative work before the next crisis may help evolve the state’s ability to convene powerful fora, under the authority of the CCI, and aligned with the relevant administrative arrangements, such as the MIPC. The strengths of the NCOC must be captured in a functional assessment of the key benefits the structure offered, and then integrated into all future government policy and actions that merit national urgency.

The value of investing in normatively and legislatively robust “national” mechanisms for governance. Process and due diligence matter. The primary federal body, the MIPC, was excluded in the formation of the NCOC, and whilst the apex statutory forum, the CCI, had been relatively dormant in the months leading up to the Covid-19 pandemic. This represents an object lesson in the importance of frequent and regular procedural due diligence and constitutional adherence.

The urgent need for more effective local governments. Absent serious investments in representative local government, with adequate powers over core local functions, and the ability to raise and spend their own revenue, the next crisis will also exact the same heavy cost on district administrators that the Covid-19 pandemic has. Weak local governance hollows out the spirit and effectiveness of a federal system, and

incentivises increased centralisation of power.

The state-building and service delivery value of effective public sector organisations. Building long term, durable and effective organisations in the public sector, through legislation that protects the structures from the temporal whims of politics and the public discourse, is at the heart of state resilience and capacity. Effective public sector organisations like BISP, and the Ehsaas programme reinforce and strengthen federal coherence — even if they may seem to undercut subnational autonomy at times.

Politics as usual does not always need to come at the cost of effectiveness and efficiency. Ultimately in a crisis, all political differences are suspended so that the system can focus on getting things done. No greater proof than the NCOC is needed that Pakistan’s many run-of-the-mill crises all require the political, military and economic elites to be prompted to come together for a response. When push came to shove, Pakistan’s federal system was able to respond to the crisis. This means that federalism has the latent power to tackle much more than it does.

Clear and coherent public communications can alter outcomes for the better. Routine political contestations must not be allowed to supersede core federalist principles and communication channels require strengthening to ensure individual or party posturing does not derail governance.

Introduction 01 & Context

A crisis is ultimately a test of organisational and operational design. Crises, therefore, represent potent moments to understand the design of systems. A crisis offers a unique lens into the social, political, economic and cultural reflexes and responses of governance systems. The design of government systems must, therefore, reflect the capacity of a state to respond to a crisis. This working paper attempts to examine Pakistani federalism (the constitutionally mandated system of governance in the country) during the ongoing Coronavirus crisis. It seeks to increase our understanding of decision-making, prioritisation, apportionment and representation during the Covid-19 pandemic.

We try to assess the Covid-19 response in Pakistan as a lens to analyse how federalism – as a governance system – has served the Pakistani people, how it has evolved in the face of a crisis, and what pressures and implications its evolution has for the future of governance in the country. An assessment of the official Covid-19 pandemic response in Pakistan will help bring into focus governance procedures and decision-making processes that often get blurred out and foregrounded by the outcomes, consequences and shortfalls of governance.

All Covid-19 indicators so far show significantly less damage in Pakistan than anticipated – especially during the first wave of the pandemic. Fatalities are below what was estimated, the economy seems to have rebounded faster than expected, and normalcy – despite a lack of clarity about vaccinations – seems to have returned. Something has clearly worked, and the authorities seem to have performed well. Yet there is not enough robust data to establish causality between policy and outcome.

This working paper does not attempt to evaluate Pakistan's Covid-19 response or the success or failure of federal and provincial governments in terms of their impact on either citizens' lives and welfare, or on the economy. Instead, it attempts to understand the processes involved in the response to the Covid-19 crisis. It is an effort to draw attention towards decision-making institutions and mechanisms. It seeks to examine the extent to which federalism and democratic structures helped in seeking better outcomes. This paper hopes to contribute to discussions on democratic governance and provide insights to build further on the principles of devolution and steer future decision-making during crises.

1.1 Methodology

The methodology adopted for this working paper combines both primary and secondary data. Data gathering required a reliance on remote working, given the challenges of in-person and face-to-face interviews and meetings during the pandemic. Secondary data was based on a desk review of official documents, notifications, research and journal papers, analytical reports and news stories. These were supplemented with key informant interviews with experts and notable commentators on federalism and Covid-19, including those holding public office.

The main themes for data gathering were federalism, devolution and decentralisation, representation, efficacy of pandemic response and the response architecture, social welfare initiatives, and crisis communications.

1.2 Context: Politics in the Time of Covid-19

To examine how federalism shaped Pakistan's Covid-19 response, it is important to assess political contestation during the pandemic. One of the primary frictions or contests that defined the early stage of the crisis were tensions between the Sindh and federal governments. The importance of that dynamic is not a function of the wider severity of the contest. Indeed, the foundations of Pakistani federalism were neither shaken nor stirred by it. Rather, the Sindh and federal government tensions during the Covid-19 pandemic offer a unique window into federal design in Pakistan, given the

wider context and history of centralisation in Pakistan.

Covid-19 struck Pakistan at a time when the ruling party had been in power for 18 months — its first time in control of the federal government. Its populist rhetoric before and after an acrimonious election process, and the controversy over electoral results, initially impeded the collaborative work that the complexity and seriousness of the Covid-19 pandemic has demanded. In the first online meeting of the political leadership across all parties, opposition leaders felt slighted by the prime minister, after he signed out of the meeting upon completing his address.¹ A special session of Parliament was convened to develop a national strategy to deal with the outbreak. There too, the prime minister chose not to attend, leading to further critique from his political opponents.² The opposition parties then held their own All Parties' Conference and, in protest, did not invite the government.³

In normal times, these would have been run-of-the-mill political standoffs. However, during the Covid-19 pandemic — and with the importance of the issues involved — they have acquired an urgency of their own. Instead of calmly leading the people during a frightening emergency, politicians were seen as furthering their agendas, creating rifts in the public trust and escalating political polarisation. The impact of such bitterness in the public discourse is devastating for a crisis response, weakening already feeble public trust. The resulting low compliance and dismissiveness toward laws and regulations, the contempt for official SOPs,

the adoption of conspiracy theories, and the difficulty in achieving even basic levels of consensus required to confront the crisis, are all rooted in a fragmented and divisive public discourse.⁴

Some long-standing or pre-existing issues also re-emerged. The Sindh government was particularly sensitive to any criticism of its health response because of a centre-province standoff that had been shaping up in recent years. After the 2010 devolution, all provinces increased allocations to their health budgets substantially. However, among the issues that arose after devolution were three federally-run hospitals in Karachi. Taken together, the case of these hospitals provides an illustration of how prior conditions shaped the crisis response. The Sindh government had been demanding their transfer to the provincial authority for a decade and the federal government had been resisting it.

In 2019, the Supreme Court ruled against the Sindh government, stating that the federal government was within its right to set up and run hospitals in the province even if it was a devolved concern, since "health is a basic human right".⁵ After protest by the Sindh government that the judgement was akin to a rollback of the principles of devolution, the federal government announced that it would hand over the hospitals to them as a confidence-building measure.⁶ Naturally, the Sindh government welcomed the gesture. For once, it seemed that the spirit of federalism would help engender more, rather than less, unity between province and centre.

However, in the midst of the pandemic in June 2020, the federal government allocated funds for the three hospitals and announced it would take them over and run them itself.⁷ The Sindh government stated that it had been investing billions in the hospitals as their flagship health facilities and filed for a review of the Supreme Court decision while also allocating money to run them in its own provincial annual budget.⁸ Currently the hospitals have dual budgetary allocations and are awaiting judicial review.

Health is a natural arena for centre-province competition. Though it is a devolved area, many public health initiatives were retained as national programmes, due to issues of programme standardisation, vaccine procurement and wider global commitments. The National Programme on Malaria, Tuberculosis (TB), and Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) and the Extended Programme of Immunization (EPI) to fight diseases like polio, for example, continue to be run from Islamabad.

Despite some debate about the mechanics of how vertical programmes such as the EPI may be devolved to the provinces, the Council of Common Interests (CCI) decided in a meeting in April 2011 that vertical programmes such as the EPI would continue to be financed by the federal government until the next NFC Award.⁹ The EPI therefore continues to be coordinated at the national level under the Ministry of National Health Services Regulation and Coordination (NHSR&C) and is financed by the federal PDSP at the same financial levels as 2010-11. Whilst

provinces, districts and union councils are instrumental in the coordination and delivery of the anti-polio campaigns run by the EPI programme, the EPI continues to be vertical — owned, funded and governed by the federal government.

Pakistan's previous successful dealing with national disasters was due to political stability; the authorities in question responded to flooding, earthquakes and dengue outbreaks by leveraging their control over provincial administrations they had presided over for successive terms. It found that many of these measures "generally tended to rely on executive fiat rather than concrete legislative and institutional reforms."¹⁰ In the ongoing pandemic response, while the federal government has not acquired administrative longevity, the penchant for relying on executive fiat has remained the definitive trend.

In light of the historical and recent tensions in centre-province relations, we now examine the pandemic response through four distinct but interrelated lenses (namely, coordination, communication, local government and social protection). Using these lenses, we seek to explicate how unresolved or lingering issues in Pakistani federalism rise to the surface and obstruct collaborative and integrated governance, especially in times of crisis.

Coordination for the First Wave 02

The first known cases of Covid-19 in Pakistan were reported on February 26, 2020. On March 13, the National Security Committee (NSC) held a meeting chaired by the prime minister, bringing together the Cabinet, chief ministers, chief secretaries and health ministers of all provinces as well as the top military hierarchy, including the chiefs of all services: Army, Air Force and Navy. Coordination for how the country would tackle the virus was at the top of the agenda. It was at this meeting that the National Coordination Committee (NCC) – the apex national body for Covid-19 decision-making – was formed.

This meeting generated two concrete takeaways that would shape how Pakistan would respond to the virus. First, the undoubted need for an operational platform which would coordinate the Covid-19 response across the federation, and second, the urgent need for the procurement of medical supplies, protective equipment and healthcare machinery.

The creation of the National Command and Operation Centre (NCOC) and the use of the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) as a centralised instrument for procurement were both a direct result of the imperative to address these needs. At the heart of these needs was the universal and

perennial challenge faced by nearly all federal systems: the ability to ensure coherent, robust, fast and joint decision-making.¹¹ In short: how to coordinate crisis response in a federal system?¹²

2.1 Multifarious Institutional Responses to Covid-19

2.1.1 The NDMA as Lead Procurement Agent

At the March 13 meeting of NSC, the NDMA was anointed as “the lead operational agency” for the Covid-19 pandemic.¹³ Pandemic-related procurement was deemed to be a central function, delegated to the NDMA, which then fulfilled the procurement and delivery of vital personal protective equipment and hospital machinery across the country, utilising the various corps headquarters of the armed forces.¹⁴ The NDMA continues to oversee the full spectrum of this procurement process from supply chain management to accounting and audits. The authority has been led by a senior army official (with a change of command in December 2020, upon the superannuation of the incumbent), and allowed a *carte blanche* for procurement and clearances.^{15 16}

The NDMA’s original mandate

Cases, Deaths and Recoveries in Pakistan

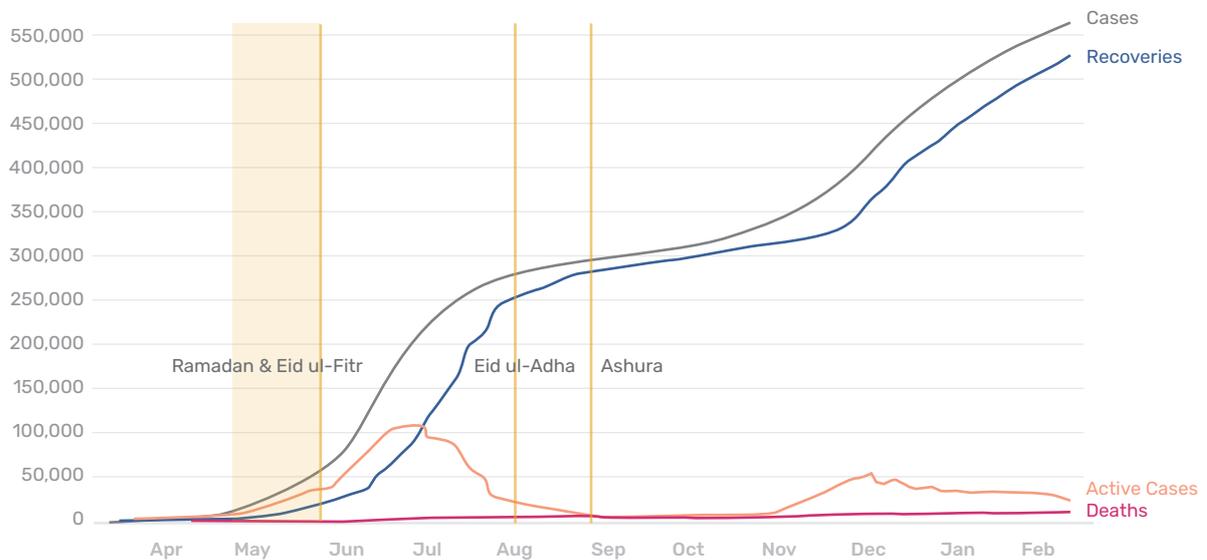


Chart: Tabadlab . Created with Datawrapper

Figure 01: Tabadlab's Covid-19 Tracker¹⁷

was to manage national disasters, not just the procurement related to a disaster. Many observers have asked why the NDMA was not empowered to serve as the clearinghouse mechanism and coordination body for the entire Covid-19 response. In short, critics of the pandemic response express scepticism about the need for the NCOC, given that the NDMA had the mandate to perform disaster management at the national scale. Instead, the NDMA was reduced to a procurement arm during the pandemic and has remained largely disconnected from its provincial sub-units, the PDMAs.¹⁸

One important aspect of the tense political environment within which the pandemic response was shaped is the allegations of corruption that plague the

public sector at large. Since the start of the current government's tenure, the opposition has consistently claimed that the anti-corruption agency, the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) has been used as a tool for political victimisation. Indeed, several officials, including civil servants, that were seen to be associated with past administrations have been arrested and incarcerated without trial or conviction. As recently as May 2020, in the midst of the first wave of the pandemic, representatives of the ruling party were accusing the provincial government of corruption in pandemic spending, demanding an audit and threatening legal action.¹⁹

The fear and trepidation caused by this environment is one of the major drivers of a slowdown in public procurement

and public sector project execution — predating the Covid-19 pandemic. Civil servants and the wider executive branch are reluctant to sign off on projects that involve public expenditure for fear of undue scrutiny, harassment and reputational abuse. At the early stages of the pandemic response, this inertia quickly became a vital obstruction to the government's desire to act quickly and efficiently. Indeed, the NDMA's specific role as an instrument of procurement is seen to have been rooted in this complex challenge. The NDMA's designation as a clearinghouse for procurement likely served as a vital catalyst for the Pakistani state's ability to fulfil procurement of life-saving medicines and equipment, especially during the early stages of the pandemic. All this was despite the relaxation of public procurement rules during emergencies, that has been and remains codified in Pakistani law.²⁰

One novel approach to the threat of accusations of corruption and fraud was adopted by the Sindh government as it appointed a committee to oversee spending of the Coronavirus Emergency Fund (CEF) with private sector representation and technical experts, along with setting up a portal with access to a detailed breakdown of all Covid-19 related income and expense.²¹

2.1.2 The Parliamentary Committee on Coronavirus Disease (Covid-19)

A bipartisan parliamentary committee was constituted on March 26, 2020

to review, monitor and oversee issues related to Covid-19, particularly the economy.²² While members of the Parliamentary Committee on Coronavirus Disease specifically asked to be allowed oversight of the activities of the NDMA, the committee has largely been at the receiving end of information, rather than providing supervision.²³ Widening rifts between the government and opposition since March 2020 have contributed to the dormancy of the committee and left it all but redundant.²⁴

2.1.3 The National Command & Operation Centre (NCOC)

On March 28, 2020, the federal government announced the creation of the National Command & Operation Centre (NCOC) — a forum to ensure coordination for the Covid-19 response between the federal government, provincial governments and the armed forces. Visualised as a “nerve centre to synergise and articulate the unified national effort against Covid-19”, the NCOC was set up as the implementation arm of the NCC. Chaired by the Federal Minister for Planning, the NCOC constitutes the four provinces, Gilgit-Baltistan, Azad Jammu and Kashmir, and the Islamabad Capital Territory. It is the Covid-19 response mechanism that was convened to ensure that the Pakistani public policy response to Covid-19 was truly “national” in character and representative of the input and, ideally, consensus between the provinces, the regions, and the federal government, as well as the full spectrum of the executive

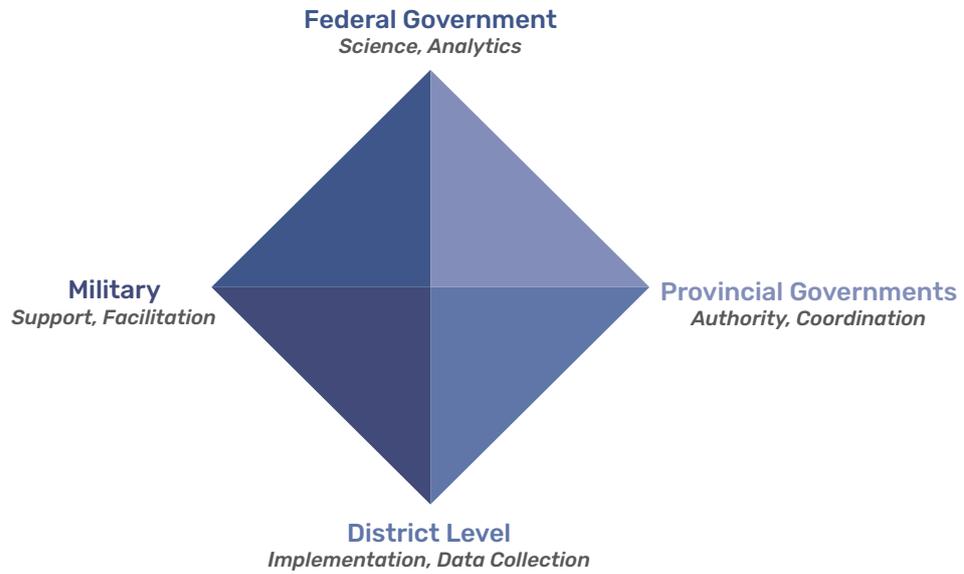


Figure 02: Structural Response to Covid-19

arm of the state (including the armed forces).

The NCOC collates and analyses data from across the country and makes recommendations to the NCC. Upon approval of the NCC, the NCOC is also tasked with ensuring implementation. It has taken valuable steps to increase coordination for Covid-19 efforts by utilising this data and employing technological solutions. Some examples of this include its Resource Management System which maps health resources such as doctors and hospitals in order to facilitate needs assessments and decision-making. This is further linked to an app called Pak Neghayban which provides updates to users on nearby hospitals and facilities such as the number of available beds and ventilators, and the status of Covid-19 isolation wards.

Meanwhile, the NCOC was also aimed at closing a widening political chasm which greatly impacted the coordination of Covid-19 efforts in its early stages. Federalism has since resurged as a hotly-contested topic and a polarising debate has raged over the role of the 18th Amendment and the long-overdue National Finance Commission Award. A turf war between the Pakistan Tehreek e Insaf (PTI) at the centre and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) in Sindh threatened to escalate into a crisis of the federation, until it was eventually mitigated by the institutional stability that the NCOC helped forge.

2.2 Establishing a Coordinated Flow of Data

Having access to reliable data is a prerequisite to building robust countermeasures to disease outbreaks. The absence of data in Pakistan was one of

the major challenges to decision-makers in the country in the initial weeks of the pandemic. From provincial health authorities to district administration, the information pouring in was fragmented, unreliable and non-granular.

The collection, processing and analysis of data became one of the NCOC's primary tasks. Fortunately for policymakers, the country already has a solid framework for data collection and management available due to its long battle with another unrelenting virus: polio. The Integrated Disease Information Management System (IDIMS) was created in 2015 – itself the product of a centralised response to a health crisis, it must be noted – as one consolidated mechanism in which real-time data from regional, provincial and national levels could be accessed in one place.²⁵ Having a platform to store data which has been gathered from ground level and is analysed at the top has proven invaluable in the struggle against polio over the past few years.

The IDIMS was quickly adapted to Covid-19 needs. It allowed for high-level data analytics which enabled policymakers at NCOC and in the provinces to map disease projections and take decisions over “smart” lockdowns. IDIMS is also the skeleton behind the detailed and regularly updated Covid-19 dashboard set up by the federal government.²⁶

However, any information management system is only as good as the data fed into it. The lowest, most localised tier for state outreach is missing. Local governments,

critical for managing such vital tasks, are not functional in any part of this country. This has meant that the lowest unit of information collection is the district level, which is still too aggregated, particularly in rural areas. What makes this dilemma a little easier, though, is that Covid-19 has been more of an urban phenomenon in Pakistan, making it comparatively simpler to create information collection mechanisms.

Many have argued that a complete picture is still not available, even if they concede that there is enough to make decisions with. Reports and accusations of misreporting the numbers have been rampant since the pandemic broke out in Pakistan.²⁷ Despite all that could have been done better, though, the collection and processing of data has been an area of cooperation rather than conflict between centre and provinces. Data seems to have made its place as a politically-neutral essential — the gathering and collation of which has been recognised as being a vital element of the Covid-19 response for all parties involved. Both the federal and provincial governments have set an example, through the NCOC, of the benefits of a coordinated effort to reach policy decisions.

2.3 A Critique of the Institutional Response

There is little doubt that the Covid-19 response has been clearer and better coordinated since the NCOC was formed. Over the many months since the NCOC

began operations, coordination has smoothed and there is, broadly speaking, genuine institutional stability and ownership of national decisions related to Covid-19.

However, the initial discord between the centre and at least one of its federating units sharply contrasted with its reliance on executive institutions such as the NCOC and NDMA. It also throws up important questions regarding why disaster management authorities in Pakistan have almost exclusively been chaired by military personnel. Up until the retirement of the military official leading the NDMA in December 2020, he was heading both the NDMA and Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority (ERRA) simultaneously.

Several commentators have identified,

whether disparagingly or admiringly, the NCOC as a "hybrid" institution, i.e. comprising both civil and military leadership. Starting with the chief coordinator at the top, there are at least 70 army officers working at the NCOC.²⁸ Senior-most officials like the Chief of Army Staff, the Chief of General Staff, and the Director General of Military Operations have also been occasionally involved in the NCOC's functioning, while the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) continues to play an important role in public communications around the pandemic. According to NCOC insiders, however, there is no doubt that the civilian chairperson of the unit, the federal Minister for Planning, is firmly in charge of calling the shots.

In its current disposition though, there is no agreed methodology nor formula



Figure 03: Timeline of the NCOC

about the NCOC's decision-making. Is NCOC a consultative or a prescriptive forum? What is the delineation of the manner in which decisions are made? How is decision-making distributed between civil and military leaders? How does provincial representation figure into NCOC decisions? Are decisions based on unanimity, majority, or a show of hands? The NCOC makes life and death decisions that affect over 220 million people, yet the mechanisms that shape its decision-making are relatively abstract and yet to be codified. Federal government representatives associated with the NCOC claim that no decision has been taken without the consent of all provinces and that any apparent friction stems purely from political posturing on part of the opposition.

Experts have also raised questions regarding the process of establishing the NCOC. Notwithstanding its functioning or efficiency, it has been created via an ad hoc arrangement which is effectively

outside the realms of any legislation, constitutional mandate or parliamentary purview. Unlike, for instance, the NDMA which has legislative cover, the NCOC is currently an extra-legal body, ostensibly meant to exist as long as Covid-19 does.²⁹ This means that the federal government must ultimately determine the future of the NCOC and how to utilise this platform for coordination once the pandemic is behind us. At the moment, at least, the government intention seems to be clear: the NCOC is a temporary unit and will be wound up as soon as the pandemic is over.

The vision behind creating a body such as the NCOC to coordinate a response across the federation was a necessary first step. In order to build on this platform, it falls on its constituents to have concrete answers to these questions and concerns — in particular regarding the future of the NCOC and how any such platforms can be made even more consultative going forward.

Table 01: Risks & Challenges

Risk Factor	Nature of Risk	Time Frame	Explanation	Mitigation
Enhanced role of military in key government institutions	Democratic	Long-term	The administrative efficiency required in dealing with a pandemic cannot come at the cost of hard-fought civilian space. The marked increase in military presence in the government may have long-run ramifications.	Retaining key positions with civilian leadership Identifying specific areas where military assistance is most required
Centralised decision-making powers	Federal Political	Medium-term	A top-down approach taken by the NCOC can place further strain on federal harmony in the country. Health is a devolved subject and presuming to override the federal structure in the interest of expediency may have political costs.	Recognising provinces as the primary decision-making tier Redirecting all efforts to support provinces in ways they require Developing a consultative approach instead of a directive one
Disconnect between top-level policy and on-ground reality	Administrative	Short-term	The on-ground Covid-19 realities and requirements in Pakistan are as geographically diverse as the state itself. In the absence of robust local governments, there is a risk of using a one-size-fits-all approach.	Empowering local governments and administration to make and implement policies in line with their realities
No linkage between policy and outcome	Strategic Policy	Short to medium-term	At the moment, there is still no verifiable proof that it is the decisions taken by the NCOC which have averted the Covid-19 crisis. It is not necessary that future decision-making based on the same model will deliver similar results.	Facilitating an independent research into the causes of Covid-19 containment in Pakistan and learning from this analysis

Crisis Communications During the Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic is as much of an “information crisis” as it is a public health crisis. Governments around the world continue to struggle to make decisions with limited data and constantly evolving information. They are also consistently having to battle disinformation, mistrust and the seemingly endless proliferation of conspiracy theories that invalidate and challenge science and medicine. Majoritarian and populist instincts among political leaders, public figures, and leading media personalities also tend to diminish the capacity of governments to communicate about the pandemic with consistency and on the back of evidence.

Like everywhere else, officials in Pakistan have also had to contend with an incomplete understanding of the disease, whilst being beset by an economic crisis that predated the virus’ arrival. With public health being a devolved subject, it took time and political contestation before an integrated national response was possible. In the ensuing vacuum, a number of significant challenges for public communication about Covid-19, its risks, necessary precautions, and most recently, vaccination, have emerged.

Communication tactics for the Covid-19 response that have been adopted by Pakistani authorities include press briefings, press releases, policy statements, public service messages and celebrity or thought leader endorsements. The means used included both traditional media such as print and radio, new media through Twitter, Facebook and TikTok, television advertisements, news talk shows and discussions, and pre-recorded telephone messages and caller tones. Official outreach messages were communicated in five different Pakistani languages. The content of the messaging focused on awareness about and the importance of complying with Standard Operating Procedures or SOPs for the pandemic, such as frequent handwashing, the use of masks, physical distancing, and urging people to take ownership and responsibility for infection prevention.

Like other aspects of the Covid-19 response, the overall public communications strategy for the pandemic was complicated by political competitiveness and contested public narratives about the disease. It is important, hence, to have a close look at the implications of the federal structure

of Pakistani governance for Covid-19 crisis communications.

3.1 Conflicting Signals and Mixed Messaging

The first wave of Covid-19 in Pakistan witnessed a competitive dynamic between the federal government and the provincial government in Sindh. The Sindh government focused on the urgency of immediate action, following the global urging to 'flatten the curve' and locking down till the medical infrastructure was in place to cope with increasing cases. The prime minister, on the other hand, focused on the economic vulnerability of the poor in the case of a protracted lockdown, opposing it as the de facto or immediate response. Resultantly, there was substantial public debate both on whether a lockdown was required or not, and on whether – once it was announced – there was really any need to abide by it.

Different and divergent messages about the need for a lockdown likely had a substantial negative impact on the enforceability of the lockdowns, and anecdotal evidence suggests that public officials, including police and district administrators, faced higher than usual resistance to the enforcement of precautionary actions such as physical distancing and masking — in part due to mixed messaging. In the early days of the pandemic, many communications experts deemed the overall approach to crisis communications for Covid-19 to have been an utter failure.³⁰ Whereas the

prime minister underplayed the public health impact of the pandemic, other leaders, including chief ministers of other provinces, and some from within his own party, offered stark warnings.³¹

In several public statements, the prime minister declared the option of a wholesale lockdown to be anti-poor, and an idea that was being propagated by the elite to insulate themselves.³² The Sindh government asserted that saving lives was more important than the economy, since the former could not be revived whereas the latter could. The public debate was cast as a simplistic 'lives vs. livelihoods' standoff. This was eventually resolved through the notion of "smart lockdowns", in which data analytics would be devised to identify Covid-19 hotspots. Once identified, these areas would be isolated whilst others – especially commercial areas – would be allowed to continue functioning. The prime minister approved of the "smart lockdowns" idea, and was also credited by his supporters for having conceived it. In this way, the binary nature of the lives vs. livelihoods debate was at least partly addressed.

Concurrent to the emergence of this debate, the Supreme Court took suo motu notice of the efforts to restrict business as usual and issued directives in May 2020 for markets across the country to be reopened. The court's declaration of market closures as a violation of fundamental rights was unhelpful to the evidence-based approach that was being adopted through smart lockdowns. Critics of the decision say it

interfered with executive agency at both federal and provincial levels, undoing their freedom to make decisions based on merits and demerits. Indeed, after the Supreme Court's instructions on markets, even the NCOC had to adopt a careful approach to framing the closure of shops and malls. Although the Supreme Court later walked back the vociferousness of its earlier statements, yet another signal of mixed messages and unclear public communications had been delivered to the people.

To minimise the communication crisis, a task force on Risk Communication and Community Engagement was formed under the Ministry of National Health Services with representatives from other ministries and development partners. The military's media wing, ISPR, assisted the federal government in strategising for increasing outreach.

3.2 Impact of Mixed Messaging

Tensions between various state organisations and authorities were initially exacerbated due to political rivalries, past propensities such as that of a populist, interventionist court, and news media personalities who pushed whichever side of the debate they identified with, instead of nurturing dialogue. This inconsistency also spilled over to how the state engaged with religious groups. During the holy month of Ramadan, and on Eid ul Fitr, the government sought

to minimise congregational prayers by adopting a campaign under the slogan of "every home is a mosque". The idea was to discourage large gatherings and encourage "stay at home" approaches to worship and religious social interactions.

Yet when religious leaders protested the government's attempts to minimise crowding at mosques, markets and other social venues, the authorities were unable to resist. The demand that mosques be exempted was agreed to. The die had been cast, and other religious congregations, such as the annual Tableeghi Jamaat conference at Raiwind was also exempted. More than 70,000 devotees congregated for that conference during the height of the first wave of Covid-19 in Pakistan.³³ Public censure drove the government to revoke the permission and the organisers were asked to wrap up earlier than anticipated — but the damage had been done. Other groups, including traders, private school owners and businesses catering to low-income groups were all given the tools to argue that they too deserved exemptions from lockdowns. The Council of Islamic Ideology, upon a request for input by the Lahore High Court, advised the government to discontinue the use of its central slogan, "Don't be afraid of Covid-19, fight it" as it was deemed un-Islamic.³⁴

Such convoluted and mixed messaging, and reversals of decisions resulted in a deepening politicisation and polarisation of public health issues during the pandemic. The initial conflicting messages

emanating from authorities led to people underplaying the importance – initially of the lockdown – and eventually of the pandemic itself. When one group was afforded permission for one kind of congregation, local authorities had trouble arguing with other groups demanding similar exceptional treatment. Like all other countries in which politics has trumped public safety, polls in Pakistan also show that many citizens simply do not believe in the existence of the novel Coronavirus. A survey by Gallup Pakistan on public perceptions, attitudes and behaviours around the pandemic conducted in June 2020 found that 55 percent of people in Pakistan believe the threat of Covid-19 had been exaggerated.³⁵

Perhaps consequently, as many as 37 percent of the population claimed that they would refuse vaccination for Covid-19.³⁶

Citizens’ trust in public officials is shaken, though it cannot be causally attributed only to the Covid-19 response. In a Gallup poll, when asked whose advice people trusted the most regarding the Coronavirus, 68 percent said they trust doctors the most, followed by 11 percent who said they trust religious leaders and only 5 percent said they trust politicians.³⁷ Experts have noted the corrosive effect political distrust has on democratic politics, its association with lower compliance, higher enforcement costs and its manifestation of the problems of representation.³⁸ They point out that

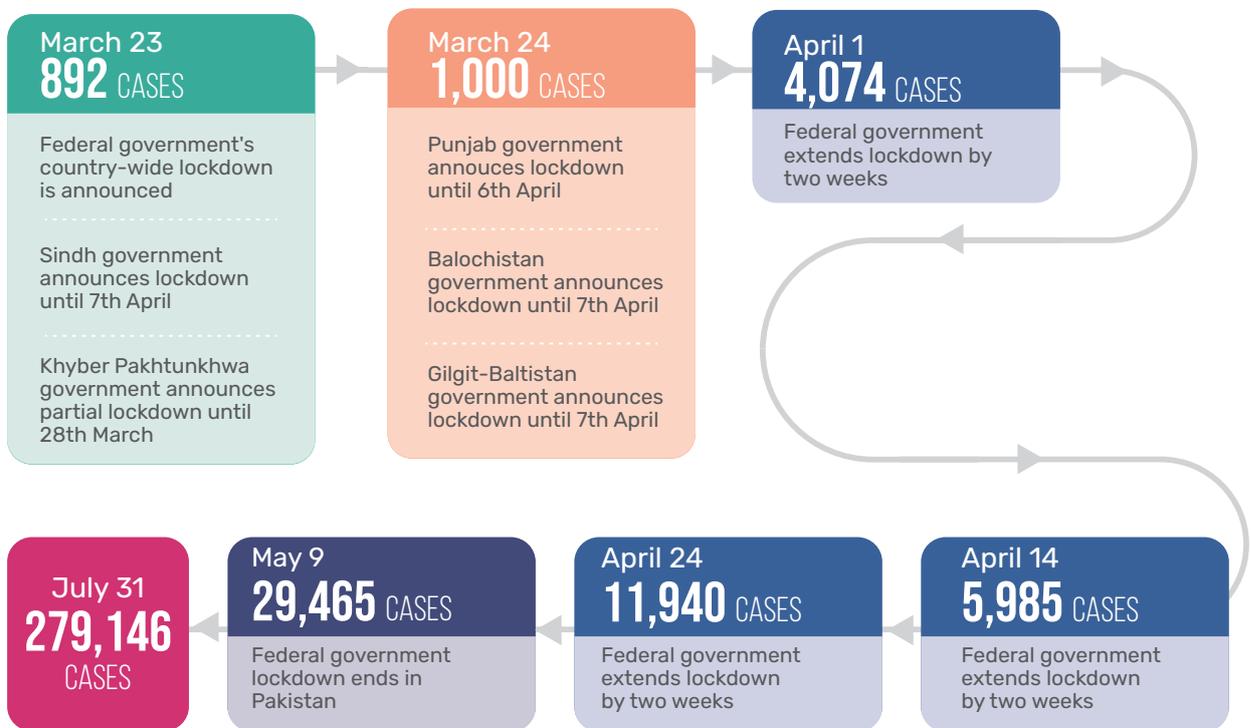


Figure 04: Timeline of lockdown strategies

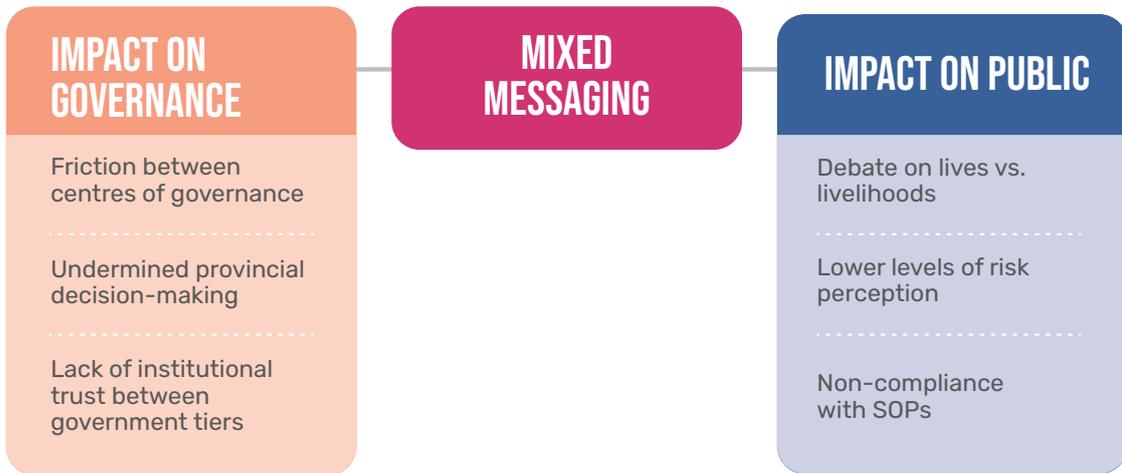


Figure 05: The Impacts of Mixed Messaging

allowing distrust to fester piles on social and political costs, inhibiting the basic levels of consensus a political entity needs for the smooth operations of key governance functions.³⁹

Similar conflicting decisions and uncertainties dogged the debate on the closure and re-opening of schools. This issue in particular stumped governments all over the world, given the high opportunity costs of both opening and closing educational institutes, with no global consensus. In Pakistan the contesting viewpoints have again been exacerbated by concurring issues. In the midst of the pandemic and school closures, the National Curriculum Council adopted the Single National Curriculum (SNC). Since education is a devolved subject, many experts worry that even with provincial participation and approval, the methodology and process by which the SNC has been adopted merits revision.

The already tense relationship between the Sindh government and federal government risks becoming even more complicated by such issues, especially during the efforts to contain the damage from the pandemic.

Despite all these challenges, there is also evidence that coordinated public communications efforts were attempted in some cases, and these have generated successful outcomes. One example was the speed with which both the federal government and the provincial government in Punjab launched television-based fora for digital and long-distance learning during school closures. The TeleSchool and Taleem Ghar applications were both organised in record time, and on extremely small budgets, immediately after the Covid-19 crisis emerged. These television channels cater to over 27 million students across the country.⁴⁰ There are other powerful examples of important

public communications efforts that were made in the early days of the pandemic, that benefitted from the coherence, data and learning that the NCOC made possible. Behavioural science was used, for example, to sharpen and improve the public service messages that were added to the caller tunes. To draw more robust conclusions about the impact of these messages requires greater investment in research on behavioural aspects of the Covid-19 response.

The initial frictions and confusion during the pandemic were eased once inclusive

and outcome-focused communication channels were created and deployed. The NCOC's role as a data clearinghouse for the pandemic response may have played a vital role in improved public communications. The need to institutionalise lessons will be critical for reinforcing confidence in equitable centre-province relations and in shoring up public trust to help counter the next major crisis that the country faces.

Local Decisions, Operations, Governance & Operations 4

One of the key operational challenges that the government faced, especially once the policy coordination and procurement challenges had been addressed via the NCOC and NDMA respectively, was how decisions agreed upon at the NCOC would be executed on-ground. Conversely, one of the key questions that faced both the provincial governments in their autonomous capacity, and the NCOC as a collective forum, was how data, information and insights from the grassroots would reach decision-makers in provincial capitals and in Islamabad. Among the many innovations that were adopted to address the accurate and timely flow of information and decision-making from bottom to top and top to bottom, was the deployment of army officers to collate and report data on the status of large public hospitals in the early days of the first wave of the pandemic. Concurrently, many decisions that needed local execution were communicated by provincial authorities to district administrators, with no element of representation or participation at the local level.

Conscious of the absence of local ownership over several Covid-19 related decisions, many parliamentarians have independently created avenues to engage the people. In Peshawar, one

MNA hired trucks with loudspeakers mounted on them, and got the local mosque leaders to accompany the trucks as they drove through neighbourhoods with public service announcements about the need for physical distancing and staying at home. In Sindh, MPAs became involved in local service delivery, especially the delivery of food and basic needs. Ad hoc expressions of elected representatives becoming involved in Covid-19 relief efforts were manifest in all provinces. However, the formal mechanisms for such participation were limited. This was primarily because local governments in all four provinces are largely either non-functional, or extremely limited in their role, scope and operations.

4.1 The pre-Covid-19 Local Government Context

Since 2010, the Constitution has devolved the responsibility for legislating and establishing local governments to the provinces. The provinces have been slow to respond to this opportunity, with reluctance driven by a lack of trust in local governments, a lack of political will to devolve power further, and a lack of provincial capacity. Nevertheless, all four federating units in Pakistan have managed to pass their respective local government

Table 02: Interprovincial Comparison of Local Governments ^{41 42}

Province	Length of Term	Tiers/Classes of Local Government	Notes on autonomy and service delivery
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	4 years	2 tiers (Tehsil and Village Council) District level tier abolished by KPLGA 2019	Only 8 subjects remain in the purview of local governments, as opposed to a historical 24 under the KPLGA 2013
Balochistan	4 years	2 tiers in rural areas 1 tier with 3 non-hierarchical classes of local governments in urban areas	Similar to other provinces, there is considerable provincial oversight and control over functions that typically fall under the purview of local governments
Punjab	5 years	5 non-hierarchical classes of local governments District level tier abolished by PLGA 2019	Overriding influence of provincial government in all functions of local government and HR management District Health Authority, set up by PLGA 2013 abolished and health as a subject returned to provincial government
Sindh	4 years	3 tiers in Karachi Either 2 tiers or 1 tier in other urban areas depending on population size. Each local body class differs based on population size. 2 tiers in rural areas District councils and union councils retained; intermediary taluka council removed	Local bodies such as Karachi Metropolitan Corporation do not have control over typical LG functions. Basic municipal functions have been held by the provincial assembly

acts (LGA). The LGA provisions within provincial laws have also changed several times over the last decade, creating a lack of stability and continuity in the wake of constantly changing rules of the game.

The legislation and structure of local governments varies greatly between the provinces, but seems to represent a hybrid between two local government regimes enacted by military dictators — one by General Zia ul Haq in 1979, and the other by General Pervez Musharraf in 2001. They borrow from the three-tiered system built around districts, tehsils and union councils but differ in terms of the number of subjects devolved to the district level, the length of their respective terms, defining the basic unit of government and the number of tiers in the local government structure among others.

The level of empowerment invested by the provinces in each of these local government systems seems to be decreasing. By removing the district tier and revoking most of the 24 subjects in its purview, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government has effectively rendered the tehsil and village council tiers subservient to the unelected district administration.^{43 44} In Punjab, district health authorities have been returned to the provincial government's domain, which has also reserved the right to block any local government decision it deems prejudicial to the public interest.⁴⁵ The Sindh government reserves a similar right, made all the more intense by the political rivalry between the PPP and MQM which dominate the provincial and

district levels, respectively. Perhaps the weakest local governments in Pakistan are in Balochistan, where invalid ballots, low voter turnout and constantly eroding legitimacy has rendered the role played by the third tier of government severely limited.⁴⁶

In line with a Supreme Court order, all provinces completed their local government election process in 2015. Of these, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan's local governments completed their terms in 2019, and Punjab's local bodies were dissolved when the PLGA 2019 was passed.⁴⁷ While Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) and Gilgit Baltistan (GB) are special cases, a similar neglect regarding local governance has prevailed in these regions as well. The last local body elections in AJK were held in 1991, and in GB in 2004.⁴⁸

When the Covid-19 pandemic arrived in Pakistan, only Sindh had functioning local governments — though their functioning was nominal, at best. In January 2020, the PTI had proposed a bill in the Sindh Assembly to make amendments to the Sindh LGA of 2013, arguing for a more robust set of powers for the third tier of government and a change in the structure of Sindh's local bodies.⁴⁹ In July 2020, the Supreme Court held a hearing for the PTI's petition against the Sindh LGA of 2013.⁵⁰ At the end of August 2020, as they completed their four-year term, all local bodies in Sindh stood dissolved.

At present, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) is unable to hold the next round of elections due to a delay in the

delimitation of constituencies, which can only be done when data from the sixth population census is made available. During this time, local government powers have either been revoked by provincial governments or the district administration has stepped in to oversee critical social and municipal services. This has led to several observers noting the lack of legitimacy that infects decision-making and service delivery, as unelected officials or district administrators dominate grassroots and local level decisions, governance and operations.

4.2 Filling the LG Vacuum: District Administration to Tiger Force

The absence of clear insights, actionable data and implementable instructions for local level actors accentuated the governance challenges faced by the country in the initial Covid-19 response. In effect, district administrators (especially District Commissioners, or DCs and Assistant Commissioners, or ACs) and the wider elite bureaucratic machinery, led by the Pakistan Administrative Service, exercise nearly total and absolute control of managing the pandemic response at the ground level. The allure of this model is obvious. PAS officers are generalists that are trained to mobilise and deliver results on short budgets and minimal instructions. For many that seek technocratic solutions to political problems, an all-powerful administrator rather than an “unqualified” public

representative is a shortcut worth taking. However, many decades of experimentation with such structures reveals that the performance of such a system varies significantly across jurisdictions, and not every officer is as efficient as the best among them.

Local governments could have made a qualitative difference in the collection of data from neighbourhood, street and household levels for which there can be no better source than elected representatives who are also residents of the area. Elected local representatives would also manifest the widest and deepest stock of social and political capital to support vaccination efforts and to counter false and malicious information about the virus. Local government officials as elected community representatives would also have enabled policy implementation and enforcement, given how unsustainable and ineffective attempts at forcible adherence to SOPs has been all around the world.

An apt example from Islamabad is a long-standing tussle between the unelected Capital Development Authority (CDA) and the elected Metropolitan Corporation Islamabad (MCI). The CDA was meant to serve as the implementation arm of the MCI, but has continued to retain its bureaucratic independence. The federal government, on the other hand, also took several key directorates from the city government, causing the first elected mayor to tender his resignation.⁵¹ The entire Covid-19 response, as a result, has been solely the

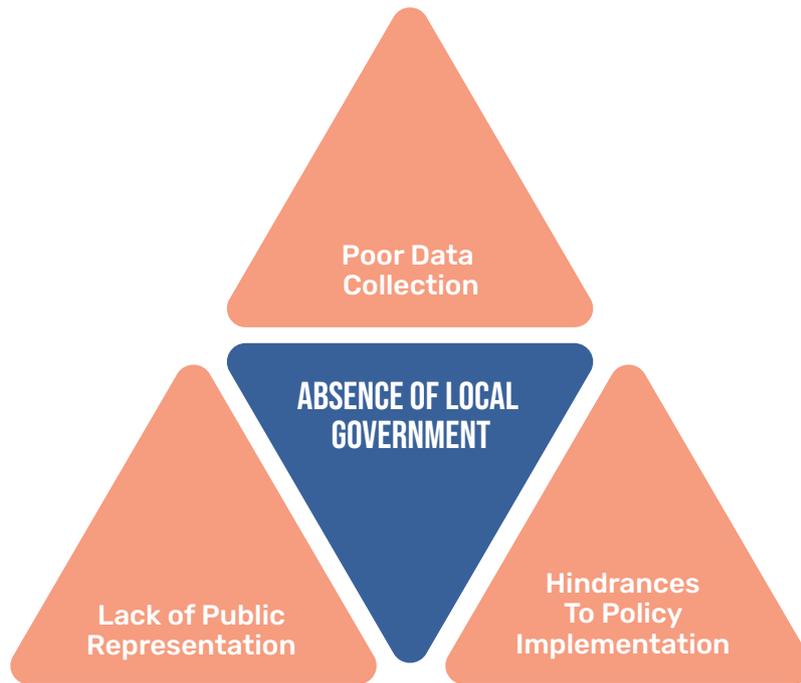


Figure 06: Impacts of Missing Local Governments

domain of the district commissioner, or DC Islamabad. By happenstance, the incumbent DC Islamabad is perhaps the most social media savvy public servant in the country, and has adroitly managed both the administrative and the public communications aspects of the pandemic. But Islamabad is one of over 130 districts, and there are few examples of the same ilk.

Conscious of the absence of local level ownership of decisions and the obvious potential challenge of enforcement, the government decided to establish the Corona Relief Tiger Force (CRTF) — a nationwide collective of ruling party members who would voluntarily serve to implement and help enforce Covid-19 SOPs. In March 2020, the prime minister announced that a one-million-strong force

comprised of young volunteers would be created to assist the government with its efforts. The Sindh government opted out of the effort. The CRTF was constituted to help out in ration distribution, monitoring the implementation of guidelines regarding social distancing and market timings, and generating Covid-19 awareness.

Critics of the ruling party had already begun to term it as an unnecessary “parallel force” with no legal cover, when the scope of the CRTF was increased to also include price inspections, supervising utility stores, checking hoarding and helping with tree plantations.⁵² Despite the initial noise surrounding the CRTF, few if any districts have seen any kind of sustained engagement of the CRTF in the

functions it was conceived for. Anecdotally, many of the gaps in local enforcement or implementation are left for district administrators to plug — mostly without the adequate resources needed for such plugging.

The outsourcing of such primary functions to unelected officials or volunteer forces is a further indication of the void left by local governments. At the most substantive level of engagement between citizen and state, the federation

is currently built upon any number of stopgap arrangements, all of which are predestined to be unable to serve as a substitute for elected, representative and robust local governments. The success of the NCOC in coordinating, or the NDMA in procuring, or individual cases of DCs responding to Covid-19 does not undermine one of the most foundational lessons from the pandemic: local decisions, local governance, local operations of the state all require urgent attention.

Social Protection & Basic Income

On March 24, 2020 Prime Minister Imran Khan announced an economic stimulus package to mitigate the fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic. Amidst a host of measures was a special provision for the poorest and most vulnerable, including daily wage labourers across the country.⁵³ This funding was channelled to citizens through the Ehsaas programme, which operates under the mandate of the federal government's social protection arm, the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP). The government's flagship Covid-19 relief initiative, the Ehsaas Emergency Cash (EEC) programme was launched on April 1, 2020, "to help them buy rations so they don't go hungry".⁵⁴ The EEC was designed to support more than 16 million households through a one-time PKR 12,000 cash grant. Originally with a total budget of PKR 203 billion, nearly PKR 180 billion had been distributed to over 15 million households across the country.⁵⁵

The government benefited from having much of the BISP and Ehsaas infrastructure, as well as the funding for the cash transfer, already in place. Cash grants would have been made to a portion of EEC beneficiaries, irrespective of the outbreak — but the pandemic significantly altered both the timelines and the quantum of the cash grant. Predating the

pandemic, the government had already allocated in its FY19-20 budget PKR 190.5 billion for cash transfers to the poor.⁵⁶ According to Ehsaas, this amount constituted about 93 percent of the EEC payments.⁵⁷ The federal government mobilised an additional PKR 4.88 billion specifically from the Prime Minister's Covid Relief Fund.

The ability of the government to repurpose an existing national programme that is run by the federal government for income support during Covid-19 was one of the most important mitigating factors in how Pakistan dealt with the pandemic. The Ehsaas programme and BISP infrastructure that enabled it offer a useful case study of how, within federal structures, national programmes can be deployed for citizen well-being in emergencies.

5.1 Federal v. Provincial Social Protection Programmes

The experience with social security and social protection in Pakistan dates back to the 1970s, when the government set up the Workers' Welfare Fund and the Employees' Old-Age Benefits Institute (EOBI). In the 1980s, the first generic social assistance programme, the Zakat Fund, was introduced. This was followed by the Pakistan Baitul

Maal Fund (PBM) in the early 1990s. These schemes were self-financing by way of taxes and levies, however, the PBM was more inclusive in its scope compared to the Zakat Fund, which was restricted to destitute and widowed Muslims.⁵⁸

It was not until 2007 when the government introduced a National Social Protection Strategy (NSPS), that set out a more comprehensive approach to social protection for the country, with a specific focus on social safety nets. In order to respond to the challenges identified in the NSPS, the coalition government that formed after the 2008 elections established the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP). BISP has been managed entirely by the federal government since its inception. Provincial roles are limited to some administrative and coordination capacities, while the centre runs the programme, funds it entirely with federal money, makes all decisions about allocations, and manages its monitoring and evaluation. Funding support for BISP and Ehsaas includes contributions from bilateral aid programmes, as well as loans from the World Bank — but the overwhelming majority of Ehsaas and BISP programme funding is through the federal government's own resources. The identification of beneficiaries was originally made on the basis of submissions from elected representatives, but this was replaced with a national database linked poverty scorecard.

The Constitution does not specifically

mention social protection as a service delivery function, however, the Ministry of Social Welfare and Special Education and the Ministry of Zakat and Ushr — both related to social protection — were abolished at the federal level during the retrenchment process initiated by the devolution resulting from the 18th Amendment. Many have interpreted this process as indicative of the implication that social protection, like education and health, was devolved to the provinces. However, the BISP Act was approved by the same Parliament that legislated the 18th Amendment, during the same year. It seems unlikely that BISP was intended to be devolved to the provinces, given that Parliament had ample opportunity to articulate such an intent through not one, but two legislative processes.

As the largest social protection and income support programme of its time, BISP has been widely lauded as a successful model with millions of beneficiaries in the poorest segments of the Pakistani population.⁵⁹ Despite its success, such a structure does generate overlaps in the role of federal and provincial governments in social protection, as well as possible duplication of resources. This is manifested in the social protection programmes that have been initiated and that are now operating at the provincial level, though the scope of activities of these programmes varies across provinces.

At the provincial level, the Punjab government has the most comprehensive

set of programmes — consolidated with the launch of the Punjab Social Protection Authority in 2015. This was done on recommendation of the World Bank to consolidate social protection initiatives undertaken by the various government departments and agencies in Punjab, through which a cumulative expenditure of PKR 60 billion was expected to be incurred in 2013. In continuation of its own rebranding of social protection, the Government of Punjab is also launching Ehsaas-Punjab, built on the model of the national Ehsaas programme, which will focus on cash grants for the elderly, widows and orphans, transgenders and PWDs.

Other provincial governments also have social welfare departments set up under the explicit mandate of the two devolved ministries at the federal level, though the scope of these varies across provinces. For instance, the Balochistan Welfare Services are mostly focused on shelter homes, relief centres and literacy-related projects.

5.2 Leveraging BISP for Ehsaas and Ehsaas for EEC

The need for further scaling up a programme such as BISP was widely agreed upon even prior to the pandemic, owing to the threat of growing poverty and the precarious nature of livelihoods for the poor and vulnerable. Prior to Covid-19, a 17.5 percent cut in development spending had been announced in the

budget and it was recognised that poverty reduction would remain subdued in the near future. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) stated, “cash transfers under the BISP can and should be quickly stepped up to mitigate adverse social consequences”.⁶⁰

In this context, the May 2019 agreement between the IMF and the Government of Pakistan for the 39-month Extended Fund Arrangement (EFA) included certain qualifications. After fears that social protection would be scaled back to create fiscal space, the IMF emphasised in a subsequent press release that it had advised that any cost cutting should be “accompanied by prudent spending growth aimed at preserving essential development spending, scaling up BISP and improving targeted subsidies, with the goal of protecting the most vulnerable segments of society under the umbrella of the government’s new Ehsaas Programme (including BISP).”^{61 62}

The institutional arrangement for BISP and the financial allocation were, therefore, in place and could be disbursed almost immediately. However, the government was able to start the disbursements only in May 2020, after the lockdown had been lifted. This was because it needed to scale up the number of recipients for the cash transfer from 4.6 million BISP recipients to 12 million (and later 16 million) EEC qualified recipients. The expanded scope of beneficiaries to those beyond the previous catchment to include ‘the new poor’ posed a challenge,

given the inadequacy of the database of poor and vulnerable citizens, additional means of identification would be required. The Division of Poverty Alleviation and Social Safety created five categories of recipients.⁶³

1. The existing, identified 5 million BISP women beneficiaries, now called Ehsaas Kafaalat.⁶⁴
2. The 4 million 'new poor' drawn from the existing database from an income band previously not labelled as the 'poorest people,' i.e. beneficiaries self-identified through SMS, cross-checked with national identity card (NIC) numbers.⁶⁵ The division of beneficiaries was consistent with provincial population shares as per the 2017 census.
3. Another 4.2 million 'new poor' identified at the district level. Category 3A was introduced for any province wanting to increase provincial beneficiaries by allocating additional provincial budgets.
4. 1.26 million individuals who applied through a web-based portal hosted on the prime minister's website. This was meant specifically for labourers and wage earners who suffered livelihood losses, on the assumption that daily wage labourers would be aware of this initiative, will be able to access the internet and fill out applications on a

web portal. This was the only category for which the Prime Minister's Covid-19 Relief Fund was utilised and there was no pre-existing fiscal allocation.

5. Spill-over list of other categories, adding up to 2.45 million beneficiaries.

In contrast to the pandemic politics in much of the developed world, there was no political opposition to the idea of immediate cash transfers to the poor and vulnerable. The federal government, in fact, was urged to give more; to not limit it to a one-time payment and that repeated such payments would be required.

Categories 1 and 2 of beneficiaries (totalling nine million people) were consistent with the systematically developed National Socio Economic Registry (NSER), the poverty database and registry. The latter three categories were created under time constraints and in urgency. The need to establish three new categories is a product of the long delay in updating the NSER — a longstanding issue that predates Covid-19. In category 3, the mechanism used emanated from the NCOC, which directed the chief secretaries of all provinces to ensure the executive heads of each district in provinces, the DCs, made lists of deserving beneficiaries. The provinces were also involved, since secretaries are employees of provincial governments, but the mechanism circumvented participation of elected officials by functioning entirely through the bureaucracy. Category 3A allowed provincial governments to add

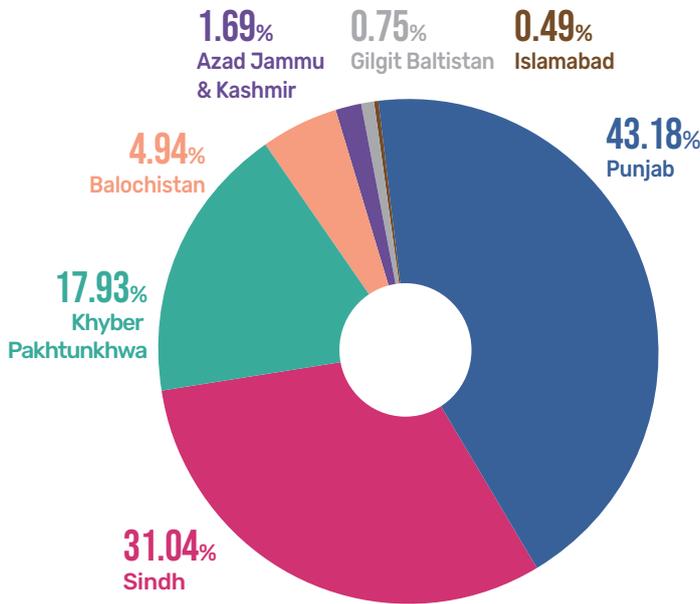


Figure 07: Provincial Share in Ehsaas Cash

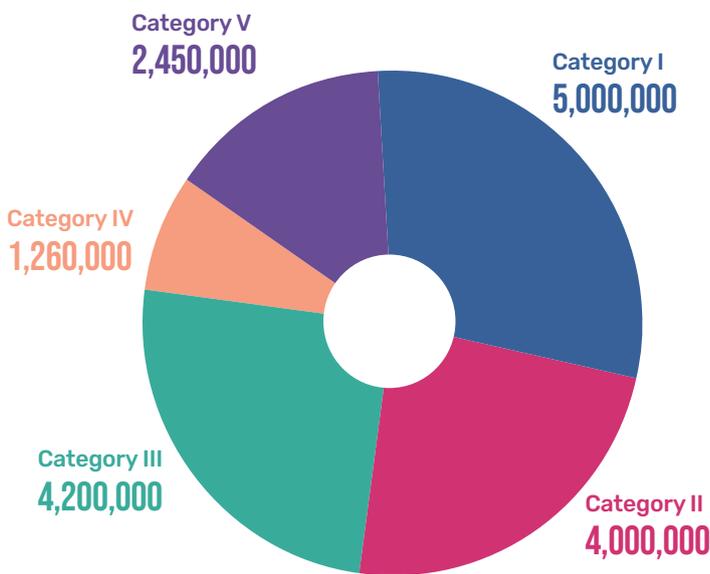


Figure 08: Number of Beneficiaries by Ehsaas Categories

their own beneficiaries with the condition that those cash transfers would be paid for by the provincial governments themselves.

Only the Punjab government exercised this option. MPA Sanaullah Baloch from Balochistan pointed out that provincial governments were impeded in their ability for doing so, since the federal government does not release provincial budgetary allocations in time and staggers payments to shore up their own accounts — leaving provinces strapped for cash despite allocated shares. Through the pandemic, provincial governments mostly seemed to let the federal government lead on cash transfers and focused their own resources on trying to shore up their health infrastructure, facilities and supply lines.

In category 4 and 5, there were no provincial quotas and no data has been officially released of how many people were selected, and from where specifically. Experts have expressed some reservations about the mechanism of using a web portal for outreach to daily wage labourers, given their general lack of literacy and internet access and inability to navigate online forums. However, there has been no outreach

evaluation yet to decisively state whether it worked for the majority or not.

These reservations are about the efficacy of targeting, not fraud, corruption or the absence of disbursements. The coordinator for social protection for the Chief Minister of Sindh, Haris Gazdar observes that unlike the usual procedure of laborious screening and bureaucratic delays for transfers, there was an opposite push during the pandemic: to quickly identify and transfer amounts in a rush. Economist Asad Sayeed points out that BISP targeted the poorest of the poor, hence was more skewed towards those in

rural and remote areas, and has far more rural beneficiaries than urban.

The challenge remains that the Covid-19 pandemic has affected urban and peri-urban areas more than rural areas. If the emergency cash transfer was intended to help people cope with the pandemic and lockdown, then it was mistargeted since there was effectively no lockdown and very limited virus outbreaks in rural Pakistan. However, he points out that economic conditions have been so dire, even prior to the economic impact of Covid-19, that the rural poor are needy and deserving of the

Table 03: Provincial Breakdown of Ehsaas Emergency Cash Beneficiaries⁶⁶

	Number of eligible beneficiaries	% share in Ehsaas Cash	Population % (2017 census)
Punjab	7,003,260	43.18	51.57
Sindh	5,034,275	31.04	22.45
KP	2,908,352	17.93	16.65
Balochistan	800,803	4.94	5.79
AJK	273,653	1.69	1.90
GB	121,072	0.75	0.70
Islamabad	79,151	0.49	0.94
Total	16,220,566	100	100

This table does not include Category III A, which is funded by the provincial government of Punjab

amounts in any case. Job losses in urban areas also struck daily wage earners who, in a number of cases, travel to the cities for work from rural settlements.

Current MNA and Punjab's former Minister of Finance, Dr. Aisha Ghaus Pasha points out that provincial labour departments could have been involved for effective targeting since they have some level of information on daily labourers and wage earners in the province, however cursory or rudimentary a form it may be in. The labour departments, however, were not involved in the identification process and instead, phone-ins, self-sent SMS messages and web-based applications were used.

The broad political consensus favouring the rapid expansion and immediate deployment of public funds for cash grants through the federal government indicates the enormous potential of a federalist spirit, in which the question of agency and the importance of control take a back seat to rapid and effective delivery. The greatest endorsement of the Ehsaas Emergency Cash – regardless of whatever limitations it may have had technically – is its almost universal acceptance as an important means of mitigating the impact of a crisis on poor and vulnerable Pakistanis. For sceptics of both the extent of Pakistani federalism, and its limitations, the EEC is a vital and instructive symbol of its potency.

Conclusions 06 & Lessons 6

As with almost all large-scale crises, the nature and scale of the Covid-19 pandemic warranted a “national” response — not just a federal or provincial one. Disaster responses, however, do not occur in a political vacuum; they are shaped by the interface between the nature of calamity, the people’s experience of it, the political negotiations between those who make and implement the response strategy, and the dynamics of past interfaces.

Across the globe, the pandemic has brought the federalism debate to the centre of governance, given concerns over decision-making and power-sharing dynamics. In order to better contextualise the challenges of Pakistani federalism, this section briefly reflects on three other countries and their positioning on the centralisation-devolution spectrum.

The overall impact of the pandemic has varied significantly. In India, it has created an impetus to further centralise governance and limit states’ autonomy in key areas. On the other hand, in Malaysia, it has enabled a precedence for states to challenge the overarching executive authority of the federal government. Meanwhile, the lack of federal leadership in the United States has uncovered partisan bias among states — leading both its main

political parties to perhaps examine their stance on American federalism more carefully.

In Pakistan, Covid-19 struck at a peculiar political and historical juncture. The ruling party forms the federal government and a majority or coalition government in three of the four provinces. The party with the second-largest majority — holding the office of Leader of Opposition — on the other hand, did not have a provincial government and hence sat out the subsequent political battles. The only province where a political party not aligned to the one ruling at the centre is Sindh.

One of the primary motifs in the analysis in this paper is the initial standoff over the Covid-19 response between the federal government in Islamabad and the provincial government in Sindh — even though they managed to eventually work together through the NCOC. Otherwise routine political contests between a ruling party and an opposition party escalated into a federational challenge. They could have metastasised further. The NCOC and NDMA’s success, the vitality of the EEC, and the lower-than-expected burden of infections and fatalities in both the first and the ongoing second wave of Covid-19, all contributed to the mitigation of political contestation

around the pandemic response.

Blaming the 18th Amendment and the federal structure for impeding the government's ability to respond to the pandemic helped stoke the fears of majoritarian centralisation among political power brokers in Sindh and amongst so-called "peripheral" political forces. This prompted opposition parties and other civil society actors to revitalise the issue of provincial autonomy, especially in the early days of the pandemic.

The 18th Amendment was seen as being under threat, even though the current government has explicitly expressed its alignment with the legislation, and simply does not have the numbers to overturn it. In any case, the federal government was not actively seeking to subvert provincial decision-making and has been more concerned with finding avenues for expanding the funds available to itself. Instead of a national conversation on how best to free up resources to deal with an unforeseen calamity, the debate became about the 18th Amendment itself.

6.1 Covid-19 as a Driver for Data Transparency

All response institutions in Pakistan seemed to have made a significant effort in increasing transparency in the wake of the pandemic.

- The Covid-19 statistics are shared by the federal government and publicly updated around the clock;

- the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government took steps for public disclosure for its budget utilisation and financial management reforms;
- the Sindh government set up a website, tracking donations raised and what they were spent on;
- the Ehsaas database tracked, in real time, cash transfers to and withdrawals by beneficiaries;
- the NDMA maintained public, online records of their purchases, acquisitions and their provincial allotments; and
- the NCOC uploaded daily situation reports on their website.

These concrete steps testify to a substantial increase in transparency in terms of material resources, outputs and outcomes.

Lesson: *Crises create opportunity. The Covid-19 pandemic has created a major opportunity to deepen and expand the scope of open and transparent data and information for the public good that will forge a more perfect union, and more robust federal structure. This opportunity requires sustained and vigorous follow-up.*

6.2 Missing: Administrative and Normative Coherence

There is a lag, however, between the transparency of processes and decision-making that has yet to be overcome. In part this is because the mechanisms through which decision-making takes place at

the NCOC have not been formalised, nor published. The NCOC was established by the National Coordination Committee (NCC) without the scrutiny and debate which precedes legislative measures that establish similar bodies or fora. Unlike the NDMA, the NCOC does not have the legal mandate of an act of Parliament.

Perhaps more importantly, the NCOC represents an aberration on two critical fronts. First, the issues that NCOC was designed to tackle – national coordination in a time of Covid-19 – are supposed to be dealt with by the Ministry of Interprovincial Coordination. Second, if the political or provincial-federal disagreement on the issues surrounding the NCOC were so stark that the MIPC was unable to take them on, then the constitutionally-mandated forum for the resolution of this challenge is the CCI.

While the NCOC has representation of all the provinces, and includes elected officials, bureaucrats and the military, neither was it created at or housed under the Ministry of Inter Provincial Coordination (MIPC), nor did the Council of Common Interest (CCI) discuss or endorse its establishment. The absence of rules of business, regulations or other formal guidelines for how the NCOC will work are thus a natural point of contention and curiosity. While its decisions are communicated, how those decisions are arrived at, has not been established. In such a vacuum, executive fiat dominates in the long run.

The NCOC was created as an urgent and temporary response to the pandemic. It remained the pivotal platform for planning, coordinating and integrating state response to Covid-19. While assessments of the quality and efficacy of the response may differ, policymakers will need to reckon with the structure itself. The NCOC is an ad hoc body with no constitutional mandate, parliamentary oversight or legally established procedures.

The current thinking in the government, as shared by the Minister of Planning and Development, is that the NCOC will be wound up after Covid-19 and an exit strategy has been prepared, through which future disaster management responsibilities will be shouldered by the NDMA, while the CCI is strengthened to provide oversight.

Lesson: *The expediency of solving an operational problem without the underlying institutional and legislative work, creates administrative gaps and institutional overlap (and even, potential conflict). The government's plans to terminate the NCOC upon the end of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis should be informed by an effort to invest in existing mechanisms for national action — namely the CCI and the MIPC. More robust political and legislative work before the next crisis may help evolve the state's ability to convene powerful fora aligned with the relevant administrative arrangements. The strengths of the NCOC must be captured in an accurate functional assessment of the*

key benefits the structure offered, and then integrated into all future government policy and actions that merit national urgency.

6.3 Strengthening the MIPC and Enhancing the CCI

The current federal ruling political party (the PTI) also governs three of the four provinces. This should have ensured minimal friction between the centre and provinces during the Covid-19 pandemic response. However, even with only one province (Sindh) being governed by a different party (PPP), a system-wide disarray seemed to define the initial response. Political contestation is a normal and healthy component of democratic, and especially federal systems. The administrative and institutional mechanisms that are designed to ensure equity, inclusion, ownership and coordination between the centre and the provinces must, therefore, be pursued and adhered to with great rigour.

During the Covid-19 response, the NCOC was an extremely effective decision-making body for coordination, data and insights. However, it was not a product of the existing administrative or institutional mechanisms for centre-province and/or province-province issues. The CCI is the very apex of the federalism platform in Pakistan, with a specific constitutional mandate to enhance inter-provincial harmony and coordinate on matters that impact all federating units. Since 1973, and particularly since 2010, the weightage

given to it is understood to be directly proportional to the importance attached to consensus-building.

Constitutionally, the CCI must gather every 90 days. However, it first met six months into the pandemic and has convened on only one other occasion since. At neither meeting was the Covid-19 pandemic the primary focus of the discussion. Prior to the pandemic, a CCI meeting was called in December 2019, a full year after its previous assembly. The lack of CCI meetings through the pandemic and it being bypassed for decision-making has been noted by political observers. Many are concerned that the MIPC and the CCI, both risk being made defunct if key decisions are made absent their engagement.

The creation of a dedicated coordination body for pandemic response may signal a clarity of purpose and singular commitment to the issue, however, it also signals a collective disinclination of institutions, governing politicians and key bureaucrats to utilise existing administrative and normative tools — instead choosing the path of capacity substitution and institutional bypass.

Lesson: *Process and due diligence matter. The primary federal body, the MIPC, was excluded in the formation of the NCOC, and the apex statutory forum, the CCI, has remained relatively dormant since before the Covid-19 pandemic. This represents an object lesson in the importance of frequent, regular and robust procedural due diligence*

and constitutional adherence. For federalist principles to persevere, the CCI must be strengthened and given due importance for it to remain catalytic in times of governance disquiet and standoffs. Equally, or perhaps even more importantly, the existence and role of the MIPC – which is where a body like the NCOC should have been conceived and housed – must be revisited.

6.4 Urgent Need to Bridge the Local Governance Gap

The delivery of basic public services is indisputably connected to the empowerment of local governments, and their institutionalisation is an urgent, critical requirement across all of Pakistan.

The absence or frailty of local governments created a vacuum acutely felt during the Covid-19 response, requiring the executive branch to step in instead of public representatives. It falls on the provinces to speed up the process of devolving powers to districts, towns/tehsils, union councils, village councils, neighbourhood councils and panchayats — with the same vigour with which they have demanded decentralisation for themselves. Pakistan must take this opportunity to rapidly develop a local government system as the first line of defence against any such future crises.

There is near unanimous support for deepening devolution in manifestos of all political parties. Extending the principle of decentralisation to the Covid-19 response,

implementation must be shouldered by provincial governments — with the federal government providing oversight, facilitation, guidance and back-up financing where required. The likelihood that local governance can be managed by individual superstar executives assumes that every bureaucrat has the same capacity and willingness to work as the most famed and prominent ones.

Lesson: *Absent serious investments in representative local government, with adequate powers over core local functions and the ability to raise and spend their own revenue, the next crisis will also exact the same heavy cost on district administrators that the Covid-19 pandemic has. Weak local governance hollows out the spirit and effectiveness of a federal system, and incentivises increased centralisation of power.*

6.5 Understanding Power of Effective Delivery Mechanisms

The efficacy of crisis response depends, to a large degree, on pre-existing institutional arrangements. It is far easier to reorient present systems to respond to disasters rather than to create new ones from scratch. The BISP and NSER database for instance, could be deployed for cash transfers almost immediately. The Integrated Disease Information Management System (IDIMS) created for polio has been improvised

for high-level data analytics for Covid-19. NDMA's streamlined purchase and supply lines were steered for pandemic relief. In the absence of local governments, the DC system was enabled as ground-level responders. The existence of these institutions enabled a quick response and illustrates the need for investing in institution-building and outreach systems, as well as for mining improvisation capacities.

Lesson: *Building long-term, durable and effective organisations in the public sector, through legislation that protects the structures from the temporal whims of politics and public discourse, is at the heart of state resilience and capacity. Effective public sector organisations like BISP and the Ehsaas programme reinforce and strengthen federalist coherence.*

6.6 Politics Matters: Conflict & Consensus

Existing issues intensify during crises. Countering the assumption that people are able to put their conflicts aside and work collectively for the greater good, it has been evident that the inverse can also occur. Crises are also the least likely time for redress of entrenched grievances. Prior conflicts can shape and determine current responses, hence, all investments for addressing festering issues through consensus-building in times of relative normalcy can yield substantial benefits during crises.

Lesson: *Ultimately, in a crisis, all political differences are suspended so that the system can focus on getting things done. No greater proof than the NCOC is needed that Pakistan's many run-of-the-mill crises all require the political, military and economic elites to be prompted to come together for a response. When push came to shove, Pakistan's federal system was able to respond to the crisis. This means that federalism has the latent power to tackle much more than it does and is a system that must be invested in accordingly.*

6.7 Public Trust and Need for Reliable Communications

Governments cannot function effectively during crises without public trust. Crises will not enable trust in the face of prevailing distrust; therefore, honest and coherent communication is critical. People have access to many, often contradictory, sources of information. Government authorities should present a clear, sincere source of guidance and when there are low levels of information, it is better to openly acknowledge it rather than giving incorrect, conflicting information to appease the public.

Lesson: *Routine political contestations must not be allowed to supersede core federalist principles. Communication channels require strengthening to ensure individual or party posturing does not derail governance.*

List of Formal Interviews Conducted

- Dr. Zafar Mirza, Former Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Health
- Fasi Zaka, Political Commentator
- Colonel Muhammad Shafiq Malik, Assistant Director Domestic Media, ISPR
- Dr. Kaiser Bengali, Economist and Analyst
- Asad Sayeed, Economist and Member, 10th National Financial Commission
- Sanaullah Baloch, Member, Provincial Assembly of Balochistan
- Zamir Ghumro, Barrister
- Dr. Aisha Ghaus Pasha, Economist and Member, National Assembly of Pakistan
- Haris Gazdar, Researcher, Collective for Social Science Research
- Nauman Wazir Khattak, Member, Senate of Pakistan
- Taimur Jhagra, Minister for Finance, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
- Nargis Sethi, Chairperson, Pay and Pension Commission
- Rafiullah Kakar, Director, Strategic Planning and Reforms Cell, Govt. of Balochistan
- Lieutenant General (retired) Khalid Naeem Lodhi, Former Defence Secretary and Interim Minister of Defence
- Asad Umar, Federal Minister for Planning and Chairman NCOC
- Shandana Gulzar Khan, Member, National Assembly of Pakistan
- Syma Nadeem, Parliamentary Secretary, Inter Provincial Coordination Division
- Sajid Turi, Member, National Assembly of Pakistan
- Afrasiab Khattak, Political Activist and former Senator
- Ahsan Iqbal, Member, National Assembly of Pakistan and former Minister for Interior

- Mushtaq Ahmad Khan, Member, Senate of Pakistan
- Shahnaz Wazir Ali, President SZABIST and former Member of National Assembly
- Dr. Miftah Ismail, Former Federal Minister for Finance
- Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, Former Prime Minister of Pakistan
- Fawad Chaudhry, Minister for Science and Technology
- Dr. Nafisa Shah, Member, National Assembly of Pakistan
- Faisal Subzwari, Former Leader of the Opposition in the Sindh Assembly

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