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Seminar Report

Poverty Alleviation and National Security

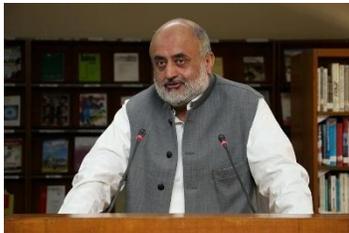
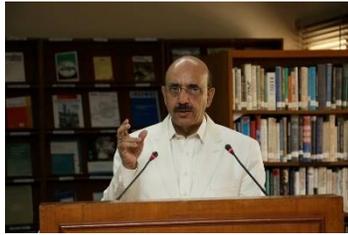
April 22 2016



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Pictures of the Event



Poverty Alleviation and National Security

The Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad (ISSI) organized a roundtable discussion on Poverty Alleviation and National Security on April 22, 2016. Civil society representatives, government officials, academics and students from various universities constituted the diverse discussion panel. Ambassador Masood Khan, Director General, ISSI opened the event with his welcome remarks said that there is a direct correlation between poverty alleviation and national security. He emphasized that reducing the gap between the rich and poor was essential to reduce poverty. He also highlighted the importance of the public and private efforts in collaboration for alleviating poverty in Pakistan.

The keynote speaker Dr. Hafiz A. Pasha, a senior economist, gave a powerful presentation on national status of poverty, supplementing his hard-hitting arguments with empirical data and new research being conducted in this field. He appreciated the government for prioritizing poverty alleviation. Contextualizing the link between poverty alleviation and national security in Pakistan, he said that there is a powerful link between poverty and absence on human security. He pointed that poverty makes people vulnerable to three deprivations:

1. Freedom from basic want.
2. It leads to an environment of fear and insecurity, and it is this fear that affects mindset of poor.
3. It deprives people with life with dignity, which is fundamental human right. We see child labor, bonded labor and other evils.

Highlighting the major trends in poverty, he said that most of the research done argues that poverty over the years has been increasing. Poverty did fall in first 5-6 years of this century, but after 2008 it is increasing. The first thing to note is rural poverty is higher than urban poverty. The other trend evident is that there is a lot of poverty up and down in regional context Pakistan. Rural Sind has same poverty as rural Baluchistan which is alarming. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) has done better due to inflow of remittances.

Besides Sind, where in some districts poverty is 50%, the other big pocket of poverty is in southern Punjab, with 8 districts up to 50%. Of fundamental importance is the extremely high percentage of poverty in FATA with two-third of the people in poverty and with literacy below 20% that of national average. He also pointed towards the growing inflation and unemployment resulting in idle youth which then becomes the fodder for militancy.

Surprisingly between 2001-02 and 2013-14 period, there has been a decline in nutrient value in major urban areas, as in Karachi it has fallen by 10% and nationally by 10-15%. The reason being the rising food prices.

Presenting statistical evidence on inequality and land acquisition he said, "We see that agriculture land concentration has increased. Only 0.2 farmers own 12% land and this has increased 8% from 2000-10. A hundred families own 67% of the corporate assets of Pakistan. So there has been very little improvement in distribution of assets."

The chief guest, Ms. Marvi Memon, Member National Assembly and Chairperson, Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) said that there is a symbiotic nexus between poverty and insecurity in Pakistan which can be attacked most effectively through the propagation of the rule of law and access to justice.

BISP is initiating NSAR data base for tracking poverty pockets. Best payment mechanism will guard the dignity of BISP beneficiaries and e-commerce will provide an outlet to women entrepreneurs.

Talking about the efforts of the BISP in poverty alleviation she said that it was working to ensure reduced malnutrition, conditional cash transfers to ensure that women get pre-natal visits, family planning products, and malnutrition supplements. She also said that BISP is working to promote education and has enrolled its 1 mm children of which 47% are girls. BISP is also working on providing vocational training and more than 100,000 of them have received interest free loans. She emphasized that BISP is Pakistan's only platform which if fully utilized can help identify the poorest, provide custodianship in every respect to them and then make them graduate out of poverty. She further said that with the BISP's target of 1 million graduates of poverty will be the turning point and the tipping point in Pakistan's growth journey. She emphasized the linkage between poverty management and regional security. In this regard she stressed the need for knowledge sharing in order to fight poverty and in turn extremism.

Mr. Saleem Ranjha, Secretary BISP, sharing his experience from the field and working with poor and marginal communities said, unless you don't experience something you cannot feel its intensity. BISP caters to 5.2 million families, but our goal and destiny is way ahead. We want to make these dependent families as independent. There are a lot of success stories in Pakistan, and our work is to link these success stories into a major transformative change demanding social justice. For this purpose, we will have to focus more towards implementation of the policies and their effectiveness. BISP is developing new biometric procedure of cash disbursement which will make it easier for far-flung areas to get stipend in their localities. Moreover, BISP's education program has successfully enrolled 1200,000 students in school and we aim at increasing this figure. Also with the help of Akhuwat and Prime Minister's Loan Program, BISP has been able to grant 150,000 deserving families with soft loans. BISP is working on a right-based approach for poor and our ultimate objective is to lift these people out of poverty and restore a sustainable livelihood for them. For this I request everyone to help and support this cause, because without it we cannot prosper.

Dr. Zafar Iqbal Qadir, Director and Chairman Taleem Foundation, stressed on the role of education in alleviating poverty. He especially talked about the importance of tele-connectivity and emphasized how his organization is making a difference by promoting e-learning. He said that poverty is the lack of financial space to live a comfortable life. It is a complex paradigm, but by and large revolves around basic aspects of life that are education, health and clean drinking water. He emphasized the role of both the public and private sector in alleviating poverty. Government alone cannot deal with it. Private sector has its limitation in terms of lack of policy access and resources. Therefore, there is a need to combine the two – the government as a policy maker and regulator, and private sector should come up with initiatives. He talked about Akhuwat, Kawish, and Indus hospital which are just a few organizations that have played a role in alleviating poverty.

Since last decade or so, there has been an expansion in usage of information and communications technology (ICT). Social life is moving faster than ever before. We have been able to point out the vulnerabilities, with easy access and outreach through technology intervention. This outreach through ICT is also empowering poor men and women through the access to quality schooling, health intervention, skill training, employment generation are improving their living standards.

He further pointed out that tele-connectivity is a real game changer. Access to capital linked up with tele-connectivity has been a success. Taleem Foundation is an example where it made a difference through education in the poorest district of the country Kund in Balochistan. Through efforts in various districts of Balochistan, there were professional produced in last the 10 years which are equal to those created since the creation of Pakistan.

He emphasized that the real change came through vocational education, where schools are created to provide education through e-learning from Islamabad and Karachi. These schools are solar powered, tele-connected, and video linked. Students have given an amazing response. Overall results are phenomenal

In conclusion, he said that poverty refers to access to opportunities, if we have those then we will come out of poverty. Poverty is nothing but the negation of hope and happiness, therefore, threatening the very social fabric.

Dr. Rashid Bajwa, CEO National Rural Support Programme (NRSP), said that the government has finally moved away from just a calories based (2350 calories per day) poverty definition to service based definition of poverty whereby it has added access to health and education. Poverty level increased after this definition and stands around 29-30%. Another important aspect is that all poverty alleviation efforts have been government based. They have not been holistic but piecemeal. However, at least the government has come up with a prescription. He also asked whether poverty is at the district of provincial level? He said that poverty is at the household level.

Poverty levels talked about two key ingredients for poverty alleviation – targeting and access. Targeting is important because any subsidy that goes by the policy makers, if it is not targeted, it is misused. We are lucky to have NSCR because it can target each household. But the other more importance aspect is access i.e. How to reach these poor people. More important still is sustainable access. For example federal government started a health insurance programme and the biggest problem was to reach out to the people and give them health insurance cards. Access happens when you organize these communities. Mohalla level communities collate to village level communities these collate to the union council level. If these three level structure is organized then there can be access and talk of poverty alleviation.

He emphasized two strategies for alleviating poverty – access to finance and access to services like water, immunization, sanitation and education. There are 5 activities vis a vis access to finance, one is cash transfers through BISP, second is loans, another is providing productive assets transfer, and microfinance. These are short term measures. Long term strategy that the government is pursuing is giving skills training to the youth. He also underlined the need for population planning in Pakistan. Until and unless that is done there can be no poverty alleviation or overcoming the scourge of terrorism.

Dr. Abid Sulehri, Executive Director Sustainable Development Policy Institute, also talked about the poverty-security nexus. He said that while the government has revised its poverty figures, a lot more could have been done. Poverty figures are much worse than the official figures claim. He said that the poverty figures are closer to 45-46%. It is a welcome move that the government has revised the formula to define poverty. However, another issue he pointed out with poverty diagnosis is non-credible statistics as far as the Pakistani population is concerned. There are conflicting figures from different sources ranging from 130 million to 177 million for the year 2010-11. This again affects the poverty figures as well. He suggested taking multidimensional poverty average to assess the levels of poverty. He also talked about differing levels of poverty in different provinces which need to be kept in mind when planning for poverty alleviation.

Another issue, he pointed out, is the increasing income disparity in Pakistan. He said that the rich in Pakistan are getting richer and the poor poorer. Pakistan's per capita income is increasing for the past decade but poverty is increasing. When the isolated incidents of poverty they take on a collective identity – be it ethnic, sectarian or provincial, that basically erodes the basic fabric of society. This conflict between the haves and the have-nots is a direct threat to security. Talking about security, he identified four levels of security – individual, national, regional and global security. He said that all four levels of security are interlinked. It is the human security that gets neglected. He underlined the importance of human security which should be taken as a national security problem. We have 4 Ds in our budget – debt service, defence and security, day to day administration and development. Since the first three are essential and cannot be compromised, it is the development fund that gets slashed every year. We are not supporting human security or the individual security. Talking about the poverty-militancy nexus, he said that statistics show that the poorer districts with food security issues were the worst physical security districts as well. Also out of 20 food security districts, 18 were in Balochistan. Human security is, therefore, a national security problem, one that cannot be neglected.

He emphasized on the need to bring the 25 or so provincial and federal social safety nets which should be brought under one umbrella in order to coordinate and manage poverty alleviation efforts in an effective manner.

The presentations were followed by a roundtable discussion in which Ms. Tahira Abdullah said that we should move from poverty alleviation to poverty eradication, a commitment which was made in 1995 by the State of Pakistan at International level. She also emphasised that population census and other statistical indicators should be measured in continuity. She shared the contested poverty figures of Oxford Research Institute, which say that over 66% of the population in Pakistan is living under income of \$2 per day and majority of them are women. Moreover, she highlighted other troubled areas of bonded labor, discouraged youth and unemployment, increasing social sector budgets, compulsory and free education, homebased women workers and minimum wage, food security and others.

Ambassador of Myanmar at this occasion shared his opinion on how do poor countries graduate from the tag of Least Developed Countries (LDC). He said that child mortality, education, population, health, market integration, and price stability are key areas where we need to focus. He wished success to BISP for launching e-commerce.

Representing young voices, Ms. Areeba, an intern at ISSI, said that in her opinion there is an indirect link between poverty alleviation and national security. Focusing on terrorism, she emphasised the role of environment in which poor people find themselves as a key enabler for extremism. She emphasised the need for education and technology transfer to help poor graduate from poverty.

Mr. Ahmad Saffee (Research Fellow ISSI) reviewed four key policy documents with regards to poverty alleviation and national security and found commonalities in them, which he emphasised should be packaged and brand under one umbrella, geared towards nation and peace building process. Secondly, he emphasised the need to revive moral sciences in economics and poverty alleviation initiatives. He also made a recommendation of attaching the unconditional cash transfers of BISP with education, as it will improve Pakistan's position in multiple poverty index.

Ms. Shaheer Ellahi, Assistant Professor, Bahria University Islamabad, said that issues of ethnicity, class differentials, and caste system have divided the nation and these need to be addressed in a dignified manner. Representative from UN Women stressed gender equality and opportunities in poverty alleviation and she also highlighted how women are at the heart of de-radicalisation which is often ignored.

Dr. Aminah Hoti, Distinguished Fellow at ISSI, said that we need to think out-of-the-box solutions for tackling poverty, and in this regard education is a core area which needs effective implementation.

Ambassador Masood Khan in his concluding remarks said that Pakistan has to build upon positives and gather data for socio-economic indicators, which will serve as a compass in guiding our social protection and poverty eradication policy. He said that Pakistan should focus on poverty eradication, leaving nobody behind. He emphasised the significance of 80 million plus middle class which can serve as an engine of growth. Pakistan should brand a positive outlook of its economy. BISP is a success and now it needs to be up-scaled, under a comprehensive strategy for fighting poverty. Poverty alleviation has to be incentivized for the private sector, with corporate social entrepreneurship. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is a game changing opportunity for the people of Pakistan, creating jobs for millions and strengthening our local Small-Medium Enterprises (SMEs). He also emphasized that all prongs of national security should be strengthened: "Peace is not given to you as charity but you have to earn it."