

Government of Pakistan
Poverty Alleviation and Social Safety Division
Op-Ed

The Ehsaas Strategy

Dr. Sania Nishtar – Sep 17, 2020: The Ehsaas Strategy has been released today (pass.gov.pk/) to solicit public input, prior to its finalization. The strategy elaborates on the prime minister's vision of a welfare state.

This is the first time that a government document has gone to government officials and the public for review at the same time, introducing a culture of openness and transparency. Ehsaas is unique for three reasons. One, with currently 134 policies and programme elements, Ehsaas is the most ambitious umbrella initiative the Pakistan government has ever undertaken aimed at social protection and poverty alleviation.

Two, it takes a multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approach, recognizing the importance of the private sector, civil society and multisectoral across-government collaboration.

Three, Ehsaas is embedded in a theory of change, reflected in four pillars: action against elite capture; safety nets; livelihoods and jobs; and human capital formation with a focus on lagging areas.

Safety nets are the short-term priority within Ehsaas in view of the current fiscal austerity measures. To expand safety nets, the social protection budget has been increased and to promote integrity, the Ehsaas Governance and Integrity Policy has been prioritized. Work on the new national socioeconomic database has been fast-tracked to enable precise targeting. The soon-to-be-launched 'One-window Ehsaas' will address fragmentation. To promote policy coherence and coordination, the Poverty Alleviation and Social Safety Division 'the Ehsaas Ministry', was established, and the previously fragmented federal social protection agencies were placed under its administrative control. BISP's digital payment system is being revamped after a nine-year delay.

Under the new BISP programme, 'Kifalat', the 5.7 million BISP beneficiaries, which were previously receiving 'cash only' will now have access to bank accounts, mobile phones, financial literacy, digital hubs, labelled cash transfers, and graduation opportunities. The National Poverty Graduation initiative – comprising interest-free loans, asset transfers, and vocational training – and projected to impact 16.28 million individuals over four years has already been launched.

'Tahafuz' – Pakistan's first shock-oriented precision safety net, will be launched by December. Ehsaas also includes welfare policies for the differently-abled, the homeless, orphans, street children, seasonal migrants, transgender, victims of child and bonded labour, daily wage workers, substance abusers, workers abroad, informal labourers, and domestic workers.

Under Ehsaas, undergraduate scholarships are on the anvil in collaboration with the HEC. A new health and nutrition conditional cash transfer programme to address stunting is in the final stages of planning, and education conditional cash transfers are being upscaled for five million children.

Beyond social protection, Ehsaas recognizes that the determinants of poverty and inequality are complex – as are the measures to address it.

Global lessons show that massive poverty reduction is the result of overall robust and sustained economic growth, when combined with economic freedoms and the will of governments to counter organized vested interest and elite capture. In Pakistan, elite capture is the root cause of poverty and is evident in water management, crop choices, land use priorities, labour laws, the taxation system, cartelization trends and nepotism patterns.

The government's vision is driving change at various levels to address this. In its framework, Ehsaas has included objectives under Pillar I 'Address Elite Capture' to assist that overarching mission.

For too long, the levers of our system have been in the hands of a small group of elites. As an attempt to break that system, a constitutional amendment to move Article 38(d) from the 'Principles of Policy' section into the 'Fundamental Rights' section reflects the philosophical change within Ehsaas, while on a practical basis, Ehsaas stipulates pro-poor goals, and conflict-of-interest norms for every ministry; polices to protect resources for pro-poor initiatives; and guidelines for parliamentarians on use of development expenditure.

Ehsaas Pillar III is predicated on the understanding that human capital development is a significant contributor to the wealth of a nation in this digital age. Therefore, to catalyze action, provincial Ehsaas plans are being developed.

Ehsaas aims to create safety nets for at least ten million families, livelihood opportunities for 3.8 million people, and financial access to healthcare for ten million families. Scholarships/education incentives for five million students (50 percent girls); financial and digital inclusion for seven million individuals (90 percent women) and an enabling environment for poverty reduction by promoting multi-sectoral partnerships and innovations. These goals will be expanded based on new partnerships. A new policy and framework of commitments will allow the private sector and the civil society to make commitments.

The strategy document outlines the government's vision, or Ehsaas' bedrock; the principles which drive it; the context which has shaped it; the Theory of Change, which underpins its conceptualization; and the four pillars under which its goals, policies, and programmes are organized. The strategy also outlines the manner in which 21st century approaches can be used to build a welfare state – data and technology for precision safety nets; financial and digital inclusion; human capital formation; women's economic empowerment; value chain building for agriculture and crafts; Solutions Innovation Challenges to develop solutions for poverty;

measures to address malnutrition, and multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approaches for solutions at scale.

Ehsaas' premise is grounded in the importance of strengthening institutions, transparency and good governance. We realize that the limited capacity of public institutions, and governance challenges often impedes their ability to deliver. Therefore, Ehsaas is also planned with the ambition to fight through all such challenges – in that respect, implementation of the Ehsaas Governance and Integrity Policy assumes great importance.

To be fully successful, Ehsaas will need to effectively use all government levers to drive change in one direction. I strongly believe it is possible to achieve that with a constructive approach to collaboration.

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