

## **Socio-Economic Challenges of COVID-19 and its Repercussions for Pakistan**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper highlights the socio-economic challenges of COVID-19 that is putting threat not only on the individuals but also all of the institutions of the state and especially for the Government. Pakistani's survival is at risk as in the country's social and economic fabric were effecting significantly by COVID-19. Initially, Government of Pakistan has announced a fiscal incentive package of 1.2 trillion as part of its immediate response to this pandemic but financial uncertainty, fear of job loss, food insecurity, and vaccine scarcity are some major challenges that mounting the fear among individuals of the state. In a try to comprehend the havoc effect on the socio-economic fabrics, we summarize the effect of COVID-19 on individual aspects of the economy by focusing on society, individual liberties, education, economy, and medication. It is analyzed that COVID-19 has compromised every aspects of human life and yet there danger is there to overcome. The study proposes that the short-, medium-, and long-term policies are required to revitalize the socio-economic challenges and uplift the human development.

**Key Words:** COVID-19, Socio-Economic Challenges, Unemployment, Pandemic, Economy

### **Introduction**

First case of COVID-19 was reported on December 2019 at a capital city of central Hubei Province of People Republic of China, Wuhan. A large numbers of vendors and dealers from Huanan seafood wholesale market got affected first from pneumonia of unknown etiology and then a series of cases were in all around Wuhan city. It was the start of January 2020 when China announced that this outbreak is caused by a novel – belongs to the coronavirus family and was named as the novel coronavirus pneumonia and was termed as 2019-nCov by the Chinese researchers. (Zhu, 2020) Chinese authorities along with the World Health Organization (WHO) started working on it. China announced its first death of 61-year old man by COVID-19 – he was working in the seafood market. WHO declared a medical emergency on January 30, 2020 and high alerted the authorities to manage cross-border movements. Meanwhile, on 11th February, WHO named new coronavirus disease: COVID-19 (WHO, 2020) and start asserting the governments to take measures to control this disease like travel ban across the

borders. The disease was declared pandemic by WHO in March 2020 as by the time the virus was spread over 114 countries.

In Pakistan, first case of COVID-19 noticed by Federal Ministry of Health confirmed on February 26, 2020 in Karachi and on the same day, another case confirmed in Islamabad. Province Sindh was the pivot points as the highest number were reported there that reach to 20 within 15 days only. (NCOC, 2020) Pakistan was highly susceptible to the pandemic due to sharing of economic, religious, and geographic boundaries with two early hard-hit countries, Iran and China. While discussion Iran, the main transportation was due to pilgrims who were at visit of holy places - as the corona crisis emerged there, thousands of them came back to Pakistan making it an emergency at borders.

Significantly, lockdown measurements and restrictions were imposed by the Government of Pakistan, however, impact of financial and economic instability suffered millions of poor families, hence, the federal government took action to ease lockdown limitations at the start of May 2020 demanding that the virus spread has been well below projections. The decision was brought forward to establish equilibrium between lives and livelihoods in the month of Ramadan. Massive crowds were observed in markets for Eid festivities preparation despite recording its maximum daily infection toll (Ali, Ahmed, & Hassan, 2020).

The second highest wave was observed in March 2021, when cases limit has been reached in thousands across the country and there was not a single part of the country that wasn't affected by COVID-19 (NCOC, 2020) (Gov.Pk, 2021). Government followed the same restriction carried out last year and hence lockdown strategy worked actively.

## **Methodology**

The qualitative research design with content analysis of available information, exploratory cum analytical method of research is applied to the study. Secondary data is analyzed obtained from available literature of research papers, news articles, news, and national and international institution's reports.

## **Research Objectives**

This research is designed to gain the following objectives:

- I. How has COVID-19 effect the socio-economic development of Pakistan?
- II. What are the major challenges faced by Pakistan during the outbreak of COVID-19?
- III. How the socio-economic structures of Pakistan disturb to fight against COVID-19?
- IV. What repercussions are still valid for Pakistan in term of COVID-19?

## **Literature Review**

COVID-19 outbreak affected every sphere of life, starting from economic activities to individual liberties – it is the most consistent threat. This pandemic time has destabilized about 210 nations across the globe with more than 67 million confirmed cases and over 1.5 million deaths (Rasheed, Rizwan, Javed, Sharif, & Zaidi, 2021). Not only human activities were disturbed but world economy suffered an obvious decline. This pandemic brought the world largest economy shock as global output has been dropped to 3.5% in 2020 as per IMF valuation. Covid-19 proved destruction of the economic status of the developed and underdeveloped countries. Various studies mentioned 8-87% drop in the salaries due to COVID-19 in developing states. Approximately, 255 million jobs were lost in 2020 and this loss was even more higher in Latin America and the Caribbean, Southern Europe and Southern Asia. (Josephson, Kilic, & Michler, 2021) (Egger, 2021). Worst economic collapse was observed in Latin America and the Caribbean in the region's history with the economy falling by 6.7 percent in 2020 and predictable progress by 4.4 percent in 2021. 28 million people could drive into poverty due to economic downturn and unemployment is expected to reach 13.5 percent. For the first time in 60-year history, East Asia's economic growth stalled – growing by a mere 1.2 percent in 2020 (Lee, 2021).

Marup Marup and Md Amzad Hossain explained the COVID-19 effects over Nigerian economy – an under-developed country in Africa. They analyzed the unemployment ratio abruptly increased after the pandemic hit the country and about 80% of household faced income loss at some level (Khamis, Prinz, Newhouse, Palacios-Lopez, Pape, & Weber, 2021) (Hossain & Hossain, 2021). Nano Prawoto and others explained the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on socio-economic mobility in Indonesia. It is analyzed that pandemic caused the decrease in socio-economic activities and reduced the community income at large. (Prawoto, Purnomo, & Az Zahra, 2020)

Ghulam Rasol and others took a charge to describe the COVID-19 impact on the Socio-Economic Implications in South Asia. Studies concluded that there is a threat for the economic growth, upsurge fiscal deficit and monetary burden, increase the risks of macroeconomic instability, decrease migration and remittance, reduce income from tourism, and result in dwindling micro-small and medium industries and informal businesses. That would expand poverty and intensify unemployment and the risks of famine and food insecurity (Rasul, et al., 2021).

Amjad Ali, Mumtaz Ahmed and Nazia Hassan came up with a research based on the data collected from the rural mountain community of Gilgit-Baltistan to study the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 on Pakistani community. The result drawn from these investigations showed a significant socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on rural community. COVID -19 has caused a lot of damage resulting financial uncertainty, decrease in income, fear of job loss, and food

insecurity (Ali, Ahmed, & Hassan, 2020). Another research conducted by Mohsin Shafi and others explained the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in Pakistan. The result showed severe damage to the enterprises in terms of financial, supply chain disruption, decrease in demand, reduction in sales and profit, among others (Shafi, Liu, & Ren, 2020).

United National Development Program (UNDP, 2020) has assessed the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 on Pakistan via its report “Socio-Economic Impact, Assessment and Response: Plan for COVID-19 Pakistan”. It is estimated that the pandemic has effect the social and economic fabrics of Pakistan – a framework designed in order to uplift the socio-economic development. It is suggested how Pakistan can work in order to implement new economic priorities, secure jobs and economic activity, guarantee food security, and meet the social and health needs of vulnerable groups in a cohesive, collaborative manner. Here in this study we attempt to indicate the socio-economic challenges for Pakistan, especially in term of society, economy, education and health. The main idea to cover these segments is that they faced impact at first among the rest of state’s sectors.

### **COVID-19 and Society**

A very common statement that has been heard lately every then and now is “The COVID pandemic has changed the world”. The question lies here, how and in what way has it indeed changed the world? And is it false to say if this change is temporary? World, which was not ready to face a largely struck pandemic is going to sustain or maintain the common new of COVID world.

Like any other disease of the past, COVID has also met with both social and political stigmas. Anything close contact with stigma is troubling to provide facilitation to curb a pandemic or endemic. COVID, in both traditional and modern societies, has raised controversies and conspiracies about its dawn and inception (Coninck, et al., 2021). Its genesis is being checked through various logical, spiritual, moral, historical, and political tests.

The debates of the North and South gap have always been different but somehow COVID has united these debates as well. There are few questions raised to authenticate COVID as a disease or even a pandemic:

- What is COVID-19? Is it really a virus?
- How a small and unseen virus can create such a huge disturbance?
- Who created it?
- Did USA or China create it or Russia or Israel or the EU?
- Are there any stakes involved for the MNCs with the new pandemic?
- How it will end?
- Why people have to wear a mask?
- COVID is a curse descended from sky?
- Why millions of people are not dying every day as in past?
- It is a manmade disease to win over rivals.

- It is originated by a billionaire and especially by Bill Gates.

Followed by these questions and many more have started to divide society in left and right politics, liberal and conservative, traditional and philosophical, religious, and scientific, pro-government and anti-government. Election campaigns have been launched, run, and fought over these questions and the political distribution of society. The very recent American presidential elections comprised mainly on COVID politics. How the Trump administration responded to COVID warnings and then soaring threat definitely made him lose (Baccini, Brodeur, & Weymouth, 2021).

The same phenomena have been absorbed in Pakistani society where different segments have different opinion regarding the authenticity of COVID-19 – it was believed earlier that it is happened due to *haram* food habit; later it is a Jews conspiracy when it hit the Muslim world, accordingly it is an American conspiracy and they are importing dead bodies of COVID-19 patients and at last they are injecting some sort of chip that will monitor the individual activities. It is a quite common perception among ordinary masses that there is no such virus at all and if there is a disease – it is like an advance form of influenza. Even people used to say that there is no such causality from COVID-19; Government is showing dead-trolls only to seek more international funds.

Such perceptions and self-claimed news has changed the social fabric of the society. People were divided over these perceptions and even it was a quite normal to hide the COVID patients in order to restrict the social pressure. Every sect of the society that has been polarized already were divided over pandemic occurrence and its relativity.

### **COVID-19 and Religion**

Loyal followers react the way, their leader wants them to – it is more impactful when religious feelings are dissolved like salt in the ocean. People will be more drawn to the use of religion than the actual threat or hazard like an infectious disease like COVID-19. In the very beginning of Coronavirus, when it was only limited to the Wuhan, Hubei province of China, Americans did not think for an inch that it could cost thousands of American lives. Most of the conservative and politically Republican voters were betrayed by their evangelist Church preachers and local representatives stated the novel coronavirus a conspiracy of China and Russia. For so many Republicans including the leadership in the Whitehouse, novel coronavirus was called a seasonal flu. Religion and science were conflicted against each other in a country like USA whose establishment and regimes had has accused other nations of fundamentalism and ignorance. So many conservative Americans perpetuated by the Church did not recognize Coronavirus a threat due to their faith (J. Wildman, Bulbulia, Sosis, & Schjoedt, 2020). Despite the fact that CDA and WHO had issued guidelines to avoid spread of the virus, social distancing was not observed while Sunday Church events kept happening and both pastors and worshippers did not bother the virus at all. Not only religious events

were being held, partying and clubbing was also taken place normally just like Italy, which did not take serious measures in the start and took the virus lightly in an unfortunate moment of time (Molteni, et al., 2021).

On the other hand, in many Muslim countries closing of Holy sites Mecca and Medina by Saudi government in beginning of COVID crisis, their step to halt worship was massively criticized by the Muslim world especially at society level. On the other hand, prayer gatherings were also being halt to curb COVID spread by the governments. These precautionary measures were seen as a conspiracy against the Muslim faith and arrival if the anti-Christ. For so many Muslim scholars, COVID was more a curse and turmoil due to women empowerment and democratic values in the world.

The *Tablighi Jamaat* gathering in Pakistan and India were supposedly held in the first and third weeks of March. *Tablighi Jamaat* members and religious scholars had threatened the government in Pakistan that nothing could prevent them from the event, whereas it took so hard on government to ask of Jamaat organizers to postpone the event. Whereas *Tablighi Jamaat's* event was about to begin in India when the government enforced the shutdown on 24th of March, one day after Pakistan. A huge number of COVID positive cases emerged from the Jamaat members. This added fuel to the fire in perpetuating hate and violence against Muslim communities in India. Indians called COVID a planned activity of Indian Muslims. To mention, those positive cases were mostly foreigner Jamaat members.

Not only had that, but religious pilgrims from Pakistan also been to Iran which was second epicenter of the virus in Asia. Iranian had the same response to the virus which Republicans in USA had with spiritual longings. A great mass of COVID positive unchecked patients entered Pakistan from Iran; on the other hand, Jamaat whose participants come from different parts of the world in time of budding pandemic also caused its spread. Shutdown, halt of prayers and worship in worship places was taken as challenge by the religious institutions against the government (Janjua, 2020).

It was very hard for government to control these sentiments while putting restrictions over gathering in the mosques. Religious activities during *Ramadan* and *Muharram* months were continued despite government restrictions. Sectarian rift were also identify where every sect were considering government a favorite for other's sect over the conducting of religious activity without any restrictions. *Sunni* clerics were critique upon the successful happening of religious events in the month of *Muharram* while *Shia* clerics were considering government an ally of *Sunni* sect over the successful conduct of *Ijtama* by *Tabliagi Jamaat*. These rifts create socio-religious challenges for government and it was very hard to counter these sentiments where a large junk of the society is the ultimate follower of such thoughts.

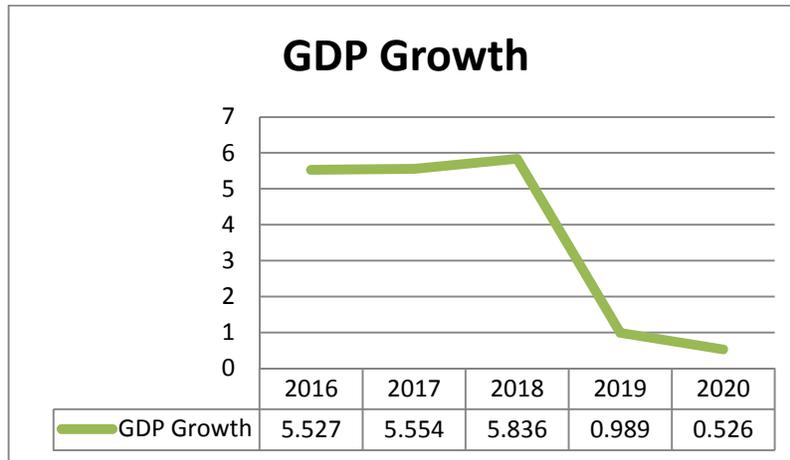
## **COVID-19 and Economy**

Governments all over the world started to enforce lockdown and asked the citizens to quarantine in their homes. Almost every state had lockdown enforced in the last two weeks of the March in the following year of 2020. When the world was shut down, people were forced by the states to quarantine inside homes, stuck to work from homes and other big number of people lost their jobs due to the shutdown of businesses (Josephson, Kilic, & Michler, 2021). Only those businesses were opened which fell under essentials by the governments. COVID outbreak closed the economy; the other major victims of COVID-19 were micro, small and medium sized enterprises MSMEs and fresh businesses around the globe (Shafi, Liu, & Ren, 2020). To be accurate, the underprivileged and people living under poverty line were more prone to the economic and health milieu of coronavirus, who no more had access to work (mostly daily wagers), unable to isolate (one roof homes) among large families where more than one family lives together. Destitute population which is by-product of failed governmental policies over the period of decades stirred by corruption, political instability, radicalization, and financial mishaps and social decadence.

It is estimated that per day around 12,000 people are at the risk of dying of hunger due to the situation created with COVID and respective crises, Yemen being the hotspot of it (oxform, 2020). Millions of people globally are struggling with their hanging jobs, under broken and questionable food systems, inequality, and pernicious domestic designs. 8.6 million Americans lost jobs during great recession while 12.6 million Americans have lost their jobs since mid-March with lockdown.

A recent report of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) estimated that Pakistan would be hardest-hit by the global pandemic of COVID-19 (UNCTAD, 2020). Loss of 3 million jobs was also feared in Pakistan according to the Finance ministry in July 2020. Every sector of Pakistan economy from agriculture to service and from manufacturing to production was affected badly from COVID pandemic and it damages the overall economic growth at large.

Figure 1: Pakistan's Real GDP Growth from last five years.



Source: <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/pakistan/real-gdp-growth>

As the pandemic hit the country, GDP fell abruptly in 2019 from 5 percent to 1 percent approximately and it even worsened the situation in 2020. Country economy was already facing low tax to GDP ratio, weak savings rate and nominal export growth, raised public debt and depleted international reserves and hence COVID pandemic proved an a nightmare for Pakistan and further disturbed the ongoing a unsustainable growth rate (Pakistan Economic Survey, 2020). COVID-19 has invited the economic slowdown, growing inflation, low rate of job opportunities and resultantly its impact on the lowest earning groups of the society. Daily wagers and small businessmen including street vendors and small manufactures were the first that affect largely by severed lockdown restrictions.

The economy of Pakistan composed of three main sectors – agriculture, industry and services. Pandemic has imbalanced both of the fast growing sector of Pakistan's economy; industrial and service sector. According to Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, considerable affect has been observed in the production sector, particularly Large-Scale manufacturing and Small-Scale Manufacturing. Industrial sector contributed -2.64 decline in the provincial growth mainly due to a negative progress of 8.82 percent in mining and quarrying sector and decline of 7.78 percent in large-scale production sector. Same is the situation prevailed in service sector where a significant decline were analyzed at 0.59 percent mainly due to 3.42 percent decline in wholesale and retail trade sector and 7.13 percent decline in transport and communication sectors due to lockdown and shutdown of business opportunities throughout the country.

Government only allowed essential jobs during the lockdown which included food business, grocery stores, pharmacies and their factories which makes to a long chain of business. Essential workers were also being fired by big corporate

franchises to stay low on staff and prevent contracting the virus. These essential workers were paid less, who was working at times when the rest of the world was guaranteeing inside their homes. These outcomes brought the uncertain socio-economic problems for the individuals and ultimately disturbed the country overall situation at large.

### **COVID-19 and Unemployment**

Unemployment was another biggest challenge happened to Pakistan during this pandemic. Throughout the first lockdown time, unemployment rate has risen to 34.1% whereas the percentage of incomes of employed citizens decreased by 42%. According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistic survey, citizens involved in non-farm activities suffer more loss as compared to those who were employed on farm activities (Pakistan Economic Survey, 2020). Citizens involved in nonfarm activities in urban areas and rural areas suffered loss of different magnitude. The unemployment rate increased by 42% in urban areas and 38% in the rural non-farm economy – whereas unemployment rose by 4% and income declined by 6.5% for respondents engaged in farm employment.

Almost all fields of employment have been affected due to the pandemic, but labor sector have been hit hardest by COVID-19. Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) surveys the unemployment generated by COVID-19, deduced from Labor Force Survey 2017-18, labor market has suffered maximum job loss. PIDE projected higher job losses in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa than Sindh and Baluchistan. According to “Special Survey for Evaluating Socioeconomic Impact of COVID-19 on Wellbeing of People” 13% shrinkage of labor market is reported in April-June 2020 in which 20 million people lost their jobs (Dr. Nasir Iqbal, Dr. Nadeem ul Haque, & Dr. Durr-e-Nayab, 2020).

Around 3 million people of the state were unable to recover their jobs after ¾th end of the first wave of lockdown and average earning remain 5.5% below in pre-lockdown levels in November 2020. However period of relief after the first wave resulted in robust retrieval for citizens, though the recovery was incomplete.

### **COVID-19 and Domestic Violence**

Domestic violence surged during COVID lockdown when the victims were home trapped with their abusers 24/7, day and night. Women and children are more vulnerable to direct physical abuse and verbal torture. The wave caused so many ripples with reported cases across the globe. United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres (United Nations, 2020) warned of a horrifying storm of domestic violence all over the world with COVID lockdown. Domestic violence did not erupt in one night; rather it was already there way before the health pandemic of coronavirus. Lockdown also restricted women and children's mobility within the homes as men always stayed in who were perpetrators of violence. With personal

movements hampered, concerns were raised, and consequences were discerned over intimate partner violence (IPV). The social distancing and stay at home guidelines proved to be lethal for women and children.

In Punjab, only in the months of March to May, there had been 25% increase in reports of domestic violence cases making up to 3,217 cases only in Eastern region of Punjab. The previous case studies of domestic violence in Pakistan are the extreme kind of physical violence (Warraich, 2020). It does not count slapping, hitting, striking with objects or verbal abuse, however, those cases register which end up to hospitals or, until the victim speaks up. Women are financially dependent; possess no property in their names and not to live alone with number of shames attached to their decisions. These reasons hinder the victim to report the violence on so many levels, either domestic or sexual. The scales of socialization among women are so poor and are socialized vulnerably to know their rights or name their violence as violence.

### **COVID-19 and Vaccine**

Vaccination and drugs have changed the fate of humanity. There was a time when thousands of people used to die with the unidentified and unrecognized diseases. Vaccination has brought higher life expectancy, at the same time, it becomes scandalous. For a large number of people, vaccination causes many other diseases. In the West, there are anti-vaccers whose beliefs lies in the fact that any kind of vaccination causes autism in children, while at the same time, in Muslim countries, there is a big misconception that vaccines like polio cause infertility among children. The long-lasting campaign against polio vaccination in Pakistan is so deep-rooted that this virus has been eliminated from all over the world except Pakistan, Afghanistan and, Somalia where terrorism, radicalization, and political instability exist.

A large number of populations believe that Covid-19 was a product of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which want to control the world and humanity. Other people have this belief that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation intend to lessen the population of the world and Covid-19 was its step to do it. Another common perception build soon after the vaccination started is that every individual who got vaccinated will die after two years and some told it will ultimately decrease the world population.

To curb such perceptions and urge masses to get vaccination was the hardest part at government ends. Such socio-cultural issues affect the ultimate drive against COVID pandemic. Religious clerics and community leaders were also not much favorable or supportive in order to generate a sound public opinion for the COVID vaccine.

## **Conclusion**

In one year of Covid-19 emergence, 1.62 million people all over the world lost their lives, 72.8 million people contracted the virus. A large number of people could not see off their loved ones before dying or they had to face time/video call their family members.

Coronavirus outbreak had proved the world that it needed to prepare for the worst times to come. It reflected that countries had more guns and bullets than face masks, more fighter planes than ventilators and more uniforms than protective dresses. Nurses and paramedics in Pakistan faced crisis of lack of PPE for their protection. Doctors and nurses were being exposed to the virus while treating the patients without face masks and gloves, basic PPE. Thousands of doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals have lost their lives to COVID by contracting the virus directly from their patients.

An important lesson from the first wave is that there are large livelihood costs associated with even short duration lockdowns in low-income economies like Pakistan. Another lesson is that the economic shock associated with pandemics like COVID-19 requires the institutionalization of emergency social assistance with much broader coverage that includes the lower-middle and middle classes. The incomplete nature of the recovery suggests that a component of emergency social assistance needs to be designed to protect jobs during lockdowns, rather than being disbursed in the form of handouts for employers and citizens that are not tied to jobs.

Social-cultural norms and religious immaturity led the way towards the increase in COVID-19 cases. Social stigmas and orthodox approaches and insensitivity towards a contagious and life-threatening disease have done no good rather hurting and harming hundreds of thousands people by not following the SOP. Country like Pakistan with scarcity of equipment, PPE and cases blast fell more to this tumultuous virus. Graveyards were full while dead bodies started to decompose on the streets as nobody was willing to go near. These circumstances reflect on human dilemma and the question of civil liberties related to wearing facemasks or social distancing are malicious and egotistic.

COVID outbreak seems to unfold tidy sheets from the rusty beds. The wave of domestic violence with stay home orders has proved the levels of domestic and sexual violence that had been so prevalent and untouched in society at the same time. The number of sexual assaults has also been reported throughout the Pakistan during Coronavirus shutdown reflecting upon deep-rooted chaos present against women in our society.

While answering the unemployment issue and in order to maintain economic balance, government institutionalize the *Ehsaas Emergency Cash Transfer Program* as early as April 2020 and committed to providing social assistance to 15 million families. According to Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, loss of income effected most households across all asset quintiles. While government aid

disproportionately targeted asset-poor households - in line with policy - the coverage of social assistance was insufficient to insure a sizable part of households against loss of income.

These above mentioned socio-economic challenges were emerged during the COVID pandemic and it highlights the weakness of our society that exposed itself on every level. Government introduced short and long term policies that really help to control the pandemic situation and allow individuals to participate at large in order to achieve the socio-economic development.

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