Frameworks for a developmental welfare state: Lessons from Pakistan’s Ehsaas Programme

Executive Summary

This report is based on a review of the ambitious reforms made under the Ehsaas umbrella by the Government of Pakistan to its overall approach to anti-poverty programmes from 2018 onwards. In reviewing leading examples of anti-poverty programmes from across the world, it highlights the important and innovative lessons that Ehsaas provides for global policymakers on designing the right anti-poverty programmes and successfully implementing them.

Ultimately, Ehsaas has set itself apart as a unique and world-leading anti-poverty effort. In its goal of becoming a holistic and integrated response to poverty, it has launched several different programmes which tackle the multi-dimensional nature and manifestations of poverty. Moving beyond the unconditional cash payments that the Government of Pakistan initially started over ten years ago, it now includes a variety of innovative programmes that are building a broad safety net in line with the then Government’s goal of developing a ‘welfare state’. These programmes range from education-based conditional cash transfers, to nutrition-based cash transfers, asset transfers, soup kitchens, and targeted subsidies.

These new programmes have been reinforced by a systematic culture of evidence-based decision-making which has helped to steadily and continuously evolve the implementation of these efforts over time. In particular, this is underscored by the introduction of a new Division which oversees all anti-poverty programmes and has worked to reform the overall approach to delivery - the Poverty Alleviation and Social Safety (PASS) Division.

The report details the efforts of the leadership team of this new Division and how it has built in strong governance mechanisms, effective evaluation and monitoring systems, and a scientific approach to data and project management. Examples of the reformed implementation of these measures’ ranges from the introduction of biometric devices on disbursement points to ensure that the cash is going to the right people, to strong audit and board mechanisms, or the development of strong data proxies to pinpoint household vulnerabilities for the COVID-19 emergency cash response.

Through these efforts, Ehsaas has been incredibly successful in reaching its intended beneficiaries, increasing efficiency, and scaling its programmes, which is particularly notable given the challenging environment of Pakistan. This systemic approach to problem-solving in a country of 220 million people has allowed Ehsaas to develop a unique set of responses and implementation features which take into account the lived experience of beneficiaries and the overall anti-poverty landscape.
Altogether, the Ehsaas programmes presents a timely and potent example for how countries around the world can fight poverty in the most difficult of circumstances, in a time when a range of environmental, health, economic, and other challenges threaten to bring more people into poverty.