



**Report on Dialogue Series  
by The Knowledge Forum  
A webinar on Humanitarian Assistance in  
Covid-19 Lockdown – Insights from the  
Ground**

## **A webinar on Humanitarian Assistance in Covid-19 Lockdown – Insights from the Ground**

**Date:** 05 January 2021

**Time:** 4pm - 5:30pm

**Panelists:** Sabiha Shah, Jan Odhano, Naghma Iqtedar, Adeel Ahsan, Ghulam Mustafa Zaor, Kazim Ali Shah

**Platform:** Zoom and facebook live stream

**Webinar #:** 01

### **Background:**

The Knowledge Forum organized a webinar titled ‘Humanitarian Assistance in Covid-19 Lockdown – Insights from the Ground’ on 5<sup>th</sup> January 2021. The aim of this webinar was to seek insights and expert opinion about the humanitarian assistance and relief efforts initiated during the Covid-19 lockdown in Pakistan.

The Knowledge Forum (TKF) is an independent collective that seeks to produce knowledge-based resources to assist in interventions and advocacy for communities’ rights. The initiative is driven by the view that knowledge strengthens the root and guides the direction of actions aimed at advancing rights and social justice processes.

TKF offers expertise in areas of human rights and development. The knowledge generation is driven by the community agenda, prioritizing the inclusion of their voice and participation. Through high quality research and discourse curation, TKF aims to assist in the creation of a more informed perspective on complex themes that have a bearing on the communities’ access to rights and participation in political, democratic and development processes.

TKF has been founded by a group of researchers, human rights practitioners, development professionals, activists and legal experts.

The COVID-19 lockdown and restrictions imposed by the Government of Pakistan in March 2020 severely affected the livelihoods of millions of citizens. Being an informal labor-dominated market, and a severely compromised social protection system, the unprecedented health emergency threatened pushing millions of families at a point where food, medicines and supply of daily essentials became inaccessible. Apart from local philanthropy, the Government of Pakistan's Ehsaas Programme rolled out a system of bare minimum support till the lockdown was lifted in May 2020, and the population was forced to return to the market in an environment of extreme epidemic risk.

While the relief efforts lasted for a few months, the population still grapples with slower markets and the risk of Covid resurgence. The vulnerabilities facing the communities, particularly daily wage earners and informal workers, remain acute.

In order to enhance the understanding of the complex demands of the vulnerable segments of the society, it is important to exchange notes with stakeholders that had the opportunity to provide relief services to the communities at the time of the Covid-19 induced lockdown. Various community groups, civil society organizations, philanthropists and individuals have played a pivotal role in providing humanitarian assistance to the affected individuals, particularly through food and ration distribution. Their forums and assistance were also used by the government to reach out to the community for relief efforts and for data gathering.

Keeping in view the above mentioned circumstances, the Knowledge Forum organized a webinar to discuss experiences of the COVID-19 relief efforts in Pakistan. The panelists were experts and members of the civil society and the community that actively contributed to the COVID-19 relief efforts and closely engaged the community in a challenging period.

## **Key highlights**

The purpose of this webinar was to highlight the complexities of the community's vulnerabilities and the challenges associated with relief efforts at the grassroots. In

addition to these insights from the ground, other key components were also discussed including stakeholder management, charity efforts, integrated databases for such relief initiatives, duplication of efforts, role of individuals and civil society organization, conflicts and collaborations that have emerged during the process. This dialogue also aimed to highlight possible areas of improvement in service delivery across the underserved communities in Pakistan.

## **Proceedings**

The session began with a welcome note by the Aazia Rafiq, Director - TKF and other members of TKF team. The panelists were introduced to the audience. The expert panelists were Sabiha Shah, Jan Odhano, Naghma Iqtedar, Adeel Ahsan, Ghulam Mustafa Zaor, Kazim Ali Shah.

Rabia Mushtaq, Lead Consultant – TKF moderated the session and shared questions with the panelists.

Sabiha Shah of Women Development Forum shared her experience as a relief worker and highlighted the importance of understanding the pandemic, community sensitization and appropriate response mechanism during pandemic situation. She raised awareness in Lyari and nearby communities and sought support from the Town Health Officer, Lyari. For awareness purpose, a rally was organized in the community which well attended by the community members, youth, Polio workers and others. Various social action projects featuring mask distribution and health and hygiene protocols were also organized. These campaigns were conducted both online and group based following the Standard Operating Procedures. In addition to this, Micro entrepreneurship programs and online mentoring sessions were also conducted to engage the community and provide pathways for alternative source of income.

One of the major support to the vulnerable communities were Ration distribution. Over 1000 beneficiaries were supported from the area of Mawach Goth, Faquri colony, Mangho Pir and nearby areas. The beneficiaries were mostly laborers, daily wage earners, specially abled, women, home based workers and senior citizens. She shared the difficulties faced by these groups due to poverty and lack of access to income opportunities and market due to lockdown.

Sabiha Shah appreciated the supported provided by the local institutions, Banks, local and international donors and including Meezan bank, JICA and other organizations and local Philanthropists. She also stressed on the need for more concrete efforts with a sustainable approach for the marginalized communities. Such relief efforts are

important but are for limited time and there is a need to work on strengthening the marginalized communities through income generation opportunities.

Another expert panelist, Ghulam Mustafa from HANDS shared his experience in relation to Government's support. He shared the challenges of the health sector. He actively engaged relevant partners for rapid assessment of health sector along with the representatives of Sindh Government and rangers. He shared the management approach of in-kind support and related dynamics.

While sharing his observation, Ghulam Mustafa also explained that it seemed that the marginalized community from urban areas were more affected as compared to the rural areas.

Decline in purchasing power was a major issue. The communities he worked for included urban slums, marginalized groups, sanitary workers, prisoners from Karachi and Sukkur, Darul Aman, vulnerable women, person with disabilities, transgender and minority groups. While discussing religious bias, he shared that people do discriminate on religious basis. Donors and organization sometimes also discriminate on religious basis.

Jan Odhano from Community Development Foundation shared his experience of identifying and establishing 7 isolation centers. The beneficiaries were identified through a criteria and were given ration supply. This initiative was a district level coordination and engaged various volunteers. He shared the process of data management at district level and the importance of data collection for such efforts to ensure fair and transparent support and avoid duplication.

Jan Odhano appreciated the support from local philanthropists, faith based communities and other citizens. He observed that people prefer to support their own community and religious groups. There was no criteria to reach out hard to reach and extremely vulnerable beneficiaries.

Renowned Human Rights Activist, Naghma shared that the citizens were unable to comprehend the situation and responded differently as per their own capacity. Unfortunately, in Pakistan, there is no database for daily wages earner being effected by pandemic. It is a known fact that they suffered heavy losses. These marginalized communities were more worried about hunger as compared to Covid – 19. Relief support was provided in the form of ration by Edhi Foundation and few other

organizations particularly in the areas of Quaidabad, Orangi Town, Korangi, Lyari, Pahar Ganjh and nearby vicinity.

Naghma also shared issues faced by refugees during Covid-19. There are many refugees in Karachi including Afghani, Burmese and Bangali. They do not have National Identity Card and were not able to seek support from the Government's Ehsaas program at all.

Sindh Government was proactive and action oriented to lead Covid emergency efforts. Although, there were efforts to avoid duplication, there were still few discrepancies.

Another problem identified was lack of access to online facilities for ration distribution. To facilitate ration distribution, the beneficiaries were connected to the local kiriyana store / general store. They were paid to supply rations to the beneficiaries. This system helped to avoid duplication of efforts.

Adeel Ahsan from Muslim Hands shared his experience and relief efforts by Muslim HANDS. Worked with NDMA and PDMA and supported over 2.1 million beneficiaries. Support was in given on the form of awareness, Ration and sanitization kits and hand washing practices were also encouraged.

Kazim Ali Shah from Research and Development Foundation shared his experience about relief efforts and supporting communities in over 8 districts before, during and after the lockdown. 50 youth were trained by the Liaquat University. Over 1000 sessions conducted before the lockdown. Due to SOPs constraints, only 5 staff members were working on the ground. Line department, police officials also supported for this cause. He appreciated the District level coordination including Jamshoro and Mirpurkhas. Hand washing counters at were set up by volunteers and youth at the Ehsaas counters. Moreover, community members and youth were also trained for preparing sanitizers at home.

While sharing feedback, the panelists concluded upon the need for improved mechanism. They also shared few recommendations which includes:

- Control the spread of fake news and myths about Covid and other diseases
- Although the Government have established protocols, there is a dire need for strict implementation of SOPs. There is a need to follow protocols. State is responsible to share the correct information.
- Mental health is pivotal. Awareness programs should be organized on mental health and suicide prevention.
- Sustainability of nation and sustainability of relief efforts is a key concern
- Informal labors were effected the most. There are laws but needs to be implemented. The Government is registering all informal labors.

- Employees' rights and benefits should be given. They should be formally part of the system.
- Strong social safety net, social support system. Strong administration and coordination is required.
- Mechanisms and laws are there but there is no implementation. We have a reactive approach rather than a permanent proactive approach. We need to strengthen mechanism and implement.