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Poverty Measurement, Governance and Development: A Comparative Evaluation of National Poverty Framework in South Asia

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Abstract:
Here in this paper, we examine that how the approach of south asian countries has changed for measuring and addressing poverty, as they moved from their traditional single dimensional poverty lines to more flexible and subnational Multidimensional Poverty Indices (MPI). The main focus of these lines now is how Alkire-Foster method is applied in India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh. How to identify individual's need, how the allotment of resources takes place at the state level and how they manage the implementation process locally, are the main extents of this study. The main question asked here is how does government's methods of collection of data, and procedures of administrative practices led to helping the ones who generally are priviledged, and doesn't seek help instead of the truly impoverished? As we further study this paper, we see that the results will clearly show that the new multidimensional measurements are more appropriate and effective in finding the complicated and overlapping challenges faced by people than the old traditional methods. However, because the government department fails to coordinate, rely on the outdated data and lack the shared system the challenges remains even after the improvements. And as a result, they end up distributing the support to the wrong individuals while overlooking those who genuinely require it.
Pakistan's National Socio Economic Registry is the perfect example for this situation, as they fail to assist almost 80% of the poorest families in the population as it relies on outdated and static data. And the condition of India and Bangladesh is not so much different from what of Pakistan's. Because of the political influence and unfair subsidies, the welfare benefits in these countries often end up in the wrong hands. On the positive side, there are tools like India's 12 indicator and Pakistan's 14 indicator Multidimensional Poverty Indices (MPI) which are very much effective in catching the non financial aspects of poverty. However these tools are still not able to keep swiftness with rapid changes, especially after crisis or sudden shocks. This paper not only highlights the challenges but also propose three major solutions, they are: storing data files and lists in the hands of impartial experts rather than politicians, ensuring all states and neighboring countries use the same standardized checklist to measure poverty, and lastly setting aside emergency funds in the budget that automatically release during the situation of disaster. So, the result of this paper is to make everyone understand that the democracy will only function properly and have sustainable development in South Asia only when the design of the institution would be practical for the real world, and not just for appearance.
Key Words*: Multidimensional Poverty Index, Fiscal Space, South Asian Welfare, Institutional Targeting, Social Registries, Alkire-Foster Method.*

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I. INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

For so many years, poverty in South Asia was calculated by a simple measure, on the basis of income or on the basis of consumption. Even the specific baseline of poverty which is decided by the World Bank which is $2.15 a day still does not fully explain the surviving conditions of people. Just with a single number for income we cannot tell whether someone's living a good life or not, because money cannot buy everything. And that's why the real quality of life doesn't just depend on cash, and that's why the "money only" approach always fails. The standard income based measures which define systematic poverty, like poor housing, unreliable healthcare, lack of proper sanitation, and weak education systems also fail to capture the common issue. Moreover, the non cash public services such as food programs supported by the government and subsidized medical facilities income based assessments often been ignored by the income based assessment. As a result, having an incomplete picture of poverty, from the standard benchmarks like $2.15 a day only leads to the blind spots that make it hard to design effective policies. This can results in missing the real needs of people even with the welfare programs and initiatives.

To solve such problems, new approach has been used by many South Asian governments which is known as "multidimensional poverty measurement". With the help of this method we can examine poverty by using various tools from multiple perspectives simultaneously. For example, with the help of Amratya Sen's Capability Approach and the Alkire-Foster method we can measure health, education and living standards. A good example to explain this is, with the help of India's 12 indicator National Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) we can evaluate that about a quarter of the people in the country lacks adequate housing, internet access, or basic sanitation as the property decreased from approximately 25% to 15% between 2015 and 2025. Pakistan has also revised its MPI, which contains ten region specific indicators, while Nepal has developed a 10 indicator version which fits its own development goals. The focus of all these countries is now shifting "from just ensuring survival to prioritizing the development of real capabilities".

Even having the better tools doesn't automatically fix anything in the system quickly. In reality, governments are not always prepared to handle such hard situations. In South Asia, because of the weak institutions, the bureaucracy slows down, which led to unclear lines of authority between the central government and the local areas which gives rise to so many major challenges. And it ends up targeting some people who really need assistance are left out, while others who don't get the benefits end up receiving them. Even till now many social protection programs still rely on outdated lists, unreliable records, or rough methods like India's Below Poverty Line cards, which can be manipulated by political figures or become outdated over time. Both Pakistan's National Socio-Economic registry and India's food distribution systems unintentionally allows wealthier families to access most of the benefits while the poorest individuals are completely excluded and then ends up facing the same issues.

This study examines how South Asian countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal define and address poverty, comparing traditional monetary measures with their more recent Multidimensional Poverty Indices. The four main aspects of this research are : the sensitivity of the indicators towards change, whether institutions work together effectively, how well data systems communicate with each other, and the adaptability of the state financial resources. Ultimately, it will improve the viewpoint of the government to identify and support the poor as it is not merely a technical issue anymore. It is essential for preserving democracy, using public funds efficiently and, genuinely improving the quality of life for people of South Asia. In this research paper, the theoretical data is gathered from various secondary sources such as different research papers, national and international journals, and government websites. To compare the national poverty frameworks, monetary threshold, and Multidimensional Poverty Indices is the primary aim of this research paper.

II. CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This multidimensional poverty measurement does not solely focuses only on one factor, which is income as it is based on Amratya Sen's Capability Approach. His approach argues that the true development is about expanding human freedom and allowing people to lead this kind of lives they value as he just doesn't aim for higher income and it led to a change in the usual understanding of development. In this viewpoint, poverty is not just about having no money but about lacking the ability to make meaningful choices. Even though, money is important, it is only one part of the picture that can limit human freedom.

The Alkire-Foster (AF) tool which is developed by Sabina Alkire and James Foster converts Sen's original concept into a practical tool for identification framework, which policymakers can use effectively. In this study, this method serves as the foundation for both global and national Multidimensional Poverty Indices. In the AF method we don't examine the poverty in the financial dimensions but across so many others as well. Let's take the number of people "n" and indicators "d", then we will create a large matrix of achievements, which will be represented as y=[y_{ij}], where y_{ij}>=0 that indicates the level of achievements of person "i" in indicator "j". Each indicator is assigned a weight, w_j, and the total of all the weights is up to one. And then by calculating everything, like the sum of these weighted hardships the AF method then determines who is considered poor highlighting poverty that goes beyond income alone.

$$\sum_{j=1}^{d} w_j = 1 \quad (1)$$

Let's now find out the process by which the deprivation is measured using this method. First a threshold must be established for each indicator, denoted as z_1, z_2, and so on. Each z_j represents the minimum level a person needs to achieve in order to be considered not deprived in that particular area. Using these thresholds, a matrix is created that record, for each indicator and each individual, whether there is a deficit. If a person's value for giving indicator is below the threshold, it is marked as 1; if it meets or exceeds the threshold, it is marked as 0.

$$c_i = \sum_{j=1}^{d} w_j g_{ij}^0 \qquad (2)$$

Now, for each person, these deprivations should be added, weighting them as needed. This creates a deprivation score, c_i, for every individual.

$$k = 33.33\% \qquad (3)$$

The second deprivation is known as the poverty cutoff, denoted as (k). this threshold determines the level of deprivation an individual must experience to be classified as multidimensionally poor. Typically, the cutoff is set as 1/3. If a person is deprived in a third or more of the indicators, they are considered poor. Anyone whose score meets or exceeds the cutoff (k) is classified as multidimensionally poor.

$$M_0 = H \times A \qquad (4)$$

If a person's score is below the threshold (k), the method sets their deprivation to zero, which excludes them from the final multidimensional poverty calculation. In the end, the Multidimensional Poverty Index (M_0) is calculated by multiplying two factors: the proportion of people identified as multidimensionally poor, known as the headcount ratio(H), and the average number of deprivations experienced by those who are poor, referred to as the average intensity (A).

$$H = \frac{q}{n} \qquad (5)$$

In short, H tells us about that part of the population that is poor in different ways. A, helps us to find the number if problems these people face compared to the total number tracked. And the work of M_0 is to combine all this information into a single number.

$$A = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n} c_i(k)}{q} \qquad (6)$$

This mathematical equation helps us to confirm that M_0 has the most significant characteristic that is dimensional invariability. It means that if a poor person faces any additional disadvantages in another area, their overall poverty level increases even if they have issues like limited access to health or education,. Traditional measures based completely on monetary income, like the headcount ratios, which do not fully capture this aspect. In this study, four main criteria are evaluated to assess how South Asian countries implement their national poverty frameworks. These criteria are as follows:

Metric Sensitivity: This helps in evaluating the effectiveness of the national poverty measure to identify various types of issues across all different groups, such as severe, moderate, or overlapping forms. It helps us to examine whether the specific choices made for indicator weights and thresholds, like the rural isolation, living in urban slums, or risks that particularly affect marginalized communities are suitable for addressing local issues.

Institutional Coordination Architecture*:* This examines the collaborations of various government branches in managing poverty indicators. The main question asked by this field is that whether the work of the central planning bodies, provincial or state governments, ministries and local authorities are done properly, are aligned, or does confusion and efficiency ends up blocking the effective implementation of policies?

Data Integration: This helps in the communication and efficiency to work together in the country's different data system. It answers the questions like, does these systems are effective to link census data, current registries, and local household surveys with social protection databases? Or do the isolation of the information results in slowing down or preventing the real time tracking of poverty.

Fiscal Elasticity: Lastly, I examine the financial flexibility of this entire system. This involves questions such as: When the economy faces a crisis, disaster, or health emergency, does the system is able to automatically adjust budgets or redirect more social support to the areas that need it the most? Does the poverty measurement actually lead to change in funding when conditions worsen? Because in the real world, this is what fiscal elasticity refers to.

III. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND INSTITUTIONAL EVALUATION

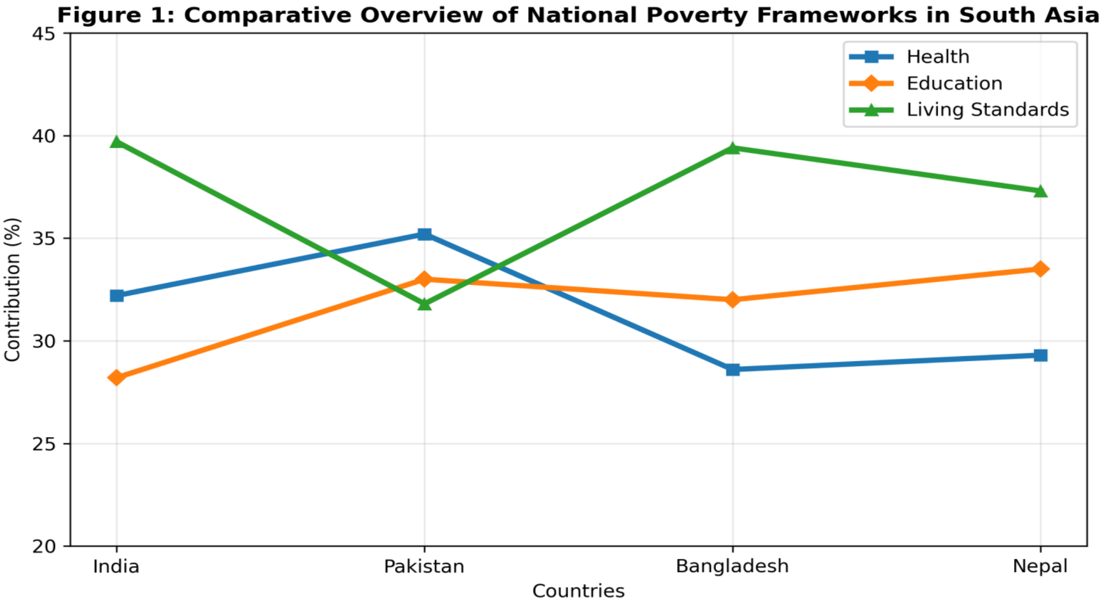
When examining how South Asian countries implement multidimensional and monetary poverty frameworks, it becomes obvious that there are significant differences, particularly how their institutions function and execute these policies. Each country whether its India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal has developed its own approach to identify poverty and has made their institutions based on its unique governance system. To make the understanding of this comparison much clear, Table 1 provides an overview of the main poverty indicators, the relevant agencies responsible for addressing them, and the key challenges that each country faces.

Table 1: Comparative Overview of National Poverty Frameworks in South Asia

Country	Health	Education	Living Standards
India	32.2%	28.2%	39.7%
Pakistan	35.2%	33.0%	31.8%
Bangladesh	28.6%	32.0%	39.4%
Nepal	29.3%	33.5%	37.3%

Table1 here shows us the contribution of each country to the three major components of their national MPI they are: health, education and standard of living. With the help of this table, we can compare the scores of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal together. Each country has its own different approach to its MPI. India uses 12 indicators, Pakistan uses 14, Bangladesh uses 11 and Nepal uses 10. This is the reason why their scores do not matches exactly. The chart below presents these scores visually, which helps us to observe how each country's priorities and policies differ.

Figure 1: Comparative Distribution of Multidimensional Poverty Index in South



In figure 1, we can see 3 different dimensions of the national multidimensional poverty frameworks across four different South Asian countries. If we focus on the Living Standards dimensions, India is at the highest contributing for 39.7%, showing that its poverty measurement framework indicators emphasizes more on living and housing conditions, accessibility of basic sanitation, electricity, clean cooking fuel, drinking water, and other basic household amenities. In contrast, Pakistan's framework shows a different pattern, where Health has the largest share at 35.2%, while Education and Living Standards almost holds a similar weight. This suggests that Pakistan's national framework gives more importance to health related issues compared to the other countries shown in the figure. Bangladesh also shows a high contribution to Living Standards that is 39.4%, with education contributing 32.0% and Health contributing 28.6% and lastly, Nepal also follows a similar pattern, with 37.3%, 33.5% and 29.3% respectively. These differences show that the national poverty frameworks of all countries works towards different policy goals and measurement approaches and not all the countries do prioritize the same dimensions equally.

If we look closely we will notice, that these numbers go over by just counting the number of people who are living in poverty. Measuring poverty plays a very important role in shaping policy priorities and how resources are distributed. For example, Pakistan's National Socio Economic Registry (NSER) is a major tool for identifying households in need and directing social assistance programs to help them. A large, centralized system which is known as the Proxy Means Test is the method used by them, which helps to find out who qualifies for programs like the Benazir Income Support Program. However, as the registry is only updated through large surveys of fix intervals, it becomes outdated very quickly and easily. Even the factors like inflation, illness, unemployment, or natural disasters, plays a key role in changing the household situations rapidly. As a result, those who do not qualify might still receive benefits, while some households that truly need help maybe missed. Although having a more decentralized system could react faster to local problems, another reason of it not working properly might be the limited administrative abilities, differences in data, and local political influences.

As the organizations that collect poverty data are often not the same as those that provide assistance, the connection between how poverty is measured and how the welfare is provided has become more complicated. In India, for example, the evaluation of poverty across various aspects are done by NITI Aayog, but still the outdated lists of beneficiaries and administrative records are used by many welfare initiatives. This led to a difference between identifying people in need and actually providing help, which can result in some people to not receive the support they actually need. On the basis of large surveys of households through the wide range of indicators such as health, education, and living standards, India's National Multidimensional Poverty Index is made. There are so many big differences do lies between different regions even though the national data has shown a major reduction in multidimensional poverty over time. For example, if we compare it with the national average, we will notice that states like Utter Pradesh often have a much higher level of multidimensional poverty, especially in health areas. This shows us that do need some specific regional approaches and we can't just rely on general national improvements.

We can observe similar governance challenges in other South Asian countries. For example, Pakistan's national Socio Economic Registry now covers so many households, but the concerns of ensuring that vulnerable groups in remote areas, such as Balochistan are properly included or not and obtaining timely updates still persisted. As Bangladesh added a wider range of indicators, including factors related to connectivity and household welfare, its poverty measurement system has also improved. However, because of no single national beneficiary database there are always challenges in accurately targeting social protection programs. Although Nepal has made significant progress in reducing multidimensional poverty, large regional differences still exist, with provinces like Karnali continuing to report much higher levels of poverty issues compared to the national average.

Figure 1 explains that South Asian countries place different level of importance on Health, Education and Living standards within their national multidimensional poverty frameworks. For example, in India, Bangladesh, and Nepal, Living Standards have the most weight, whereas Pakistan prioritizes health the most. These differences arise from variation in how each country measure poverty and the policies they focus on, rather than from differences in the actual extent of poverty. The overall evidence from the regions shows that improving poverty measurement is just one aspect of the issue: there is still a significant governance challenge in connecting new poverty data with effective, targeted welfare programs.

IV. FISCAL CAPABILITIES AND IMPLEMENTATION BOTTLENECKS

One of the most important factor because of which the South Asian countries face problem in reducing poverty is not having enough of financial resources. The budget of the government in these regions is not much flexible. Because their public spending remains focused on outdated, unfair subsidies that do just a little to lift people out of poverty their tax collection systems are not effective.

What the data shows about South Asia is that it spends the least, that's just 0.90% of the GDP. While a little more is spend on health by the other countries, which is around 0.95% GDP, their investment in terms of education is somewhat higher, approximately 3.37% of GDP. As the unregulated sector has around 80-90% of the working age individuals, and there income is irregular and the concerning fact in these sectors, are that its often not reported social welfare, remains significantly underdeveloped. And due to this, government ends up struggling with collecting the income tax as people do not report their actual income. And as a result it limits the size of the tax base. And after the addition of the heavy debts and declining foreign exchange reserves, there is very little left for social spending. Government should invest in targeted social protection programs, but they often allocate substantial resources to universal subsidies, especially for energy fuel and food. In emerging Asian economies, these subsidies average about 2% of GDP, sometimes exceeding 4%. Because the higher income families uses more energy fuels, the benefit of these services goes to wealthier households, while the poorest people end up with almost nothing.

Table2: Sector Expenditure and Fiscal Progressivity

Expenditure Type	Average Share of GDP (%)	Primary Target Beneficiaries	Fiscal Progressivity Rating
Education	3.37	General Public / Youth	Moderate
Health	0.95	General Public	Moderate
Social Assistance	0.90	Registered Poor / Marginalized	High
Energy & Food Subsidies	2.00	Commercial / Higher-Income	Highly Regressive

And this is the reason behind the regions being trapped in high poverty rates and lacks support from targeted interventions, while public funds are mostly used for the type of programs that fail to reach those most in need. A country cannot provide universal subsidies because it will directly weaken its ability to support the specific welfare programs. Bangladesh is a great example of this, as Bangladesh spends less on health and primary education combined than on energy and food subsidies. But when the global prices for items like oil or wheat will rise, these subsidies will end up increasing even more, taking money away from programs meant to be made to assist the poor families. As a result, that we have to see the struggle of major poverty indicators, like the Primary Education Stipend or child nutrition transfers to reach all families that truly need assistance. And in the end it remained underfund. The way of South Asian countries creating their national budgets makes the situation more complicated. These budgets do no easily adapt to new circumstances. Money allocations do not automatically change with economic challenges or updated information about poverty. The budgeting process continues as usual even when planners highlight that poverty is increasing in areas like Rajanpur in Punjab or Karnali in Nepal, and are guided more by politics than by actual needs. Only with the clear rules that force public spending to reflect changes in local poverty levels such as legal requirements or system that link funds to current poverty data statistics like the MPI, we will be able to change the situation. The real needs of people do not push through the usual bureaucratic barriers, and the budget remains unchanged.

V. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

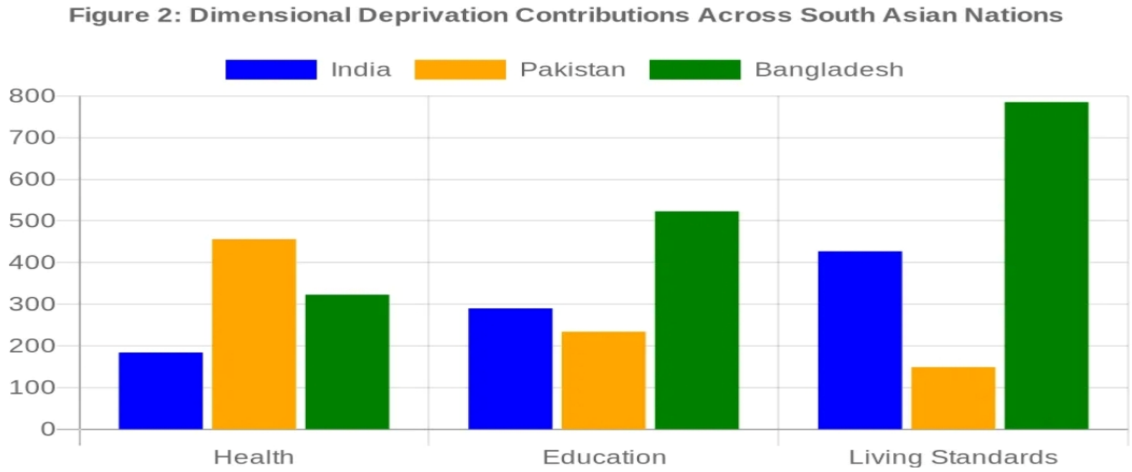
To truly use better poverty data to bring real change for people in South Asia, leaders must address significant institutional challenges. They need to improve the effectiveness of public institutions, ensure that their data systems can share information with each other, and create budget plans that can adapt effectively during crisis. Here's how to begin:

5.1. Set-Up Independent Statutory Data Trusts

South Asia's welfare initiatives continue to face the same major challenge that is scattered data and poor targeting. If we adopt a system of independent, legally safeguard data trust instead of each ministry keeping its own data separate, it would be much better as these trusts would act like neutral digital storage places which will be holding current, household level information that any welfare program can access. A single Registry Model will operate all of them. Let's see how it works: If only the trust gathered all the key data sources such as national ID records, birth, death, and marriage registrations, tax details and recent household surveys into one centralized location, then whenever there is a change in a person's or family's situation, the trust can update this information instantly. No-one's privacy will be broken and the robust encryption should only be used by the trust to ensure that only the necessary data is shared with the appropriate programs. This allows eligibility checks to be done using fair and transparent algorithms without exposing personal details unnecessarily.

By using such systems, we will be able to change the things faster. And as a result, Government will finally stop to pour money into endless door to door surveys. Local politicians will lose the power to provide benefits to their known people. And no one will able to cheat the system, just to grab help one is not entitled to will get way tougher. Plus, the trust will highlight which problems hurt the most and in which part, so it will become easier to find out who needs help first. Figure 2 shows how this plays out across different regions in South Asia.

Figure 2: Dimensional Deprivation Contributions across South Asian Nations



5.2. Harmonize Regional MPI Indicators for Transnational Welfare

If the South Asian people will agree to work together on how to measure poverty, because they almost have same type of environmental headaches, it will make things uniform and easier to understand for everyone. Every country has its own priorities, but by fixing the few core set of indicators in all the countries, whether its

India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal and if they agreed on it, things would become a lot simpler. Policies would function better, it would be easier to share solutions, and no one would have to reinvent the whole process personally.

Let's take the climate risks as our example to understand this situation, if everyone starts to track the things in the same way, whether it is safe drinking water during dry spells, flood resistant homes, or salty soil ruining crops then it will help the workers and their families the most who have no choice but to move, especially when disasters strike. If every country starts to use the same data, differentiation would really hold importance. More importantly, with this countries could set up connected safety nets. Imagine if a huge flood pushes people across borders, but if the government chooses to work with this strategy, then they could keep eye on people, help them access food or healthcare, and avoid gaps of an invisible line. It's about making sure that when disasters cracks, nobody falls through it, despite of their borders.

5.3. Integrate Shock-Responsive Fiscal Triggers into Budget Allocations

And because South Asia still uses the old ways for budgets and rarely changes fast enough it backfires, especially when a crisis comes out of nowhere. If government became able to build poverty and well being data right into their funding decisions then people will start to trust them more. One thing that needs to change is that whether it's the local or the national Finance commissions they should completely stop relying on the statistics which is outdated and actually keep an eye on the problems on the ground level. For example, if the school attendance drops due to flood or some sudden economic mess and if the child malnutrition spikes money will move immediately to the most needed areas. There would be no time for any endless debates or delays, it would just be a quick, and direct help, wherever it's needed. If we use this kind of approach it will result in finally making the fiscal policies agile and it will help in working with real power to protect health and education when things get rough.

5.4. Conclusion

Just swapping out the old income measures for fancier statistics is not the correct process of tracking poverty in South Asia. Honestly, it's much more than that. Launching of something like the National MPI sounds impressive on the paper, but if the state have weak machinery, then nothing much will change. Success depends on so many different questions like what state can actually deliver? Are the officials really ready to use this data? Do the right people are receiving the funding? Is anyone making sure the most vulnerable aren't left out?

We need a strong, adaptable institution of the real ones for this work, and not just teams filling out forms, that's the real backbone of fair development and for that we first need to get better at targeting the right beneficiaries, if we became successful in doing so then the people will start to trust government programs more. And to make it happen, we have to cut out wasteful subsidies, and protect the data. Or eventually people will lose their faith completely.

In region of inequalities sticking around and climate disasters coming back years after years, the question everyone should ask the government is simple: can they deliver welfare in a way which is efficient, transparent, and actually respects the people? And that's what democracy should look like. When South Asian countries pair solid, up-to-date poverty tracking with accountable, responsive public service, they will start to turn economic growth into genuine social security, and it would be something which will last. That's how we make sure that the progress this time brings the real change.

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