



Research Strategy for Benazir Income Support Programme (2021-24)

Policy and Research Unit

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List of Acronyms

BISP	Benazir Income Support Programme
CCT	Conditional Cash Transfer
F&A	Finance and Accounts
HR	Human Resource
IA	Internal Audit
IT	Information Technology
MIS	Management Information Systems
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MCO	Media, Communications and Outreach
NSER	National Socio-Economic Registry
PRU	Policy and Research Unit
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SSN	Social Safety Net
UCT	Unconditional Cash Transfer

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Introduction and Background

The Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) launched in 2008 in the wake of the Global food and fuel price hike, has become Pakistan's flagship social safety net program and is one of the largest social safety net programs in South Asia. The program has three primary objectives: a) enhance financial capacity of the poor and their dependents, b) formulate and implement comprehensive policies and targeted programs for the poor and vulnerable, and c) reduce poverty and promote equitable distribution of wealth, especially for low income groups. BISP is a statutory body established under the BISP Act 2010, that is overseen by a Board. The Chairperson BISP is the Chair of the Board, while the Secretary BISP is the Principal Accounting Officer of the Programme and ex-officio Member and Secretary to the Board. The BISP Board is assisted in its work by a number of committees, which includes Audit, Finance, Risk Management & Assurance, Technical Design and, Research with the work of the Board and its committees being governed by the Board of Benazir Income Support Programme (Conduct of Business) Regulations, 2015.

BISP's main flag-ship program is the Unconditional Cash Transfer (UCT) "Benazir Kafaalat", which is currently being paid on a quarterly basis to eligible women in households falling under the defined threshold score on the proxy mean test (PMT). Through its Kafalaat program, BISP is serving over 8 million poorest families with cash transfers, making use of technologically advanced platforms and solutions. In addition, BISP also implements a range of other conditional and complementary programs for the poorest households across the country, which includes education-related conditional cash transfer (CCT) "Benazir Taleemi Wazaif" nutrition related CCT "Benazir Nashonuma" for BISP beneficiary women to increase the uptake of health and nutrition services by them and provision of scholarships to children from low income families for higher education under the Benazir Undergraduate Scholarship Project (BUSP). The targeting of the different BISP programs to beneficiary households is determined through the National Socio-Economic Registry (NSER) that was first developed in 2010-11 through a census like survey covering 85 percent of the country's population. The new NSER survey for updation of the Registry has recently been completed and Registration Desks have been established in different tehsils for registration of missed out households.

Over the years since its establishment, the BISP has become the leading program for translating the Government's vision towards poverty alleviation and providing support to the poor and vulnerable population segments. In the coming years, the BISP is poised to take on the leading role for expanding the delivery of social safety nets to a larger share of the country's poor population as well as developing linkages with other programs and interventions to enable the beneficiary households to effectively graduate out of poverty. The core programs being implemented by BISP focus on the two main areas of provision of safety nets and promoting human capital formation. BISP's programatic interventions also directly contribute towards achieving impact on a number of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); which includes SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality).

Rationale for Research Strategy

In order for BISP to effectively gear up its operations to reach a larger share of the poor and vulnerable population, it will require research support for enabling evidence based decision making with regards to program design, implementation, mid-course correction and ultimately impact assessment of outcomes.

This document presents broad contours of a three-year Research Strategy for BISP that will provide the framework for all research related activities to be carried out for improving the effectiveness of BISP operations. In this regard, the main components/ key areas of focus for research and analytical work over the coming years are laid down and various methods and tools available for addressing these needs are outlined. This Strategy is designed to be a living document and based on implementation experience and emerging demands, the priority areas may change.

Vision

Evidence based design of social safety and social protection programs for effectively tackling poverty and reaching out to under privileged and vulnerable population segments.

Mission

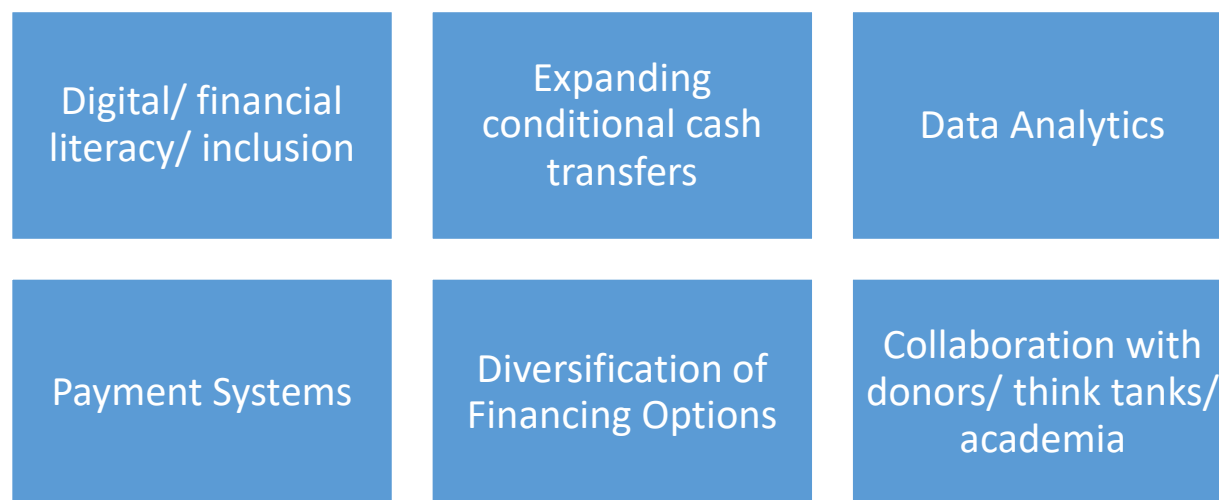
Design and develop objectively focused result based mechanisms, tools and standards within BISP for ensuring effective service delivery to the poor and deprived families.

Main Objectives of Research Strategy

- Promote rigorous and evidence based research to evaluate the effects of different interventions of BISP on life of marginalized segments of the society.
- Facilitate multidisciplinary research on poverty and SSN programs.
- Strengthen operational research to enhance policy and program design and implementation.
- Improve operational efficiency by employing data analytics of existing BISP programs' databases.
- Build sustainable research partnerships with universities and other research institutes.

Key Focus Areas of Research Strategy

The main areas of focus of the BISP Research Strategy are outlined below:



Benazir Kafalaat – the flagship program of BISP and the largest unconditional cash transfer program in Pakistan will be substantially expanded both in scale and scope over the next few years. Besides providing income support to women from poor and vulnerable households, the program will be reformulated to promote financial and digital inclusion through the “One Woman, One Account” initiative. This will provide access to a menu of financial services to the BISP beneficiary women along-with the awareness and ability to properly utilize these services (through financial literacy campaigns), to provide them sustainable pathways out of poverty. In this regard, different approaches will be piloted in different regions of the country and will be evaluated for further upscaling country-wide during this period.

The BISP is endeavoring to expand the outreach of its existing conditional cash transfer programs in the education and health/ nutrition domains. The Waseela e Taleem/ Benazir Taleemi Wazaif program which provided cash transfers to Kafalaat beneficiary households conditional on enrolling their children aged 5-12 years in primary school has recently been expanded. The Benazir Taleemi Wazaif will provide stipends to children in beneficiary households from ages 4-22 years i.e., from primary to the higher secondary levels. The stipends under Benazir Taleemi Wazaif have been significantly increased particularly for the girl student. Further, a graduation bonus has been added in-order to encourage poor families to enroll their out of school children. It will be important to analyze how the upscaling of this program occurs over the next three years and how the program contributes towards improving the educational outcomes across the country. Benazir Nashonuma, (which provides specialized nutrition food and cash transfers to children and their mothers to prevent the occurrence of stunting through centres in the most disadvantaged districts of the country) is also being scaled up at the national level, which will require extensive research support in the coming years to understand the critical bottlenecks in implementation and further streamlining of processes to reach a national presence.

As part of the Research Strategy, regular data analytics will be carried out for the different datasets maintained for operational purposes by the MIS/ IT Wing. This includes the payment alerts data that is generated for each bi-annual payment tranche of the Benazir Kafalaat and Benazir Taleemi Wazaif programs. The regular analysis of operational data will help in improving the delivery of BISP programs by helping in identifying problem areas and taking timely corrective measures. The data from the updated national Socio-Economic Registry, once validated, will also be used extensively for data analytics, both for operational and research purposes.

A robust payment system is a vital element of any successful cash transfer program. BISP has made important strides in transitioning to a secure and transparent payment mechanism over the years. The new digital biometric payment system introduced in 2019 has done away with the money orders and debit cards, while still being able to use Point of Sales agents, as well as payments will also be available at dedicated campsites, bank branches and biometric ATMs. A second-generation reform of the payment system is now being planned to further streamline the payment mechanism. Relevant research activities will be planned to observe and showcase the strengths of this new payment framework.

Since its inception in 2009, the BISP has been dependent on the Government budget for financing its cash transfer and other poverty reduction programs. As the scale and scope of its main programs is expected to considerably expand in the coming years, there is a need to develop new innovative financing mechanisms to mobilize additional resources and create fiscal space for pro-poor investments. In this regard, different modes of public private partnerships would be explored to provide sustainable livelihoods opportunities to BISP beneficiary households in collaboration with the private sector to graduate them out of poverty and make them self-sufficient. These partnerships will be explored under the Board approved Future Strategic Plan of Action (PoA) for Graduation through Collaboration.

A key area of focus for the Research Strategy would be engagement in collaborative research with universities/ think tanks and research institutions as well as regular dissemination of such research output. Research collaboration will focus on topics of mutual interest in the domain of social protection/ safety nets and the BISP will enter into Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with such organizations with clearly defined goals and objectives. In this regard, SOPs/ guidelines will be developed by the Policy and Research Unit (PRU) to define the criteria for collaboration and different models of collaboration that can be employed to maximize synergies.

Main Forms of Research Output

The research and analytical activities to be carried out under the above main areas will be of different types, employing both quantitative as well as qualitative data to gain maximum insights into the areas being studied and to generate concrete and actionable recommendations. The research activities will be both conducted in-house and outsourced to third party consultants as well as through collaborative arrangements with academia/ policy think tanks.

The main forms and types of research output that will be produced under the framework of this Research Strategy will include the following:

- Impact evaluation studies

The impact evaluation/ assessment studies would be a very rigorous form of research that will seek to measure and quantify the impact of various BISP programs on the lives of their target population. The impact evaluation studies will examine the effects of unconditional and/ or conditional cash transfer programs on different socio-economic dimensions of household welfare of the BISP beneficiary families. Moreover, as BISP has been engaged in delivery of the Emergency Cash Transfer Program as a main instrument of the Government's response to the COVID crisis, over the last one and a half years, research may be commissioned for examining the impact of this program on the broader population segment covered in comparison to the segment of Benazir Kafalaat beneficiaries. As such studies involve an extensive survey of nation-wide sample of BISP beneficiaries, they will be outsourced to third party consulting firms, while quality control and assurance will be carried out in-house. The impact evaluation studies will mainly cover the first two focus areas, i.e., financial/ digital inclusion and expansion of conditional cash transfers.

- Process evaluations

Process evaluations help determine if program activities are being implemented as intended and result in certain desired outputs. As BISP's existing UCT/ CCTs are scaled up in the coming years, periodic process evaluations of these initiatives will be vital for the concerned operational wings for ensuring effective implementation. In addition, periodic process evaluation of other BISP programs like the Benazir Undergraduate Scholarship Project that is providing scholarships annually to approximately 50,000 students on need basis, in partnership with the Higher Education Commission would be also be carried out over the program period. A well designed process evaluation study can provide an early warning for any problems that may be encountered in the initial phases of program implementation and enable monitoring of the program activities are working

- Periodic monitoring reports

The M&E Wing of BISP regularly monitors the implementation of different BISP programs, the findings of which are presented in the form of monitoring reports. Monitoring involves the collection of routine data that measures progress toward achieving program objectives. It is used to track changes in program outputs and performance over time and enables the senior management to make informed decisions regarding the effectiveness of programs and the efficient use of resources. The compilation of monitoring reports on different aspects of BISP interventions will be a regular activity during the next three years to be determined by the senior management.

- Research Reports

The output and main findings of major research studies can be published in form of research reports. These reports can be published on a regular periodical basis, such as on yearly basis or on special thematic areas that may warrant further analysis and discussion. In this regard, the publication of an annual report on state of social protection in Pakistan can also be explored.

These reports can be prepared in-house or through a collaborative research arrangement with different think tanks/ universities/ research institutions.

- Policy briefs

The tool of policy papers/ briefs can be used for communicating the practical implications of research to the senior management for taking informed decisions on alternate scenarios. Knowledge on new and emerging issues with respect to the design and implementation of safety net programs globally which can be adapted to BISP's context can be disseminated internally in a concise form in the shape of policy briefs. These briefs can be used for sharing developments made by other peer countries in social safety nets and other poverty alleviation endeavors. These policy briefs can be prepared in-house or through a collaborative research arrangement with universities/ research institutions. These policy briefs can cover topics falling under the first five focus areas of the Strategy, as outlined above

- Case studies.

The research output can also be disseminated in the form of case studies on a particular aspect of the delivery chain of different BISP programs as well as to show case success stories. These case studies which can also highlight lessons learnt in program design and implementation can be disseminated to both internal and external audiences. The case studies can cover topics falling under different areas of the Strategy.

- Dashboards of customized data analytics

Through regular use of data analytics of operational databases, dashboards on different aspects of program implementation and organizational processes can be developed. A data dashboard is a tool that provides a centralized, interactive means of monitoring, measuring, analyzing, and extracting insights from different datasets in key areas while displaying information in an interactive and visual manner. These customized dashboards can provide useful information on the status of implementation of BISP's unconditional and conditional cash transfer programs to the senior management as well as the concerned operational wings.

Implementation of Research Strategy

The recently established Policy and Research Unit in BISP will serve as the focal point for coordinating implementation of the BISP Research Strategy 2021-24. The PRU aims at working extensively towards developing policies, conducting research, reviewing literature/best global practices with respect to social protection programs in the context of BISP. It will also help in evaluation of BISP programs and will be engaged in analyzing impacts of existing interventions and develop financially sustainable models to strengthen the existing programs. It will also serve as a knowledge management and data analytics hub for BISP.

The PRU will be engaged in implementation of the Research Strategy in collaboration with other wings, including the M&E Wing, operational wings (Cash Transfers, Conditional Cash Transfer, National Socio-Economic Registry and Complementary Initiatives) and support wings (MIS, HR,

Training, F&A, IA and MCO). It will provide support to other wings in carrying out demand driven research, both in-house as well as outsourced to third party, provide feedback on conceptualization of research projects and development of ToRs, evaluate research output shared by third party consultants for ensuring quality and relevance as well as carry out data analytics on different dimensions.

The design of different activities under the Research Strategy will be overseen and reviewed by the recently established BISP Board's Sub-Committee on Research, which would periodically review and assess proposals for research studies and data analytics to establish effectiveness of BISP programs and delivery processes. The detailed terms of reference of Sub-Committee on Research are outlined in Annex 1.

Annex 1: Terms of Reference of BISP Board's Sub-Committee on Research

The responsibilities of the Board's Sub-Committee on Research include the following:

- To review and assess proposals for research studies and data analytics to be carried out by PRU in collaboration with other wings, including M&E Wing to establish effectiveness of BISP programs and delivery processes.
- To provide guidance in preparation of the annual work plan of the PRU.
- To coordinate, assist and give input in the work plan of PRU such as the conduct of studies and analytics, which may also require collaboration/ cooperation from different wings of the BISP, including M&E Wing.
- Periodically review the performance of PRU against its work plans and also review its progress on the conduct of research and policy studies.
- The Committee will be authorized to co-opt subject experts based on study topic from private sector, research institutions/ universities and stakeholders in the public and private sector for wider consultation(s).
- The Committee may also make recommendations on the collaborative and partnership arrangements between BISP and various research institutions and stakeholders with regard to research and knowledge management.
- The Committee shall meet at least once in a quarter (3 months).