

Assistance to Pakistani Diaspora in South America: The Covid-19 Lockdown

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Abstract

This study elucidates the situation that aroused during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 in the South American states. It evaluates and analyses the measures that were taken by the Pakistan Embassy in Buenos Aires. It depicts the problem -solving skills and leadership that allowed the Ambassador to rise up to the challenges. Using qualitative method of research comprising interviews and vignettes, the study examines how the work done behind the scenes as part of government response may be developed for broader application of holistic and integrated emergency disaster management in diaspora communities.

Keywords: Covid-19, Diaspora, Leadership, MoFA, Pakistan.

1. Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic struck the world massively and its colossal impact altered life for years to come. At its peak in 2020, the novel coronavirus was spreading mayhem globally, bringing strong detriments in access to healthcare, food, job security, socio-economics and politics. Pakistanis who were living in the jurisdiction of the Embassy of Pakistan in Buenos Aires, i.e., Argentina, Ecuador, Chile, Peru, Paraguay and Uruguay were among the worst hit segments of the society. Far from their homeland, these people were very miserable, not only being hungry they feared for their lives as they looked for ways to protect themselves and their families.

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This case study evaluates and analyses the measures by which the Embassy of Pakistan, Buenos Aires, led by Ambassador Dr Saad, undertook a campaign to provide unprecedented assistance to the Pakistani diaspora in his jurisdiction during the COVID-19 pandemic. The problem-solving skills and leadership that allowed the ambassador to rise up to one of the greatest challenges of his career are examined.

Literature on Pakistan's footprint in South America is relatively thin and sparse. This case provides a glimpse into the perseverance, grit, and determination of the Pakistani diaspora in South America. The lessons learnt and the work done behind the scenes as part of government response to the pandemic are part of this study which may be developed for broader application of holistic and integrated emergency disaster management in diaspora communities. The case provides insights and learning for public officials should they face a challenge of similar nature. It also offers perspectives for diplomats, anthropologists, social workers, and community leaders engaged in similar crisis management.

1.1. Scene Setter

Dr Muhammad Saad arrived in Buenos Aires, Argentina for his ambassadorial assignment in March 2020. Within days of his arrival, Argentina and several other South American countries undertook a complete lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Grainger, 2020). This had a colossal impact on people's lives, including the Pakistani diaspora living in Argentina and five other countries (Chile, Peru, Ecuador, Paraguay, and Uruguay) to which the Ambassador was concurrently accredited (Annex-I).

Expatriate Pakistanis living in those countries were mostly engaged in blue-collar jobs. A large number of them worked at tourist spots as street vendors and hawkers. Their jobs and incomes were heavily dependent on the tourism industry, which was the worst affected by the pandemic. During the lockdown, they were reeling from the pandemic's health detriments, loss of income, an uncertain future - in short bewilderment. As reported later, the thought of death in a foreign land lurked in their minds which further traumatised their psyches.

On April 04, 2020, international media reported that dead bodies were lying unattended on the streets in Ecuador due to the collapse of civic services, including funeral and burial facilities (Gallón, 2020). The same day, the Ambassador received a telephone call from a desperate Pakistani in Ecuador requesting him to save his body from cremation in case of death.² Shockingly,

² Muslims generally, and Pakistanis particularly, are religiously and culturally very averse to cremation. In Sri Lanka this became a very sore point when the government mandated cremation of COVID victims without exception. The Prime Minister of Pakistan specifically called his Sri Lankan counterpart to request an exemption for

the Ambassador realised the gravity of the situation and the despondency of members of the Pakistani diaspora. He then called the head of the regional desk at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), in Islamabad - the Additional Secretary (Americas) - immediately, and apprised him about the grim situation and the evolving scenarios. The AS instructed the Ambassador to rely on local resources as there were huge demands of funds from the Pakistani missions all over the world.

Perplexed as he was, several questions lurked in the ambassador's mind. How could he connect the embassy with the Pakistani community that was dispersed in an area of continental proportion? How would it be possible to provide food and medicines across international borders in the six countries of the embassy's jurisdiction within the limited resources available? Equally importantly, how could psychological support be provided so as make the mission an anchor of hope for the community in an uncertain environment, and at a time of unmatched crisis? The challenges seemed daunting and insurmountable. This case study is an untold unique story of leadership, courage, sincerity of purpose and determination.

2. Literature Review

Diaspora and state relations have been a subject of interest to scholars. Gamlen's effort at conceptualisation and finding "a solid foundation" on which a diaspora could rely so as to exercise its rights is insightful (Gamlen, 2006). "The concept of the nation beyond the territory of the state" denotes an extension of the nation beyond its borders, which was an essential innovation in conceptualising states (Amjad, 2017, p. 310).

The development of diaspora strategies demonstrates a paradigm of building "non-territorial forms of organization." Developing a diaspora strategy as a policy initiative to foster motherland and diaspora relations had become imperative. The need for "an overarching framework" was overriding. Protecting the rights and responsibilities of overseas citizens is "part of nation building", and an adjunct of citizenry which became "trans-nationalised" (Wikramasekara, 2017).

Diaspora studies are still in their infancy in Pakistan with a lot of under-researched areas (Amjad, 2017, pp. 3-20). One could hardly find any mention of the Pakistani community in South America in literature on the Pakistani diaspora. As each geographical location had its specific challenges, a single global policy could not address location and culture specific problems of the

Muslims which was eventually granted but not before many of the community had been cremated and the situation had caused not just national inter-community problems but also the fraying of a lot of diplomatic ties.



Pakistani diaspora. Indeed, in the first place, these challenges had to be identified so as not to be subsumed by broad conclusions.

In his work *Portrait of a Giving Community – Philanthropy by the Pakistani-American Diaspora*, Adil Najam has indicated the strong preference of Pakistanis for giving directly to individuals in need and for “social issues”. He further mentions that their philanthropy was “not limited to Pakistanis.” The tradition of charity for the needy and poor had been kept alive by Pakistanis even in the USA (Najam, 2006).

3. Research Methodology

This study used the qualitative method of research for collecting data and information. A descriptive research model is employed to elucidate the narrative.

3.1. Analysis

3.1.1. General Information

3.1.1.1. The South American Region

South America is located not just in the western hemisphere, but nearly all of it is also in the southern hemisphere. Bordered by the Pacific Ocean in the west, it has the Atlantic Ocean in the east and northeast; the Caribbean Sea and North America lie to the northwest. Brazil and Argentina are the two largest economies on the continent. South America had faced European colonisation, in which the Spanish, French and Portuguese were the main perpetrators. Argentina, Peru, Chile, Colombia, Bolivia, Uruguay and Venezuela were colonised by the Spanish, Brazil was the recipient of Portuguese colonisation, and Guyana and Suriname faced British and Dutch colonisation, respectively. Post-colonisation, the continent faced an abundance of European immigration, with large groups of Italian immigrants found in Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil, Portuguese immigrants in Brazil, and Spanish immigration spread across the continent.

3.1.1.2. Jurisdiction of the Embassy of Pakistan in Buenos Aires

Pakistan and Argentina had established their diplomatic relations in October, 1951 (MoFA). The Ambassador of Pakistan, based in Buenos Aires was also concurrently accredited to Chile, Peru, Ecuador, Paraguay and Uruguay. The combined area of those countries was 5.7 million square kilometres - (The World Bank, n.d.) (Annexure-II).

Figure 1

Map Showing Pakistan & Jurisdiction of Embassy of Pakistan in Argentina



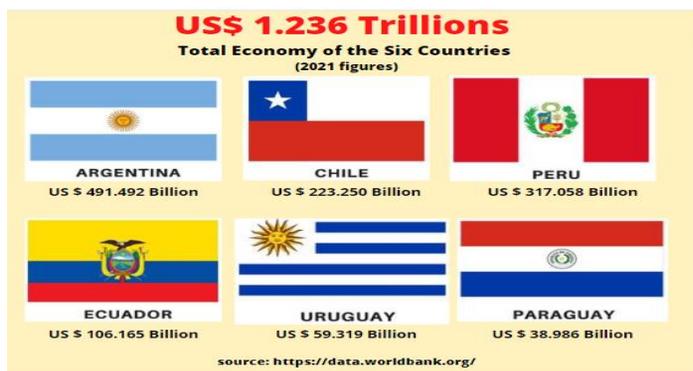
Figure 2

Chart Showing a comparison of the size of Pakistan & Jurisdiction of Embassy of Pakistan in Argentina



The combined GDP of the six countries of Embassy's Jurisdiction was US \$ 1.236 trillion in 2021 (The World Bank, n.d.) (Annex -II).

Figure 3
US\$ 1.236 Trillions



3.2. The Configuration of Pakistani Community

The Pakistani community in South American countries could be categorised into four groups (M. S. Awan, personal communication, July 16, 2022). The first group consisted of around ninety doctors who had gotten their education in Cuba. They were able to get employment in various Latin American countries primarily due to familiarity with the local medical system and their mastery in the Spanish language. Most of them were deployed in remote areas but drew secure monthly salaries from their jobs. The second group were the businessmen, primarily clustered in the northern part of Chile in a city known as Iquique. They were generally self-sufficient and earned good money from their businesses of trading in used cars. They had an excellent network, and helped each other and the neighbouring sister communities.

The third group comprised of Pakistanis, who were lured to a better future in the USA but were instead trafficked to Ecuador on fake travel documents at a time when Pakistanis had visa-free entry to that country. Having lost all their savings to reach “America”, those Pakistanis, who mostly hailed from remote parts of South Punjab and adjoining districts of Sindh, were left with no option but to earn their livings as vendors, hawkers, waiters and labourers in the tourist cities of Ecuador. Their average income before the pandemic was around US\$150 per month. They were mostly illiterate and could not read or write English or Urdu. In hope of getting Ecuadorean citizenship, they had continued to work in difficult situations. They comprised the most vulnerable segment of the Pakistani diaspora in Latin America. Some of them had gotten married to native women and now had children with them. The fourth group were those who were in petty jobs and small businesses and were dispersed in different cities and towns of the six South American countries in the mission’s jurisdiction.

The estimated size of Pakistani community in these countries are as under: (M.

S. Awan, personal communication, July 16, 2022).

Table 1
Estimated Size of Pakistani Community

No	Country	Size	Remarks
1	Argentina	200	Mostly based in Buenos Aires and Mar del Plata.
2	Chile	2,000	Concentrated in Iquique & Santiago.
3.	Peru	200	Lima & Tacna cities
4	Ecuador	2,000	Guayaquil, Quito and Cuenca cities
5.	Paraguay	150	Ciudad del Este
6	Uruguay	100	Mostly medical doctors across the country.

Note: The table depicts the estimated size of Pakistani Community

3.3. Situational Analysis

3.3.1. COVID-19 Pandemic

The spread of COVID-19, caused by the infectious SARS- CoV-2 coronavirus, was classified as a pandemic. The disease spread through droplet infections and people-to-people contact and caused damage to the lungs and sinuses. The elderly and those with pre-existing medical conditions had most been at risk of catching the disease.

3.3.2. Response to the Pandemic

State response to the COVID-19 pandemic included an array of lockdown and protective procedures through which the spread of the deadly virus could be contained. As the world scrambled to create a vaccine that could help in decreasing the effects of the virus, South American countries found strength in closing their borders. In Argentina, a strict government lockdown lasted more than eleven months, one of the longest in the world. Similarly, Chile, Peru, Ecuador, Uruguay and Paraguay saw great restrictions on travel into and outside the country. For countries such as Ecuador, Uruguay and Chile, which earned substantial revenue from tourism that meant a great decline in the economy and job losses in the tens of thousands. Governments responded to issues of rising unemployment and a general decline in morale through initiatives such as the Emergency Family Income (EFI) programme launched in Chile, which provided financial assistance for families.



3.3.3. Challenges to the Pakistani Community during the Pandemic

The Pakistani diaspora in South America faced insurmountable challenges of food security, income support, mental health, and access to reliable information during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Coupled with a low literacy rate and an inherent inability to access support from host countries and local governments, the community naturally became highly vulnerable during the pandemic. Those unfortunate enough to contract the virus were stuck with improper access to healthcare or the inability to pay for treatment.

A large number of community members, dispersed over the vast expanse of South America, had approached the embassy for assistance at the early stages of the pandemic. They were spread from Guayaquil and Cuenca in Ecuador to Punta Arenas in Chile in small cities and towns.

The city authorities faced problems of varying degrees in their service delivery systems. As could be expected, the authorities had preferred their own citizens over aliens and non-nationals for the provision of services. For the most part, Overseas Pakistanis had not yet been able to acquire local citizenship and were the most marginalised community in the local environment. Some needed food for survival, others needed monetary support for payment of rent, utilities, hospital charges and medicines. Being locked down in their homes, they were unable to provide food and groceries for themselves and their families. With dwindling savings and increased lockdown configurations, many were left hungry whilst others relied on publicly available welfare services. With limited or no income and negligible savings, uncertainty continued to cloud the community members. With a long a lockdown, these people would die from hunger. As for the hospitalised patients, they needed someone to take care of their needs too. The psychological effects of fear, uncertainty and lockdown were apparent. The situation was dire.

The community members were neither organised nor registered with the embassy. Resultantly, their contact details, as well as contacts of their families in Pakistan who could be informed about any emergency situation or death, were not available. Laws regarding disclosure of patient information or particulars of deceased persons to any third party or to the embassy varied in different countries. The Embassy only had a skeletal staff, and they too had absolutely no experience handling crises of such magnitude. The mission faced availability of funds and stringent government rules regarding expenditure from the Pakistan Community Welfare & Education Fund (PCW&EF).³ To make

³ A pool of money available with Pakistani missions abroad which is funded through an extra fee imposed on consular activities like issue of passports and attestations of

matters worse, transnational cash transfers were beset with multiple barriers including high transaction costs.

The embassy had been contacted by several Pakistanis who had requested that in case of death, due to any cause, they should not be subjected to cremation due to the lack of capacity in graveyards. The transportation of dead bodies to Pakistan during the period was a great challenge due to the closure of most of airlines as well as exorbitant transportation costs.

3.3.4. Lost in Wilderness – Uniqueness of Circumstances

Most of the Pakistani diaspora in South America comprised males between the ages of 25 and 45, albeit with a small number of females as well. Geographically located far from Pakistan, some of them had lost contact with their families back home and had re-established their identities in the hinterlands of South America. The uniqueness of their circumstances, the stories of grit and determination, and how they were adversely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic formed the key components in devising a workable assistance mechanism for them by the embassy. The following issues depict some of the struggles of Pakistanis in the region:

Human Trafficking remained a significant problem for many South American countries. With lax border patrols, that had become easy to permeate, countries such as Bolivia, Colombia, and Paraguay were known for easy onward travel to North America by foot and transport. Trafficking rings had, on several occasions, hoodwinked economic migrants from rural areas of Pakistan – flying them in via commercial airlines into Bolivia and illegally crossing to Peru and other countries. With low levels of literacy and weak geographical insights, the migrants were led to believe that they were in the United States but had instead been abandoned in South American countries. These migrants either had found themselves in immigration detention centres or were forced to do petty jobs for their survival. Given a general disconnect with the available support mechanisms, some faced court proceedings. Local media, at times, had covered instances of swathes of Pakistanis located on the Peruvian-Bolivian border held up in the local jails. The problem had increasingly been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus a number of concerned families of these migrants in Pakistan had reached out to the embassy for assistance in obtaining information about their family members. Indeed, they just wanted to know whether they were dead or alive. Accompanying these requests were earnest pleas to repatriate them to Pakistan.

Most of these Pakistanis who had come to South America were economic migrants who having come in the hope of a better life now struggled badly as COVID-19 swept through the region. With low literacy and skill levels, they

documents.



were engaged in blue-collar jobs as street vendors, hawkers, waiters and dishwashers. Their incomes often only allowed for the daily meals, a small accommodation on the outskirts of the city, and, when lucky, a small amount for remittance to their families in Pakistan. The presence of these migrants was only known to a small group of locals with whom they interacted or to other members of the Pakistani diaspora present in the city or region.

Many situations indicated that they had not been back to Pakistan for fear of losing their visa status, and in dire situations, out of sheer poverty. Stuck in a dire predicament of low income and no way of returning home, the COVID-19 pandemic further exposed their vulnerabilities and left them with a fear of succumbing to the disease. With a deep desire to return home, communications reached the Embassy of Pakistan with a heartfelt request for help. This set of diaspora soon formed part of Dr Saad's consideration. How could he best assist in a situation that knew no bounds?

"Incapacitated and in a coma for months," were words that described Haider, a young Pakistani male in Argentina. Suffering from a brain tumour, he now had a deteriorating consciousness during the COVID-19 pandemic. With local charities supporting costs of hospitalization, rising costs of care during the pandemic meant that quick intervention was required. Hence a request made to the Embassy of Pakistan and the Government of Pakistan.

Attainment of requisite clearances, ascertaining clarity of permissions, and locating the family was an uphill task for Dr Saad to tackle. This very problem formed a key component of his mitigation strategy: "How to support patients like Haider and to shield them from the onslaughts of the pandemic?"

Students on cultural exchange were also caught on the wrong side of the COVID-19 pandemic. The students of Pakistani origin, on exchange from American universities, could not leave Argentina in time and found their avenues of support shrivel. Numbering about twenty, they had been abandoned by their respective universities and left to fend for themselves with their own funds. They had no choice but to bunker down in their apartments for months as COVID-19 ravaged South America. With a plea for help to the Embassy, they requested support for sustenance and getting back to Pakistan. Their savings were not enough to sustain them, and soon than later, they would have gone hungry.

3.3.5. Despondency and Gloom in Ecuador

With a population of 17 million, Ecuador was facing a crisis in the wake of COVID-19. With the health system in tatters, there were around 3500 deaths in 2020 alone. The situation in the port city of Guayaquil was particularly alarming as international media reported bodies being left on the streets as morgues and hospitals were full of capacity (CNN, 2020), (Annex-III). Several containers had arrived in the city to serve as temporary morgues to accommodate the influx of

bodies, with authorities claiming to create space for "dignified burials". Those living in Guayaquil remained trapped in a nightmare, with no way to mourn their loved ones, not even through a proper burial (CNN, 2020). The members of the Pakistani community in Ecuador were also left frightened at those scenes and feared they could be among the dead. There was an imminent danger of cremation due to a lack of sufficient burial places, and their family members did not have the financial means to transport the bodies in case of death, prompting them to reach out to the ambassador for assistance.

3.4. Structural Weaknesses

The Rules of Business of the Government of Pakistan (1973), inter alia, assigned the Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development (OPHRD) to take care of the problems faced by Overseas Pakistanis (Ops). However, the OPHRD had focused on those countries with large Pakistani diaspora and had displayed severe incapacity to facilitate the marginalised and scattered OPs in South America.

The MoFA, despite being more proactive than other ministries, faced severe limitations in leveraging information and communication technology (ICT) in its operations. The Mission Services Wing at the MOFA had been run for years by low-level officials who were steeped in the "old paper-work tradition." These risk-averse officials would take an extraordinary time to respond to any atypical situation. The centralised decision-making hampered integrating any innovative IT solution in the rudimentary digital infrastructure of the Ministry and the embassies. During this crisis situation, the structural weaknesses were starkly exposed. A web-portal for universal access, record keeping and interactive user interface had never been contemplated. The small mission in Argentina did not have the capacity to develop such a portal and interface. The system, therefore, faltered in emergency circumstances.

One of the greatest challenges posed was disconnect between the embassy and the community. The Pakistan Citizenship Rules 1952 required every Pakistani living abroad to register at the nearest embassy or consulate. However, such a registration process had long been discontinued. The gap in law and practice had serious ramifications for the service delivery and welfare of Ops, especially in crisis situations. Except for some patchy information, the embassy had no record of Pakistanis living in its jurisdiction. That was in contrast to the practice of developed countries and even several developing countries like the Philippines, which meticulously maintained a record of their citizens abroad.

3.5. Evolving the Strategy

3.5.1. Journey in Unchartered Waters

The Ambassador had the arduous task of developing a strategy for an effective crisis management process. Now that a Pakistani diplomatic mission, with its



small staffing presence, had been put to the task of providing assistance to its diaspora, a clear roadmap and a strategy were required. An insight into the resource gap and requirements of the community was also imperative. Hence, the leadership skills of the ambassador were put to the test. He had a fairly good idea that ethics and values would “play a pivotal role in building trust during emergency preparedness as well as at the time of extension of support to the communities” (Khan et al., 2018).

Figure 4.
Resilience Framework for Public Health Emergency Preparedness



A structured coordination mechanism could provide an effective pathway for steering the decision-making process, and overseeing the implementation and recovery packages to maximize impact (Rasul, 2020). Thus, a framework for prioritising actions was developed, which would generate resilience in the communities in times of crises. Support networks were to be established in Argentina, Chile, Peru, Ecuador, Uruguay, and Paraguay. Dr Saad’s work consisted of establishing a system that incorporated dynamic communication channels and enabled community organisations and elders to distribute relief resources.

3.5.2. A Herculean Task

To identify the extent of the problem Dr Saad first had to search for ways whereby the Pakistani diaspora could be reached out easily. To build a line of communication from the ground up seemed to be a daunting task, but, he knew that the assistance the embassy had planned to deliver to them could only be classified as a Herculean task.

3.6. Establishing Dynamic Communication Channels

As the community was dispersed in large area and was separated by huge distances, a robust campaign had to be launched to register them by creating dynamic communication channels.

Figure 5

Communication Channels



Working through a small, and rather inadequate contact-list at the embassy, the initial communication was one-to-one i.e., individualised phone calls and emails. A need was felt for developing an integrated system of electronic communication. The ambassador highlighted to MoFA the need for providing technical assistance for the purpose. He instructed creation of country specific WhatsApp groups such Pak-Chile Connect, Pak-Peru Connect, Pak-Ecuador Connect, etc. WhatsApp group chats were made for the purpose of centralising communications with a dispersed diaspora base. This led to a large number of interactions via SMS, multimedia, and voice note. In turn, these acted as a humanised interface between community members and the embassy.

Central coordination of communications was ensured with a view to provide tailored solutions to problems being faced in that country. An example was the high number of deaths in Ecuador during the onset of the pandemic which required constant engagement and status updates from the local Pakistani diaspora in rural towns of the country. The embassy was also able to surmount challenges of language literacy in communication by recording special audio and video messages in Urdu & English. These motivated Pakistani compatriots in South America towards surmounting the COVID challenge together – in unison.

Figure 6

WhatsApp Groups Embassy of Pakistan, Argentina



Results measured through this mode of engagement demonstrated a need for regular moderation of messages received – ensuring that they were relevant, and that timely responses were provided to them. Through establishment of a crisis management centre at the embassy, the ambassador deputed an official towards the management of individualised scenarios of need. These consisted of need for food, issues of deportation and imprisonment, contraction of COVID-19, and of repatriation back to Pakistan. By way of operationalisation, the WhatsApp groups in tandem with the crisis centre placed a greater emphasis on service provision by the embassy.

Similarly, the ambassador instructed the staff to develop Facebook and Twitter platforms ensuring that most of the Pakistanis could readily access information provided by the mission. They were kept abreast of the Government of Pakistan’s travel advisories. Noting that an uncertainty was present all across several South American countries, these centralized lines of communication represented the ambassador’s desire to remain in touch with the community

dispersed across the region.

3.7. Surmounting Operational Hurdles

3.7.1. Self-Assessment of Needs-No Question Asked

The need assessment about the vulnerable Pakistanis was carried out by the Embassy. It developed a bi-lingual (Urdu and English) Google Form, with a simple questionnaire asking for contact information and national identity card number along with a solemn declaration stating that the person considered him or her as a deserving recipient of assistance from the embassy. The form was propagated through word of mouth and various communication mediums including emails, *WhatsApp*, *Facebook* and *webinars*. If a Pakistani was to discreetly declare himself or herself as 'vulnerable' – the embassy would extend support, no questions asked. It was thought, arguably, that honour-based ethics would prevail upon any request for support. With an underpinning message that the Embassy of Pakistan would provide '*all forms of necessary support*' - it was hoped that community morale would be buoyed by the offer. As the entries started filing in, clear trend patterns were established, cities where most support was required were delineated.

3.7.2. Building Trust

The well-known academic and writer, Francis Fukuyama had expounded that transaction costs of business were lower in societies with high level of trust than those of others (Fukuyama, 1995). The Ambassador decided to trust the community members and sanctioned extension of the requisite assistance to all those who had asked for it without any exception. The transparency and confidentiality not only engendered trust between the embassy and the community, but also led to an effective utilisation of the available resources in a timely manner. For their part, community members were baffled by this real time engagement from an embassy which had not reached out to them in years, and which had now developed an active crisis management process.

3.7.3. Harnessing Potential of Community Organisations

The engagement of Pakistani community organisations with diplomatic missions had always been circumstantial. As South America became the new epicentre of COVID-19, establishing greater contact with the Pakistani community became imperative. To harness the true potential of the community organisations, the ambassador had set forth the framework for robust engagement with them. Under this system, the organisations would be provided funds for local purchase of food and other items which were to be distributed to recipients in their locations. The lists of the recipients were provided by the embassy, which had gathered the information through electronic means. Utmost confidentiality of those requiring assistance was ensured so as not to divulge individualized circumstances. While local

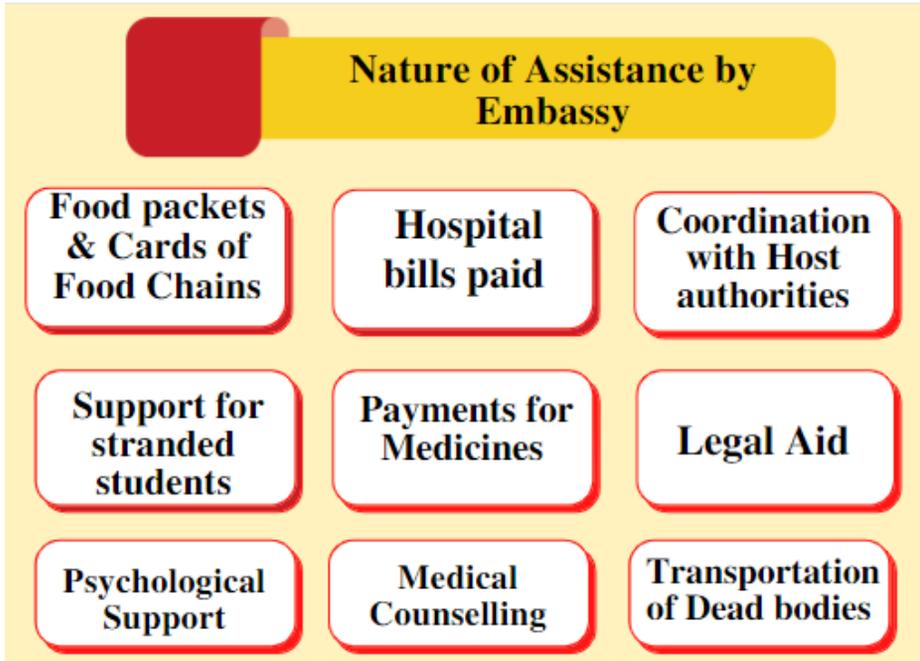


sensitivities were incorporated through involvement of volunteers, the system proved beneficial and cost-effective. The daunting task of distributing food ration and funds to such a wide-spread community was made possible with the logistic support of community leaders.

3.7.4. Mobilising Pakistani Doctors

Recognising the importance of Pakistani doctors in the embassy's jurisdiction, the ambassador contacted and convinced them to extend medical and psychological support to the vulnerable Pakistanis in their neighbourhoods and beyond. The embassy created a database and a structure through which community members and their families could get pro-bono guidance from Pakistani doctors, as and when needed, in Urdu and Spanish languages. Thus these Pakistani doctors became a veritable arm of the Mission.

Figure 7
Nature of Assistance by Embassy



3.7.5. The Assistance Package

The Embassy of Pakistan in Argentina was able to provide food rations, grocery vouchers, limited cash support, medical and psychological support, and reliable information to the community dispersed in a vast area in six countries. The idea was to provide a basic level of support to each and every Pakistani and to ensure that no one remained hungry and was not forced upon to work in a dangerous

pandemic setting.

After consultations, it was decided to provide a basic sustenance package consisting of rice, lentils, oil, spices, flour, gram flour, sugar, dry milk and tea through community elders and organisations. The embassy provided requisite finances to focal persons in each and every country so as to save bank charges on individual transfer of funds to the recipients. The community members who were located in far off places were provided pre-paid cards of food chain stores through courier services. The students stranded in Buenos Aires were provided cash amounts for meeting boarding, lodging and food expenses. Payments for hospital bills of several Pakistanis were also arranged by the embassy. Legal assistance was provided by hiring advocates for pleading the cases of the Pakistanis in distress or in detention.

3.7.6. Psychological Support

The pandemic created several psychological issues among communities across the globe. Unknown fears, lockdown, loss of employment and other issues compounded the rootless and weak Pakistani community as well. Healthcare systems in those countries were left in turmoil and were on the verge of collapse as thousands of new cases were found daily and hundreds were dying. Pakistani doctors provided necessary counselling and psychological support to the community through a structured framework created by the embassy.

As civic facilities had broken down in several cities, burial of dead bodies as per Muslim rites became almost impossible. With the closure of airlines, the transportation of dead bodies to Pakistan had not remained an option. In the backdrop of imminent danger of cremation, even the burial of bodies within the host countries had become a nightmare for the Pakistani communities who were frantically contacting the embassy to provide some assurance.

3.7.7. Allaying Concerns regarding Cremation

Thus the embassy formally approached the host governments requesting them not to allow cremation of any Pakistani who might die during the pandemic. The ambassador had penned several formal communications underscoring importance of burial in Islam and how forced cremation was a violation of those values. Furthermore, he had held several meetings with counterparts and expressed that the embassy would bear the cost of storage and ultimate transportation of dead-bodies to Pakistan, if and when the situation arose. Upon being properly sensitised, the interlocutors assured all possible assistance to the mission in that regard. The embassy was instrumental in the transportation of three dead bodies from Argentina and Chile to Pakistan during the lockdown. These timely actions allayed the concerns of the community.



3.7.8. Leadership and Team Building

The organising of community leaders, doctors and social workers was made possible by the leadership and team building skills of the ambassador. He galvanised community self-help initiatives. This had a multiplier effect in surmounting the challenges posed by the pandemic to one of the most vulnerable Pakistani communities around the globe. To some, the ambassador played a 'provider' role, while in many other cases, his role went well beyond this in establishing a viable and vibrant support system for the Pakistani community as a whole. It is certain that the support provided to the community during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic could not have been possible without Ambassador's adaptive leadership.

The outreach and resolve of the Ambassador made the task a great success. This was a great learning opportunity and a source of inspiration for the diplomatic community, government officials and the civil society.

3.7.9. Expression of Gratitude

As the ordeal and gravity of the pandemic declined, the community experienced a sense of cohesion, camaraderie and self-assurance. The community had expressed deep appreciation and gratitude to the mission for the outreach during the lockdown. Hundreds of messages were received on social media platforms, thanking the embassy and the Government of Pakistan for providing support even at the remotest corner of the world. One such message is reproduced below:

"In my darkest hour – the Embassy of Pakistan stood by my side. They supported me, and provisioned for food and income support. The support was life changing. It's as if I have a home away from home." – a Pakistani citizen residing in Cuenca, Ecuador.

3.7.10. Energised by the Positive Outcomes

The Embassy team was energised by the tremendous outcomes, positive feedback and messages from the community. The Foreign Minister acknowledged the efforts of the mission in supporting the community. A community leader who had joined hands with the embassy in orchestrating a systematic campaign of assistance in Chile and Peru, was included in the Foreign Minister's Honours list for the year 2021(Annex- IV).

The embassy received acclaim on both traditional and social media from government officials, diplomats, anthropologists, social workers and the civil society organisations for its successful campaign of assistance for the Pakistani community.

3.8. Analytical Frameworks

Figure 8
Adaptive Leadership



3.8.1. Adaptive Leadership

In this model, leaders utilise experimentation and smart risks to adapt individuals to rapidly changing environment. "Growth occurs when an organisation discards ineffective ways of operation" (Cuofano, 2021).

In the Pakistani context, embassy-community relations have always been very complicated. Having inherited elitist British traditions, generally ambassadors and officers tend to maintain an exclusive, insular and elitist outlook towards common people. The Pakistanis, who had immigrated to the South American countries illegally on forged documents, had lived under perpetual fear of deportation. They viewed the embassy with great suspicion as that was a vital link in the deportation process. Keeping such a view of the embassy, the community, therefore, had maintained a minimal link with the Mission.

Heifetz et al. (2009) expounded that the adaptive leadership would mobilize a group of individuals "to handle tough challenges and emerge triumphant in the end". The transformation of the hitherto adversarial relationship of an institution with the community into a cooperative discourse was an uphill task. Taking cognisance of socio-cultural nuances and a comprehension of the regulative paradigm, the ambassador and his team were able to portray the embassy as friend rather than a foe. The ambassador was thus able to metamorphose rapport of the embassy officials with the community

successfully through the adaptive leadership style, which became a prime asset during the campaign and afterwards.

3.8.2. Indic, Islamic and Regulative Framework

The Pakistani community leaders and doctors had known the plight of the poor and needy in their neighbourhood during the pandemic. They had an idea about the people who would not seek help despite being in dire need not just due to the earlier adversarial relationship but also due to utter restraint and sheer shyness. They were well aware of the Indic traditions of *langar* and community kitchens and folk Islamic traditions of daily food distributions at *dargahs* and *sufi* shrines for all and sundry, irrespective of caste, creed and social status. The inspirations were also drawn from the core Islamic traditions of helping people in hour of their need. Being well-grounded in local and Pakistani socio-cultural norms and its regulative framework, the community leaders and Pakistani doctors provided the best advice for surmounting various hindrances in extending assistance to a community which was widely dispersed in an area of 5.7 million square kilometres. While the ambassador's leadership had synergised the community service efforts, they were also motivated by the Indic traditions of service to the community and the Islamic principles of reward in the hereafter.

The Government of Pakistan's regulative framework for extending financial support was rigid and bland. It had not and did not envisage emergent issues and sudden challenges that a diplomatic mission could face during a crisis of such a gigantic proportion. Lately, the diaspora communities, had been theorised as extra-territorial extension of state (Amjad, 2017). Moreover, hand-holding, especially during calamities, was an established principle of modern statecraft. It was in that backdrop that the Embassy of the Pakistan in Argentina had excelled in community service, which was appreciated and hailed by local authorities, diplomats, social workers, anthropologists and the Pakistani community.

3.8.3. Cultural Nuances in Low & High Context Societies

Being a high charity giving group, Pakistanis would donate generously, especially during emergency situations (Najam, 2006). Having brought up in a high context society with strong familial bonds, Pakistanis would gravitate towards each other in times of crises. That was amply evident when, on the request of the ambassador, the community organisations and Pakistani doctors selflessly volunteered in South America to provide help to their compatriots confronting hardships during the lockdown.

In low context societies people employ linear logic (Hall & Hall, 1990). The regulatory framework and guidelines were usually provided by the health and city authorities. Those highly structured communications provided standardised operating procedures for handling crisis situations. The people of

European descent in South America usually followed those regulations meticulously. On the other hand, the Pakistani diaspora had maintained their socio-culture ethos in foreign lands and had tried to transpose practices of their high context society in the local environments.

In their motherland, the picking of non-verbal cues was of paramount importance in comprehending dynamics and undercurrents of any problem. Their society valued group membership and cohesion with intense involvement between each other. They were used to applying 'spiral logic' in any complex situation. Furthermore, Pakistanis, wherever they lived, had continued to remain attached to the value and belief system of the homeland. During the pandemic, a section of the community had thought that some conspiracy had been hatched and the vaccination drive could be utilised for contact tracing at any given time. In allaying those misconceptions, the role of the embassy had become pivotal. It had the onerous task of making the Pakistani community adjust to the socio-cultural norms and the regulative framework of the new environment. The embassy had established a vibrant structure with defined responsibilities and robust line of communication, which played an important role in bringing the community together and to behave with maturity in a 'foreign land'.

3.9. Lessons Learnt

3.9.1. Transforming Adversarial Relations into a Friendly Construct

The goodwill developed during the campaign transformed the perceived adversarial relations between the embassy and a section of the community into a friendly construct. Hitherto the connection of the Pakistan mission with the community was disjointed and flawed, quite out of line with best modern practices. The archaic complaint-based, reactive – rather than proactive relations – were highly vulnerable to breakdowns, especially in extraordinary situations. Even, a centralised database having contact details of the community and their families was not available. During the pandemic, the weaknesses of the system were broadly exposed. The need, therefore, was felt to establish a robust and dynamic connection between the Pakistani community and the embassy for keeping constant contact with them through emails, text messages, e-newsletters and social media platforms for dissemination of useful information.

3.9.2. Out of Box Solutions to Community Issues

With the Pakistani community in South America being dispersed widely in small pockets throughout the continent, it was difficult for the mission to extend assistance during the campaign. The policy framework for supporting the marginalised, vulnerable and dispossessed Pakistani diaspora in South America

could only be established with involvement of all relevant stakeholders. In that regard, Pakistan's embassy in Argentina exhibited leadership in proposing out of box solutions to the problems.

As the global scenario and governmental approaches to the COVID-19 pandemic changed owing to evolving realities, it is paramount that insights raised from this case study are considered by senior decision-makers as an exemplar for future crisis management scenarios.

4. Conclusion

The Pakistani community in Argentina, Chile, Peru, Ecuador, Paraguay and Uruguay felt comforted during COVID-19 pandemic by the proactive involvement of the Embassy of Pakistan based in Buenos Aires. The ambassador courageously steered the whole campaign of provision of assistance to the Pakistani community. He engaged prominent members of the community and galvanised community self-help initiatives which had a multiplier effect on provision of support to the needy at their doorsteps. On receipt of feedback, the ambassador would reflect, calibrate and suitably modify the plan of assistance to the community.

The Embassy team supported the widely dispersed community through not just monetary assistance and supply of food and other items, etc. but also psychological support that was extended to the community for providing succour and relief through unforeseeable situations. ICT and social media tools were employed to create a robust communication system which provided reliable and timely information during the lockdown. The transaction cost and logistical hurdles were amicably handled by executing novel solutions. For some, the embassy played a 'provider' role and, to many others, it went over and above in establishing an impeccable support system. The community expressed their deep appreciation and gratitude to the mission for its outreach in a troubling time.

A deep sense of camaraderie was developed within the Pakistani diaspora and a new wave of self-assurance, coherence and engagement blossomed. In later months, the community demonstrated their loyalty to the motherland by organising Kashmir related activities and celebrating Pakistan's Independence Day in befitting manner. The ambassador's efforts in strengthening the linkages between the mission and the community became a source of inspiration for other Pakistani diplomatic missions in the region.

5. Recommendations

5.1. An Integrated Electronic System for Service Delivery

An integrated electronic system for registration of Pakistani community and record keeping should be developed for better service delivery and

coordination among various stakeholders, especially during crisis situations. For this purpose, single portal should be established by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Islamabad.

5.2. Development of Welfare Schemes

Targeted welfare schemes should be developed and executed in consultation with the community members. The details of the schemes should be placed on the website of the missions. Pakistan Community Welfare and Education Fund (PCWE&F) should be made available to Pakistan missions in South America for carrying out the schemes. The schemes should be periodically reviewed and calibrated to ensure that the community was getting the requisite assistance.

5.3. Leveraging Community Organisations

The Overseas Pakistanis in South America should be encouraged to develop strong framework of community organisations. They should be provided financial assistance by the missions for empowering and bringing coherence within the community.

5.4. Support for Small Missions

MoFA should provide support to small missions especially during crisis situations. The officers and support staff should be provided short trainings in different modules including ITC at the Foreign Service Academy and other institutions before their deployment in missions abroad.

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