

Strengthening Pakistan's Health Defense: Reflections from the Inaugural National Health Preparedness and Resilience Conference

Sana Rehman¹, Ahsanullah Mirbahar²

¹Central Research Centre, ²Health Research Institute, National Institutes of Health, Islamabad.

In a rapidly evolving global health landscape marked by climate instability, infectious disease outbreaks, and natural disasters, the concept of health preparedness has moved from the periphery to the center of national security agendas. For Pakistan, this paradigm shift took a significant leap forward with the successful convening of the 1st National Health Preparedness and Resilience Conference, organized by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), Islamabad. Held under the banner of innovation and collaboration, the conference marked a historic step toward institutionalizing resilience and proactive health security in the country. It brought together a cross-section of key stakeholders, including public health experts, disaster management professionals, policymakers, and academics, to identify actionable strategies in building a health system that can anticipate, absorb, and adapt to both sudden and sustained health emergencies.

The conference did not merely reiterate the importance of being prepared for emergencies, it emphasized the need to embed resilience as a foundational component of the health system. The distinction is critical. Preparedness often implies readiness for known threats, while resilience denotes a system's capacity to absorb shocks, continue functioning, and emerge stronger from crises.¹ By framing the agenda around both preparedness and resilience, the NIH Islamabad signaled a shift toward holistic health governance where emergency response is integrated with long-term planning, community engagement, and systems strengthening.

Corresponding Author:

Sana Rehman

Central Research Centre, Health Research Institute,
National Institutes of Health, Islamabad.

Email: sana.rehman.hri@nih.org.pk

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Among the focal areas, diarrheal diseases often regarded as endemic but controllable were given center stage. These illnesses, typically linked to poor sanitation, unsafe water, and limited health education, are not only preventable but serve as indicators of wider systemic vulnerabilities. As climate change increasingly disrupts water quality and food safety, diarrheal outbreaks are becoming more frequent and harder to contain, especially in underserved regions.² One of the most impactful aspects of the conference was its cross-sectoral and inter-institutional approach. Representatives from the Ministry of Health, National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), academic institutions, and international partners contributed to dialogue sessions, highlighting the essential role of collaboration. This model mirrors international best practices such as those embedded in federal emergency management agency's Prep Toolkit or the United State National Response Framework where preparedness is treated as a shared national responsibility.³ In Pakistan's context, where bureaucratic silos and resource limitations often hinder timely response, this open and inclusive approach is not just necessary it is transformative.

The conference also emphasized the importance of innovation and capacity building in preparedness efforts. From investing in early warning systems and digital surveillance platforms to enhancing laboratory networks and emergency logistics, discussions reflected a forward-looking mindset. Equally important was the emphasis on human resource development. Capacity building at all levels community health workers, local responders, clinicians, and planners is critical for transforming policy into practice.⁴ Preparedness cannot reside only at the top; it must be active and operationalized on the ground. Pakistan's health system has faced numerous stress tests in recent years, from the COVID-19 pandemic to devastating floods. These events exposed not only resource gaps but also coordination failures and weaknesses in local infrastructure.⁵ The conference leveraged

these hard-earned lessons to propose more integrated models of risk reduction, disaster response, and public communication.

A notable example was the discussion around community engagement as a pillar of preparedness. Educating citizens on hygiene, vaccination, and disaster response enhances not only the reach of health systems but also public trust a commodity often overlooked but critical in crisis moments. The success of this inaugural conference should not remain symbolic. For the momentum to continue, several follow-up actions are essential, including institutionalize annual preparedness drills, dedicated budget lines for health resilience, decentralize response capacity, monitor progress through benchmarked indicators, foster academic and research partnerships.⁶

Conclusively the Conference has laid a crucial foundation for reshaping how Pakistan approaches health security. However, resilience is not built in a day or a single conference. It requires a long-term, multisectoral commitment one that integrates science, policy, public engagement, and sustained investment. As the NIH and its partners move forward, the true measure of success will be how effectively these strategies translate into safer, healthier, and more prepared communities across Pakistan.

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