

**International Student House - Washington DC**

**Varsha Thebo**

*Oximeters for Peace in Rural Sindh*

**Sindh, Pakistan**

### **Introduction**

In almost a year of living in a global pandemic, it has become evident that the burden of COVID-19 is most felt in fragile economies and under-resourced countries like Pakistan. The multiplicity of factors, such as poor governance, corruption, and lack of social infrastructure have worsened the situation for the most marginalized communities, particularly those located in the most rural areas. The absence of a strong healthcare system became particularly consequential for those living on the periphery. These patterns of inequality, further exacerbated by the virus have given rise to internal conflicts and disturbed the peace of the marginalized communities. Lack of adequate care and information have engendered harmful beliefs about the origin of virus, making it a communal and ethnic issue. This phenomenon has not only further weakened the social fabric of the region but also made it vulnerable to more violence and conflict. As health is not just the absence of disease, similarly peace is also not just the absence of violence. While health requires a state of mental, physical and social well-being, peace requires that similar connection within the societal context. Health and peace are interdependent. Health is always affected by conflict whereas peace is fostered through health promotion. This project takes into account the interconnection of peace and health and therefore tries to address the brewing conflict in the wake of the virus through a preventive health initiative.

This politicization of COVID-19 is also evident in the districts of Mirpurkhas and Umerkot in Sindh, Pakistan. The Davis Peace Project Grant will be instrumental in addressing a few significant challenges facing these communities in rural Sindh. The project will be accomplished with the help of a healthcare facility on the ground called the Bhitai Welfare Hospital.

### **Project Detail:**

Bhitai Welfare Hospital (BWH) is situated in the outskirts of Mirpurkhas. It has been established to serve the people of Districts of Mirpurkhas and Umerkot, two of the most marginalized and often most intentionally overlooked districts in Pakistan. Majority of the people living in these areas are religious and ethnic minorities with little to no access to electricity, means of transportation, or a decent livelihood. In addition to that, COVID-19 has added another layer of challenges for these communities. In the absence of proper equipment for paramedics and proper channels for information for the marginalized communities, there is a continuous surge in the spread of virus as well as a rise in morbidity. One of the major reasons is the lack of measures for early detection of blood-oxygen levels in the patients. Although paramedics visit these rural areas once a week for free health camps through BWH's Community Outreach Program, they are severely understaffed and ill-equipped to handle the burgeoning impact of COVID cases in the rural communities. From calling the virus a hoax to blaming different religious groups for the spread, lack of proper information has spread a wave of misinformation and added another layer of conflict. This project aims to tackle this problem in two parts:

### **Part I:**

Bhitai Welfare Hospital Community Outreach team will be provided with Pulse Oximeters to monitor the blood-oxygen levels of people on their community visits. Pulse oximetry is a non-invasive method for monitoring a person's oxygen saturation in the blood. The blood-oxygen levels plummet in a few Covid-19 cases silently and it becomes a major cause of morbidity. This could be prevented with pulse oximeters through an early detection of symptoms which will be helpful in determining the proper course of action. If the symptoms can be detected early and the management started quickly then the associated complications can be minimized and the long-term outcome can be improved. The oximeter readings will enable the experts to propose the appropriate intervention.

This will also help reduce the burden on hospitals and other care facilities that are already struggling with limited facilities and throngs of patients. Officials who have taken advantage of oximeters around the world have noted that “oximeters have emerged as a game changer in saving precious lives.”<sup>1</sup>

In the debilitating economy of Pakistan, many companies are profiteering by increasing the price of oximeters thereby making it even harder for welfare hospitals to secure them. With this project, Bhitai Welfare Hospital will be able to procure the pulse oximeters needed to provide better medical assistance to the otherwise neglected marginalized communities of Mirpurkhas and Umerkot.

## **Part II:**

The second component of this project is to tackle the spread of misinformation by informing the communities about the WHO recommended protocols, in their local language. This will be achieved through a call for volunteers (in May 2021) from the urban localities of these districts who will travel to the established health camps in the rural regions. These volunteers will translate the information in Sindhi (the local language of the region), visit the villages, organize the socially distanced focus groups, distribute masks/sanitizers and describe the importance of following best practices. Through this information campaign, people will also be able to take charge in case the virus breaks out in their homes and communities. Misinformation has adverse effects on societies and should be tackled carefully especially in the case of a global emergency. One of the major steps towards achieving that is to give these communities relevant information in their own language.

COVID-19 is especially hard to tackle in areas where “conspiracy beliefs” result in the lack of trust in medical treatments. This proliferation of misinformation is especially harmful in these rural communities as people not only embroil in conflicts in the face of fear and uncertainty but also often resort to harmful practices for treatments. Misinformation is often regarded a public health issue and is usually prominent in the communities marginalized by structural inequality and violence.<sup>2</sup>

## **Why this matters?**

In countries like Pakistan where governments not only lack the capacity but also willfully ignore certain groups of people, it is important to provide targeted support to these communities. It is essential to help these communities to recover from this crisis and it can only be achieved by providing them with necessary care and proper information. This project will promote peace by reducing vulnerabilities, fighting stigmatization, dispelling harmful myths and maintaining social cohesion in the time of physical distancing.

## **About the applicant**

Varsha Thebo has recently earned her master’s in Development Economics from the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. She is currently working as the Hillary Rodham Clinton Research Fellow at the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security.

---

<sup>1</sup><https://health.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/medical-devices/delhi-govt-provided-over-60000-oximeters-to-covid-19-patients-in-city-official-data/78348162>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7241063/>