Statement of Dr. Sania Nishtar
Chairperson, Benazir Income Support Program

It has been over a month since I accepted the Government of Pakistan’s invitation to chair the Benazir Income Support Program (BISP), Pakistan’s largest safety net institution, which currently runs a PKR 125 Billion income-support program for 5.7 million poor women with an envisaged impact for over 37 million individuals, nationally.

Inviting an apolitical person to lead the organization is evidence of the government’s intentions to depoliticize this institution, which I welcomed. It is deeply humbling to have responsibility for accruing benefits to millions at the lowest rung of poverty.

While I believe in the importance of the institution and appreciate the contributions of the management and many stakeholders, I am also conscious of the imperative of reform and have, therefore, taken careful stock of the situation.

Immediate priority: Prioritizing integrity of systems for an effective safety net

My immediate priority is to strengthen BISP as a Safety Net. In this regard, I plan to move ahead on two fronts quickly—before 2018 ends. First, putting organizational governance in order by making sure the new board is effectively and meaningfully engaged; and secondly, initiating processes to plug critical systems gaps.

BISP has many legacy issues, which successive managements have strived to address. Several gaps have been plugged, but many critical gaps remain to be closed. BISP’s payment mechanism needs a redesign. There is need to strengthen fiduciary systems, financial management and procurement systems, internal controls, and capacity and systems for planning. My priority is to institutionalize risk management and assurance, transparency, and a culture of evidence-based decision-making. I am deeply conscious that those that benefit from the program are voiceless, which is why beneficiary empowerment and respect is also high on the list of priorities. In this regard, I will work with the board and management to reform BISP’s systems pillars.

Once critical gaps are plugged, the existing safety net system can be expanded, and the adequacy of the benefits can be increased as per government policy, especially with regard to complementary investments for human capital development (conditional cash transfers for nutrition, health, and education) and graduation programs. In addition, demand-side safety net instruments can be introduced for protection against crises and catastrophic shocks—a salient safety net feature.

Vision for the future: From Safety Net to Universal Social Protection

Going forward, I envision BISP as a dynamic digital Social Protection ecosystem for the future. In such an ecosystem, it would be possible to develop targeted policy interventions, and deliver precise means tested benefits to the poor and vulnerable by employing big data analytics and by tracking real-time information about the evolution of the beneficiary status, to make social protection adaptive. This
will enable time-bound support for income stabilization and protection against catastrophic shocks on the one hand, and the creation of economic opportunities to decrease welfare-dependency, through relevant partnerships, on the other. In addition, this will also move Pakistan closer to delivering on its global commitment to Sustainable Development Goal 1.3, which entails “[developing] nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all”. A strategic planning process will commence at the forthcoming board meeting on December 24, with a view to commencing action in these areas.

I look forward to working with all stakeholders to ensure that we deliver on our promise of lifting millions of women and their families out of poverty.