



REFORMS FOR
A BRIGHTER
FUTURE
TIME TO DECIDE

PRELIMINARY DRAFT FOR
CONSULTATIONS AND DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION NOTE 2

IMPROVING LEARNING OUTCOMES

Sustainable and Resilient Solutions
to Pakistan's Learning Crisis



WORLD BANK GROUP

Sustainable and Resilient Solutions to Pakistan's Learning Crisis

More than **three-quarters** of **10-year-old** children in Pakistan are unable to **read and understand** an age-appropriate paragraph – a phenomenon that has been termed Learning Poverty.

Investment in education has been low, despite a growing population, while inefficiency and a lack of prioritization have meant that the limited investment in education is not used effectively. Special attention is needed to get girls into school and learning. Immediate actions should be taken to build school capacity (particularly for girls), prioritize foundational skills including reading in all schools, embrace multigrading, and adopt data driven decisions. Within the next five years, priority actions are to support teachers to have the right skills, invest in early childhood education, teach children in a language they understand, and significantly increase the amount and efficiency of the education budget. These investments will help Pakistan bring more children into school, staying longer, and learning more.



The Problem

Pakistan is Facing a Long-standing Learning Crisis

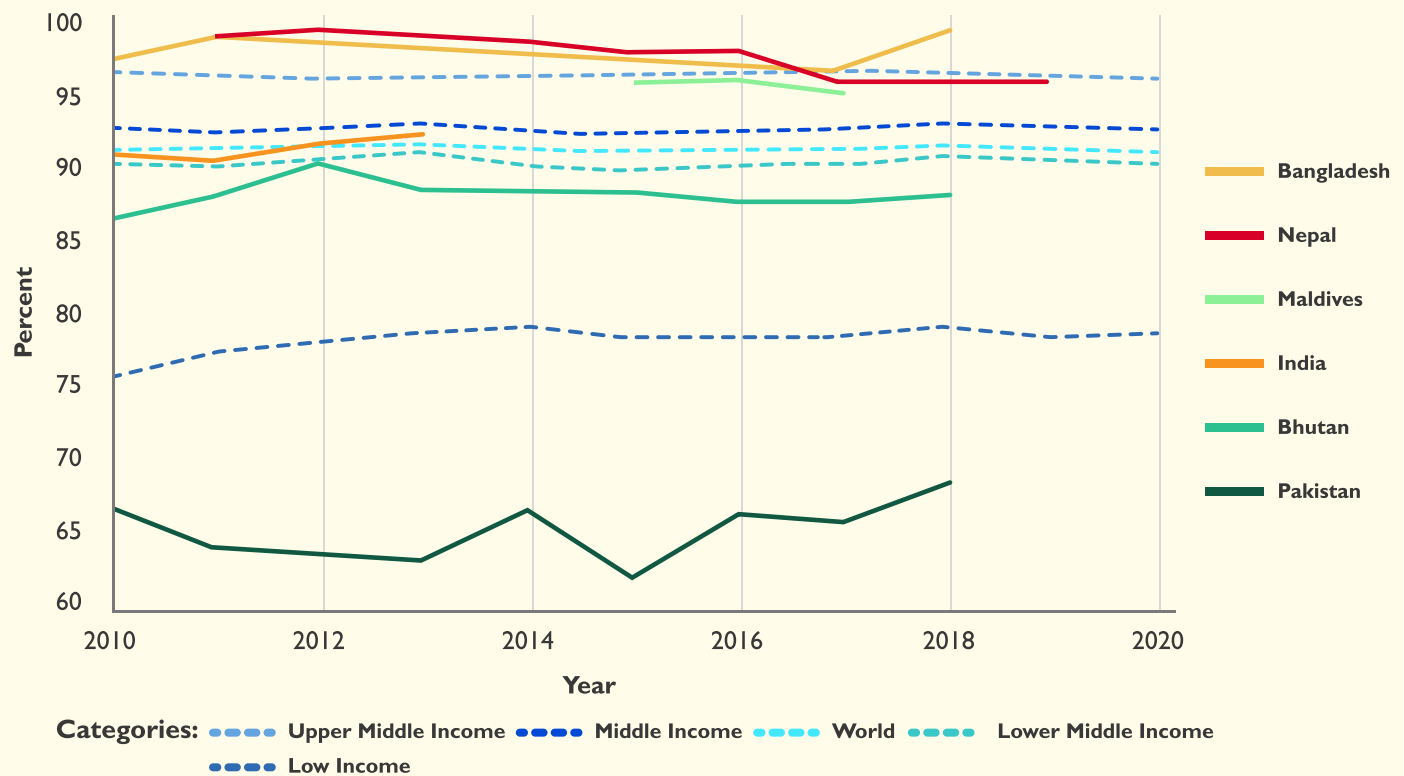
More than three out of every four (75%) of Pakistan's ten-year old children cannot read and understand a simple text. 'Learning Poverty', as it is called, is so high in Pakistan because many children remain out of school (about 20 million). But even when enrolled in school about two-thirds of children do not learn to read¹. Enrollment has increased but continues to lag other countries in the region (Figure 1). The net enrollment ratio in primary education has been increasing since 2015, but is still at 67.57%, as many children start school late and are overage for primary school. Low rates of enrollment in early childhood education – ranging from 16% in rural areas to 26% in urban areas – mean children are not ready to start school on time.

Girls face greater challenges in their access to and retention in schools. Many more girls (12 million) than boys (8 million) are not in school, denying them even the basic chance to learn to read. Key challenges that affect enrolment, attendance, retention, and learning include long distances to school, especially at post-primary levels, overcrowded classrooms even when schools are accessible, and lack of adequate, functional toilets. And because Pakistan's population continues to grow quickly, in part because girls drop out of school and start having children at an early age, the problem becomes harder and more resource intensive to solve. Given high drop-out rates, incentives for school progression can motivate higher educational attainment and improve employment opportunities.

¹ Minimum proficiency levels are set globally by the Global Alliance for Monitoring of Learning led by the UNESCO Institute of Statistics. <https://gaml.uis.unesco.org/>

Figure 1: Net Enrollment Ratio, Primary, Both Sexes

Cross Country Comparison



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (uis.unesco.org), as of February 2020

School closures during COVID-pandemic and the 2022 floods have deepened the learning crisis.

During the COVID pandemic, all schools were closed for 18 months, prompting dropouts and learning losses. One common reason for dropouts was parents’ views that their children would not be able to catch up with learning. Over 17,000 schools were damaged by the floods, impacting over 2.6 million enrolled children who were out of school for seven weeks on average.² Six months on, one-third of households expect that their children may need to be taken out of school to work.³ Following COVID-19 and the floods, estimates of Learning Poverty are at 80%. Concerted effort is needed to re-enroll students who have dropped out, and introduce remedial learning to cover learning losses.⁴

Pakistan cannot achieve its development goals without addressing the learning crisis.

Education confers a broad range of economic benefits: it helps people get jobs especially in the formal sector; increases people’s incomes and employability, improves economic mobility, and enables families to escape poverty. It increases individuals’ and families’ resilience to shocks. The skills students obtain are associated with greater productivity, technology adoption, and innovation, and education – and the skills it confers – contributes to higher growth. Pakistan’s Human Capital Index (HCI) value of 0.41⁵ was lower than the South Asia average of 0.48, comparable more to Sub-Saharan Africa average (0.40).

² Government of Pakistan et al., (2022) Pakistan Post-Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA)
³ Dahlin, Lauren; Barón, Juan D., (2023) Children and Their Families Six Months After Pakistan’s Floods. Special Note; July 2023. Washington, DC: World Bank. <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/39978> License: CC BY-NC 3.0 IGO.
⁴ See Geven, K., Fazili, S., Tahir, A. and Fasih, T., (2022) SMS Girl Data Insights: 2, for an overview of pandemic impact in Pakistan. See Baron, J., Bend, M., Roseo, E., and Farrakh, I., (2022) Floods in Pakistan: Human Development at Risk, for data on flood impact.
⁵ This means that a child born today will only attain 41 percent of the human capital she could attain by age 18 if she had access to the complete education and full health. This figure does not take into account further loss of human capital from the recent floods.



Recommendations

Pakistan has the knowledge and ability to tackle the learning crisis. There are eight key priorities,⁶ four priorities to be addressed in the first year, and three priorities to be addressed within five years.

First Year Priorities: build school capacity (particularly for girls), prioritize foundational skills including reading in all schools, embrace multigrading, and adopt data driven decisions.

1. **Expand access to schooling, especially for girls.** Pakistan has had periods of expanding schooling quickly through the elimination of school fees in the public sector and the policy of establishing both public and private schools within 1 km from households. However, there is still a considerable shortage of classrooms and lack of safety to/from and at school, especially for girls. Public funds for new classrooms and schools are needed but remain scarce. As a complementary short-term solution, provinces should continue to scale up Public-Private Partnerships, with clear guidelines on establishing government subsidized low-cost private schools in areas where there are no public schools. Public campaigns to promote enrollment, highlighting the benefits of schooling, have proven to be highly cost-effective.
2. **Make a daily literacy/reading lesson mandatory in all public schools across the country.** The ability to read and comprehend text impacts a student's learning ability in all other learning areas. Schools therefore need to focus on developing reading skills from the earliest grades, by dedicating at least 90 minutes per day to reading activities, focusing first on teaching children to read, and then on reinforcing reading fluency through routine reading practice. Policy makers can build on home-grown initiatives like the Pakistan Reading Project⁷, or the Room-to-Read⁸ project, which have shown that all children can learn to read with the right materials and continuous support for teachers. Given the large number of out of school children, such programs should also be targeted at parents so that all children, regardless of enrollment status, are encouraged to read.
3. **Recognize the reality of multigrade teaching and provide support to teachers.** Many schools do not have enough teachers for every grade. For example, 44% of schools in Sindh have two classrooms or less. This situation is likely to continue for decades, given the growing student population. Teachers need support for multigrade teaching, so that they can target teaching appropriately to students' needs. This means specific training, appropriate materials, and support that focuses on whether children are learning, not on whether the textbook has been used.
4. **Invest in publishing education data and using data improve governance and outcomes.** All provinces have established data systems, with regular monitoring of schools by administrators and collection of data for decision making. Some provinces are also introducing unique identifiers for students, so that students can be tracked as they move between grades and public schools. This data needs to be used actively to set targets and to track progress and change policy in case there is no improvement. Importantly, systems to monitor student learning outcomes need to be improved across all levels and this data used to target support to teachers and schools. Furthermore, the system should leverage technology and data to engage with parents and communities to improve governance within education. The recently established Pakistan Institute for Education (PIE) has already led the standardization of a core set of education indicators across the provinces, delivered the 2023 National Achievement Test, and enrolled Pakistan into the international Literacy and Numeracy Assessment. Data collected through these interventions will be shared with provinces to inform prioritization and resource allocation, and decision making. It can be used to set targets that are standardized across all provinces, so that improvements can be benchmarked nationally and against international standards.

⁶ Beyond education, Pakistan must find ways to tackle its population growth as it puts huge pressure on the education system.

⁷ The Pakistan Reading Project was a USAID-funded project, implemented by all four provinces to help improve reading instruction in public schools.

⁸ The Room-to-Read project is an international project to create low-cost reading material, which has been implemented in Pakistan by ITA to produce low-cost multi-language reading material.

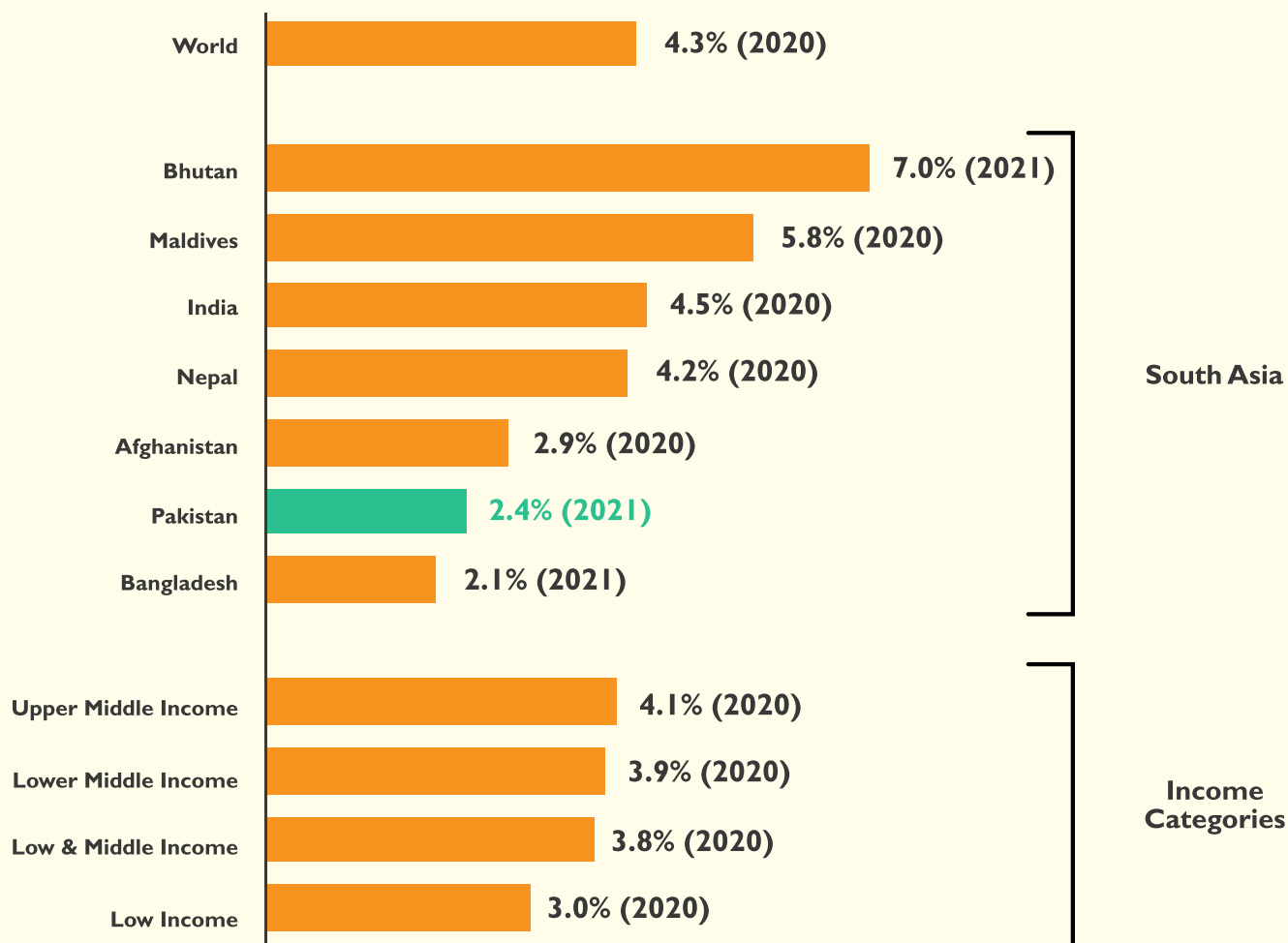
Five Year Priorities: support teachers to have the right skills, invest in early childhood education, and increase the amount and efficiency of the education budget.

- 5. Ensure teachers have the right skills and knowledge and are equitably distributed among schools.** Good progress has been made, for instance, by introducing classroom-based teacher coaching, setting clear targets for districts and schools, and recruiting teachers based on qualifications. The next steps are to ensure all teachers know the subjects they are teaching and use effective teaching practices, through introducing an objective examination of subject content for new teachers and for re-certification of existing teachers, and the use of classroom observation tools.⁹ In addition, transparent rules and expectations on career progression and incentives are needed to ensure adequate teachers are assigned to and teach in rural schools.
- 6. Increase the supply of high-quality early children education and parenting programs.** Children in Pakistan who enroll in early childhood education (ECE) are more likely to be developmentally on track at age 3 and 4 than children who never enroll. In Punjab, for instance where the province sets quality standards for early childhood education and monitors these actively, 74% of children aged 3 and 4 who attended an ECE program were rated as developmentally on track compared with 52% of children not enrolled. If Pakistan's current enrollment of 19% matched that of neighboring Nepal (62%), Pakistan's economy would be bigger by US\$4.7 billion (1.8% of its Gross Domestic Product).
- 7. Amplify the education budget and maximize the efficiency of spending.** Pakistan spends much less public money on education than other countries (Figure 2), only 2.4% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and only 14.5% of total government expenditure. That leaves a greater cost-of-education burden for households with school-age children and leads to inequalities in children's access to school and ability to learn as rich households spend three times as much as poor households.¹⁰ Along with spending more on education, the government needs to improve the efficiency of that spending, and the best way to this is to improve teachers' capacity to teach, as teachers are the largest expenditure category and the most important educational input to student learning.

⁹ The Classroom Observation Tool, based on the World Bank's Teach model, was implemented in Punjab to mentor teachers based on 11 pedagogical practices.

¹⁰ According to data from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) 2018-19, the richest quintile of households spends 12,000 rupees per family member compared to 4,000 rupees for the poorest quintile.

Figure 2: Government Expenditure on Education, Total (% GDP)



Source: WDI

What Will it Take?

A political consensus will be needed to develop a strategic investment plan for the country’s education system. The deep problems in the education system will not be rooted out in one political cycle but will need policy makers’ efforts over several decades. This requires targeted, data-driven actions, supported by all political parties, civil society, and development partners.

The government will also need to recognize, and address more directly, the heterogeneity across and within provinces, so that investment of resources and prioritization of interventions to improve access, equity and quality respond to local conditions. This can be achieved, in part, by empowering local administrative units with greater capacity, autonomy and authority for decision making. Previous experiments have been successful: Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa experienced increased in participation and retention rates, especially among girls, during their respective District Steering Committee and District Performance Management regimes, led by Deputy Commissioners and District Education Officers. However, these were of short duration and focused more on delegation of responsibility rather than power and budget: for such routines to sustain and have long term impact, efforts to decentralize decision making need to be formalized by delegation of human and financial resource management powers to local administrative units.

In parallel, the technical capacity of central institutions needs to be strengthened so they can support education delivery more effectively at the local level. Textbook, teacher and assessment development institutions, and data collection and monitoring units need to adopt technology to introduce greater efficiency to their services, recruit resources with the right skills, motivate them with career growth incentives, and introduce routine feedback loops with schools so that their services are aligned with the needs of schools.

Pakistan needs to gradually increase its education spending to 5.4 percent of GDP from its current base of 2.4 percent. The World Bank has estimated that bringing every child in school and ensuring that all children learn the basics would require an additional 3 percent of GDP on top of what is currently spent – bringing the needed education expenditure to 5.4 percent.

While increasing educational expenditure is of crucial importance for Pakistan, the investments need to be based on evidence of what works. The actions proposed above are all backed by evidence of their effectiveness.¹¹

ABOUT THE “REFORMS FOR A BRIGHTER FUTURE” DISCUSSION NOTES:

“Reforms for a Brighter Future” is an initiative of the World Bank, aimed at fostering debate and dialogue on critical economic development policy issues facing Pakistan. Further information is available from the World Bank Pakistan website at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/pakistan/brief/reforms-for-a-brighter-future-time-to-decide>. This is the second of a series of eight discussion notes. These notes outline World Bank recommendations across selected policy areas where major reforms are critical for Pakistan’s progress towards inclusive and sustainable development. They do not aim to be comprehensive, but rather focus on selected areas where major policy shifts will be required to improve Pakistan’s current development trajectory. Feedback from consultations and dialogue will be incorporated as the notes are finalized. This note was prepared by Koen Geven (Senior Economist), Izza Farrakh (Senior Education Specialist), Toby Linden (Lead Economist), and Saher Asad (Economist). Please send feedback or comments to Tobias Haque (Task-Team Leader, thaque2@worldbank.org) and Puteri Watson (Task-Team Leader, pwatson2@worldbank.org).

¹¹ See also the latest report from the Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel, ‘Cost-Effective Approaches to Improve Global Learning’.