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The Crisis of School Education in Pakistan Of Government's Failure and New Hopes in the Growing Private Education Sector

ANDREAS BENZ

Introduction

In 1947, at the birth of the new state of Pakistan, ambitious plans were elaborated to educate Pakistan and to boost its social and economic development. In his message to the first “All Pakistan Education Conference” in Karachi in November 1947, the founding father of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, emphasized the significance of education for the country’s development: “You know that the importance of education, and of the right type of education, cannot be overemphasized. Under the foreign rule for over a century, sufficient attention has not been paid to the education of our people, and if we are to make real, speedy and substantial progress, we must earnestly tackle this question [...]” (Jinnah, cited in Sheikh 1987: 16). The conference outlined the major objectives of education policy for the following years. It aimed at overcoming the colonial structures of the education system, whose objective was not to provide education for all, but to breed an elitist class of civil servants loyal to the British. Jinnah sought to reorient the education system away from colonial administrative objectives towards the social, economic and technical needs and aspirations of the new country. Free and compulsory primary education was to promote mass education and rapidly improve the low literacy rate of about 16% at the time of independence (SPDC 2003: 92).

These high ambitions and objectives found their expression in numerous education policy documents and in the successive five-year plans of the Pakistani government. However, the targets laid out in each plan were generally not achieved as envisaged, and the expected educational awakening in the country has not happened. Education experts agree in their assessment of Pakistani education policy and the current state of education in the country as disastrous. They draw the picture of a desolate, lamentable,

abysmally poor state of education, characterized by regional inequalities and huge disparities between the rich and the poor, between urban and rural areas, and between men and women. The public education system has often been described as providing the lowest quality of education and rife with inefficiency, mismanagement, political manipulation and corruption.

This article provides an analysis of the poor state of the public school education system in Pakistan (excluding university education) and gives reasons for the country's weak educational performance. In a second step it will assess the potential of the growing private education sector as a real alternative to the government school system in overcoming the educational crisis in Pakistan.

The state of education in Pakistan

According to UNDP's Inequality Adjusted Education Index¹ Pakistan has one of the lowest education values and ranks among the bottom 18 countries of the world (UNDP 2011: 135–138). Nearly all countries whose education status is even worse are located in sub-Saharan Africa, the world's poorest and least developed region in terms of economic and human development. It is a puzzling fact that in terms of education Pakistan is ranked among the group of the poorest countries, while at the same time Pakistan's per capita gross national income (GNI) rank of 138 (out of 187 countries listed) puts it 32 places higher than its education index rank (UNDP 2011: 127–130). In terms of economic power, Pakistan competes with countries like Uzbekistan, Nicaragua, Vietnam or Mongolia, which all show considerably higher Education Index values. On the other hand, countries which are much poorer than Pakistan achieve a similar or even higher level of educational performance. Obviously, Pakistan's weak educational performance cannot be explained by the level of its economic development. Lack of political will and commitment rather than lack of resources may better explain Pakistan's educational crisis (Ul Haq & Haq 1998: 54).

Although its adult literacy rate has improved in recent decades, rising from 35% in 1990 (UNESCO 2005: 284) to the current level of 57.7% (GoP 2011: 133), Pakistan is one of the very few countries worldwide in which the absolute number of illiterates is still growing, from 19 million in 1947 to over 50 million people today (UNESCO 2012). Gender disparities in

¹ The Inequality Adjusted Education Index is a composite indicator developed by the United Nations Development Programme, which combines mean years of schooling and expected years of schooling, both adjusted for inequality in the distribution across the population (for technical details, see: UNDP 2011: 169–171).

literacy levels are among the highest in the world, with an adult literacy rate of 68.9% for men and only 40.1% for women (UNESCO 2012). At present, almost one in three people in the young generation (15–24 years) cannot read and write, accounting for over 11 million illiterates in this age group. Primary school enrolment ratios in Pakistan are the lowest in the whole of South Asia, while at the same time gender disparities are the highest (UNESCO 2012).

Improvement in Pakistan's overall weak educational performance is severely constrained by the government's prioritizing of public spending, whereby extraordinarily high military budgets are paralleled with only marginal education budgets. During the last decade, Pakistan has on average spent 3.6% of its gross domestic product (GDP) on the military, but only 2.0% of its GDP on education.² Pakistan would have to double its public education expenditure to meet the UNESCO minimum standard of 4% of GDP. The share of military spending is the highest in South Asia, while the share spent on education is the lowest (UNESCO 2012). Furthermore, Pakistan is the only country in the region where military spending exceeds education spending.

This again underlines that the crisis of education in Pakistan is a home-made crisis that cannot be explained by Pakistan's level of economic development. Rather, the education crisis is the outcome of a political crisis, expressed by the prioritizing of other sectors and the neglect of the education sector, combined with the lack of political will to bring about any positive change in the public education system.

Education in Pakistan has always been politicized and charged with political objectives. In colonial times, the British used education as a strategic tool to install a system of indirect rule and to create "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, in morals and in intellect", as Lord Macaulay³ expressed it in 1835 (cited in Shami 2005: 9). This new class served the British as a loyal, westernized, English-speaking local bureaucratic and technocratic elite, helping to expand and maintain imperial power in British India. For this purpose a system of English-medium education was created for a small section of the society; mass education was never in the interests of the British.

These structural characteristics of the education system formed part of the heavy colonial heritage with which the newly established Pakistani state

² Author's calculations and compilation from the following data sources: GoP 2007; GoP 2010; SIPRI 2010.

³ Thomas Babington Macaulay, First Baron Macaulay (1800–1859) served as an advisor to the Governor-General in British India and is considered the key figure in establishing a British English-medium education system on the subcontinent.

had to deal, and whose impact can still be felt today. The same system that enabled the British to maintain colonial rule turned out to be equally useful for the post-colonial Pakistani elites (themselves a product of the colonial elite schools), and therefore little was done to bring about any fundamental change. On the contrary, the elite education sector has been reinforced by subsequent Pakistani governments, and a system of “internal colonialism of local ruling elites” (Saigol 2007: 295) has replaced the direct colonial domination of the British *raj*. Over the past six decades a long list of education policy papers has repeated more or less the same objectives: universal quality education for all citizens and overcoming the huge regional, rural-urban, gender and class-related disparities. Unfortunately the actual measures taken proved to be far from being effective in this respect. Similarly, the government has repeatedly declared its commitment to increased public education spending without taking any serious steps in this direction. For example, the National Education Policy 2009 set the target of increasing public education spending to 7% of GDP by 2015. Since the last three decades actual spending has only been 2.1% of GDP on average⁴ the target of 7% seems to be nothing but lip service.

Of course, over the years spending on education of about 2% of GDP has had *some* effect on the education system in the country, and led to an educational expansion since Pakistan’s independence. Literacy and enrolment rates at different levels have shown slow but steady improvement, and there has been a marked increase in the number of educational institutions in the country over the decades (see Table 1).

Unfortunately, this increase in educational institutions has lagged behind even higher population growth. Since 1947, Pakistan’s population has increased at an annual rate of about 3%, and 31 million people at independence have grown to 177 million people today (UNDESA 2011: 82). Every success that has been realized in the education sector by increasing the number of institutions, teachers, and resources has immediately been eaten up by even faster population growth.

The growing education supply gap in Pakistan is reflected in extremely high numbers of out-of-school children and low enrolment rates. About 6.8 million out of a total number of 22 million children of primary school age (five to nine years) are not enrolled (UNESCO 2012). In the middle and high school age group (10 to 14 years), the proportion of un-enrolled children increases to 64% of the boys and 71% of the girls (UNESCO 2012). The proportion of enrolled children decreases rapidly from the primary level onwards. Of those children who are lucky enough to be

⁴ Author’s calculations and compilation from: GoP 2007; GoP 2010.

TABLE 1: Development of the number of educational institutions in Pakistan

Year	Primary	Middle	High	Secondary Vocational Institutions	Inter-colleges	Degree Colleges	Universities
1947/48	10 000 ^a			408 ^b		n.a.	n.a.
1959/60	17 901	1 974	1 069	100	126	40	4
1971/72	45 854	4 110	2 247	284	339	73	8
1980/81	59 169	5 295	3 479	231	433	99	19
1990/91	114 580	8 539	8 011	725	612	99	22
2000/01	147 700	25 500	14 800	630	1 710	366	59
2009/10	157 360	41 330	24 792	3 125 ^c	3 323	1 439	132

^a includes primary and middle educational institutions

^b includes high educational institutions, secondary vocational institutions and intercolleges

^c refers to year 2007/08

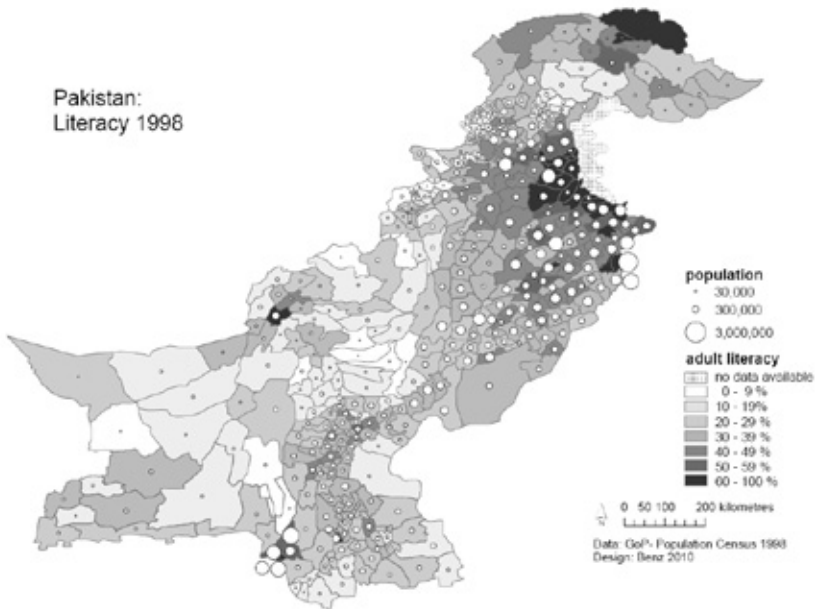
Sources: Zaidi 2009: 396; GoP 2010: 160; GoP 2011: 134-135; ICG 2004: 3

enrolled in grade one, about 40% will drop out before completing their primary education (UNESCO 2012).

The gender gap in enrolment is huge, showing a clear pro-male bias at all levels of education. While in urban areas gender parity has nearly been achieved at the primary level at least, the gender disparities in most rural areas of Pakistan are all the higher. In the rural areas only 22% of girls complete their primary education, compared to 47% of boys (World Bank 2010). In addition, socio-economic and class differences show a huge impact, so that the trend is for the gender gap to widen from rich to poor and from urban to rural.

The range of multiple inequalities further diversifies when regional disparities within Pakistan beyond the rural-urban divide are taken into consideration (see Figure 1). By trend, literacy rates decrease from urban to rural areas, from better-off to poor regions, and from the centres to the periphery. Together they reveal such an extremely heterogeneous education landscape that it is – in the words of Akbar Zaidi – “futile to talk about a single literacy rate for the country” (Zaidi 2009: 382).

FIGURE 1: Pakistan – Adult Literacy Rates 1998



Factors contributing to low overall state of education in Pakistan

In search for an explanation for the current lamentable state of education in Pakistan, one has to consider both demand-side and supply-side factors of education provision. Pakistan is abundantly impacted by constraining factors in both categories, but it will be argued here that the supply-side factors are more decisive in this case.

Among the many demand-side factors which constrain school enrolment in Pakistan, widespread poverty is one of the most pressing. Despite falling poverty rates, about 27% of the population still lives in severe poverty (UNDP 2011: 144). Child labour is frequent and there are estimated to be more than one million so-called street-children. The (quasi-) feudal structures in some areas, along with persisting practices of bonded labour, pose additional access constraints on education. A large number of refugees and internally displaced people as well as the rapid population growth increase the challenge of providing sufficient school capacity. Threats and attacks against teachers and students by militant groups as well as objections to female education are further obstacles to school attendance.

Despite the severity of these constraints, experts agree that it is not the demand-side factors which are decisive in the case of Pakistan, but rather the supply-side factors. Low education participation in Pakistan is primarily due not to low demand for education, but to the limited supply of public schooling. Studies suggest that demand for quality education is high even among poorer groups, and that the reasons for not enrolling children are often based on the perception that the available schools have poor teachers and poor quality, especially those in the public education sector (Winthrop & Graff 2010: 11). The shortcomings and problems in the government education supply have to be considered as the major cause for Pakistan's poor state of education, since it caters to the overwhelming majority of enrolled children and is responsible for fulfilling the constitutional obligation to provide universal primary and secondary education for all.

The governmental education sector has been politically neglected ever since the founding of Pakistan, receiving only minimal funding. Public spending on education in Pakistan has for decades been the lowest in the South Asian region. Regularly, the already very small educational budgets are not even fully used, and in particular the money designated for non-recurring expenditure, i.e. development expenditure, remains largely unutilized (Aly 2007: 9). Under-utilization of budgets is a problem not only at the federal level, which funds about one quarter of the total education budget, but also at the lower administrative levels (Bano 2007: 6). Some

experts claim that even the small proportion of money actually drawn gets lost somewhere in the administrative system without reaching its designated objective (Malik 1997: 123). Together, these factors lead to a severe shortage of funding in the education sector.

As a consequence of this under-budgeting, the school infrastructure is often highly inadequate with respect to both quantity and quality. There is a severe shortage of institutions, especially of girls' schools in rural areas. Many village children have to cover long distances to reach the nearest school, which poses serious constraints on female education owing to culturally based mobility restrictions for girls and young women (Zaidi 2009: 397). The available government schools are often of very poor quality. In many cases the school building is of sub-standard quality, and there are frequent reports in the Pakistani media of school buildings collapsing (SPARC 2009: 55). About 11% of government schools do not even have any buildings and operate as so-called 'tree-schools' in the open air (GoP 2010: 148). As many as 37% of government schools have no toilets, and 60% have no electricity (GoP 2010: 148). Government schools are often sparsely furnished, lack teaching materials and books, have no heating in winter and no ventilation in summer, have no boundary wall, no separate toilets for boys and girls (which impedes school attendance of girls when they reach puberty), no sports grounds, libraries, science labs or computer centres.

The principal reason for the decade-long under-budgeting and neglect of education in Pakistan is the lack of political will on the part of the elites in power to bring about any change and improvement in the status quo (Zaidi 2009: 382). Although successive governments have verbally declared education to be their top priority, it has remained mere lip service, and "[...] rhetoric has seldom been followed by effective policy and implementation" (ICG 2004: 2). The improvement of the public education system is contrary to the class interests of the ruling elites in Pakistan and would pose a threat to their own power position. A policy of neglecting public education for the masses while at the same time nurturing a separate elite education system accessible exclusively to the ruling classes perfectly serves their class interests, secures their power position and is one of the central tools for social reproduction.

Due to the low importance which successive governments have attached to the public education system, various grievances developed and remained unchecked. The public education administration in Pakistan has repeatedly been blamed for "mismanagement, political manipulation and corruption" (Winthrop & Graff 2010: 34), for being "over-centralized" (ICG 2010: 22) and for suffering from "bureaucratic infighting and

inefficiency” (ICG 2010: 22). Pervez Hoodbhoy, a well-known intellectual and critical observer of Pakistani education policy, characterizes the education administration of the country as “moronic, incompetent, self-obsessed, corrupt, and ideologically charged” (Hoodbhoy 2000). Especially at the local level, “monitoring and evaluation activities have not been carried out” (Zaidi 2009: 397), and the provincial education departments lack the necessary resources and personnel to monitor effectively and clamp down on “rampant bribery and manipulation at the local level” (ICG 2004: i). The Pakistani government is well aware of the malaise of poor governance in the education administration and identifies in the National Education Policy 2009 the “corruption that perverts the entire spectrum of the system” (GoP 2009a: 8) as a central constraint on education policy implementation. However, the political establishment has consistently avoided designing and implementing effective counter-measures, since these would be against their own interests. Some politicians have even directly been involved in manipulating teachers’ appointments to exercise control and as a reward for loyalty. Therefore, teachers’ appointments are not only often based on personal relations, favouritism and bribery, which allows unqualified and uncommitted candidates to enter the teaching profession, resulting in poor teaching quality and low motivation (Bano 2007: 25), but are also subject to political influence, since teachers serve as polling agents during elections. In the past, they have often played “a critical role in manipulating the ballot to produce favourable electoral results” (ICG 2004: 23). In this context, a “growing involvement of members of national and provincial assemblies in the selection and assignments of teachers” (Lloyd et al. 2005: 690) in order to secure election outcomes could be observed.

Political appointments and patronage together with the very limited supervision and monitoring capacities of lower level education administrative units have created a vacuum in accountability and control, which allows public sector teachers to violate their duties without facing any serious sanctions. Transfers of politically appointed teachers who fail to fulfil their duty are practically impossible “[...] because they are backed by someone in power. They have no interest in education but you can’t punish them for their performance”, as Mahtab Rashti, a former Sindh education secretary says (cited in ICG 2004: 21). Experts agree that frequent teacher absenteeism is “the norm in public schools across the country” (SPARC 2009: 55). It has been reported that some teachers collect their regular government salary while spending their time at other jobs or residing elsewhere, even abroad (Winthrop & Graff 2010: 37). Unlike in private sector schools, where students have to pay tuition fees, parents of public school students have very limited power to control and influence teachers’ performance.

This lack of monitoring and supervision by the authorities is also used by some teachers to generate illegal extra income by manipulating grades and faking certificates for payment. Household surveys in Pakistan revealed that admission to a higher level public school involved bribery in about 50% of cases (Winthrop & Graff 2010: 37). Cheating in exams and manipulation of results in combination with bribery and corruption are widespread phenomena in Pakistan (GoP 2009a; ICG 2004; Saigol 1993; Shami 2005; Siddiqui 2007). Some teachers withhold any meaningful teaching from their students during regular school hours and polish up their salary through private afternoon tuition sessions in which the real teaching takes place, and it is an open secret that enrolment in these private lessons is a precondition for 'passing' exams. In other cases, examination papers are made available in advance for money (Malik 1997: 127).

Yet another outcome of the lack of monitoring and supervision and the political interference in the education system is the phenomenon of the so-called ghost schools, i.e. schools which only exist on paper. About 30,000 government schools in Pakistan, accounting for 20% of all government schools, fall into this category. These schools appear in the education budget, teachers are appointed and posts are filled, salaries are regularly taken by the staff and school budgets are spent, but no teaching activity actually takes place. Some of these schools do not even have a building in place. A related issue is the widespread phenomenon of "proxy teaching", especially in primary schools in remote rural areas. Due to the unavailability of local teachers, the vacant teaching posts in these areas are partly filled with candidates from urban centres who often do not actually move to the rural area and either just take the salary without service or install a 'proxy person' who fulfils their duty for them.

But even in the cases in which the appointed teachers stick to their responsibilities and give classes, they often lack sufficient pedagogical skills and subject knowledge, since the system of teacher training and professional development for government teachers is inefficient and fragmentary (Bano 2007: 25–26). Therefore improper teaching methods are often applied, which leads to poor learning outcomes. Rote learning, i.e. the parrot-like repetition of whole phrases and paragraphs from the textbook and testing their literal memorization in exams, is the predominant teaching practice in government schools. Although officially banned by the provincial education ministries, corporal punishment is still widely practised in government schools throughout Pakistan. According to official sources, 40% of the students in government schools suffer corporal punishment (GoP 2005a: 23; GoP 2005b: 13). The outcomes of poor teaching methods and poor subject knowledge

are low student achievement levels, high dropout and repetition rates, low pass rates in exams and poor learning (SPARC 2009: 53; GoP 2009b: 131).

This list of shortcomings shows that the public education sector suffers from multiple grievances and deficiencies. These are largely due to the absence of political will among the ruling classes to bring about fundamental change. This political lethargy can be explained by the fact that the ruling elites are not affected by the shortcomings of the government education system since their children attend schools in a separate system of private elitist schools which provide high quality English-medium education at high tuition fees unaffordable for the masses. Moreover, the lamentably poor state of the government education system is perfectly in line with the class interests of the ruling elites, since it prevents competition by ambitious, upcoming aspirants from the lower classes. The highly segregated Pakistani education system has consequently been termed by some as “educational caste system” (SPDC 2003: 158) or even as “educational apartheid” (ICG 2004: 4; Najam 1998).

Pakistan’s segregated education system

So far, we have only been concerned with the government education sector. There are good reasons to focus primarily on this sector, since it accounts for two thirds of the total enrolment, and the government has a constitutional obligation to “provide free and compulsory education to all children” and to “guarantee its citizens a right to education” (Winthrop & Graff 2010: 10). But the Pakistani education landscape is more complex and comprises at least four major types of schools, which coexist in parallel. Questions of access and equity are raised in the light of this segregation since each school type caters for only a specific section of society, imparts a specific form of knowledge and education, and forms different worldviews, norms and values among its students (Rahman 2004a). They partly follow different curricula, use different textbooks and differ in their medium of instruction, their examination systems, their accessibility, and their tuition fee structures. A brief overview of their central characteristics is provided in Table 2.

Madrasas, although important especially for the poorest sections of society, account for less than one percent of the total enrolment in Pakistan (Andrabi et al. 2006: 447; Andrabi et al. 2008: 329). Much attention has been given in the media and public discourse to the religious education sector in Pakistan since the terror attacks of 9/11 in 2001, along with frequent claims of a ‘madrasa boom’ in Pakistan and its connection with allegedly rising radicalization, militancy and Islamism in the country. But ex-

perts agree that no such mushrooming of religious seminaries has occurred and that madrasas are not the main problem (McClure 2009). Instead, the “single biggest shift in the structure of educational delivery in Pakistan” (Andrabi et al. 2008: 337) has occurred in the sector of secular non-elitist private schools. The primary source of militancy in Pakistan is considered to be not the madrasas, but the abysmally low enrolment rates and the poor overall state of education in Pakistan due to the government’s failure in public education supply (Winthrop & Graff 2010).

While the madrasas cater predominantly to the poorer sections of society, the elitist private schools serve the opposite end of the social spectrum: the small stratum of the civil and military elites of the country. This kind of elitist English-medium school, often originally established as Christian convents, missionary schools, “English schools” or so-called “chiefs’ colleges” (Rahman 2005: 25), dates back to British colonial times, when it fulfilled an important function in the system of indirect rule, since most Anglicized senior members of the elite got their education in these schools in order to “encourage loyalty to the crown” (Rahman 2005: 25). Since independence, these schools have served the elites of the newly established state. In the 1960s, privately run elitist English-medium schools were complemented by state-supported elite schools for the military (so-called cadet colleges) and the civil bureaucracy (so-called public schools) (Rahman 2004b). All these schools charge exorbitant tuition fees and therefore are accessible only to members of the very upper strata of society, which is reflected in their share of less than one percent of the total enrolment in Pakistan. The standards of education in these schools are very high and “far superior to those of the public schools” (ICG 2004: 1). In particular the use of English as the medium of instruction provides their students with the best opportunities for high-ranking positions, since “English has always been the language of power and a virtual class marker in Pakistani society” (ICG 2004: 13). Entry to prized government and non-government jobs is “restricted to those lucky enough to have access to the limited seats in English-medium schools” (Ahmed & Amjad 1984: 34, cited in Zaidi 2009: 397).

The rise of non-elitist private schools

In this situation, the overwhelming majority of Pakistanis were long trapped between the inaccessibility – due to exorbitant tuition fees – of high-quality English-medium education and the Urdu-medium, low-quality and highly inadequate government education system. Experts have long wondered why no major attempt was made by the civil society or the private sector to close

TABLE 2: Major school types in Pakistan’s segmented education system

	Government Schools	Madrasas	Elitist Private Schools, Cadet Colleges, “Public Schools”	Non-Elitist Private Schools
Enrolment share	63-65%	1%	< 1%	33-35%
Medium of instruction	Urdu (or Sindhi, Pashto)	Urdu, vernacular languages	English	English, often mixed with Urdu
Curriculum	National curriculum	Different religious curricula	Often Western/ international curriculum	National curriculum
Examination system	Provincial boards	5 Madrasa boards	British O/A-level exams	Provincial boards
Source of budget	Government	Waqaf (religious foundations), donations, foreign funding	Tuition fees (>1,500 Rs/ month), government subsidies, military foundations	Tuition fees (<1,500 Rs/ month)
Social class	Poor to lower middle and middle class	Poor or very religious people	Civil and military elites and upper class	Lower middle and middle class

Source: Author’s compilation based on Rahman 2004a, 2004b

the education supply gap before the 1990s. Nasir Jalil (1993), for example, stated that “under similar circumstances, communities in other developing countries have mobilized their own resources to build schools and provide for teachers, but this has not been the case in Pakistan” (Jalil 1993: 78). It was just about the time of his writing, in the early 1990s, that this long-awaited private sector initiative started and evolved over the following two decades into a profound restructuring of the Pakistani education landscape: a new type of non-elitist private sector school provided for the first time a real alternative to the inadequate and low-standard government schools on the one hand and unaffordable elitist schools on the other. Formerly elitist English-medium education became increasingly accessible for the lower and middle classes, and eventually even for the rural poor. The high demand for affordable English-medium education created a large education market with

lucrative opportunities for entrepreneurs. Policies of liberalization, deregulation and economization of education paved the way for running schools as businesses.

In the light of a nearly tenfold increase within less than two decades – from about 3,300 private schools in 1983 in the four major provinces of the country to more than 32,000 in the year 2000 (Andrabi et al. 2008: 335) – many observers talk of a real ‘mushrooming’ of private schools in Pakistan. The educational expansion during the last decade has predominantly been facilitated by the private sector, and the annual number of newly established schools is about three times as high in the private sector as in the public sector (Winthrop & Graff 2010: 18). The share of private sector enrolments (from primary to the inter-college level) increased from 14% in 1991 to 23% in 1999 (Bano 2008: 473), and is currently estimated at about 33–35% (Andrabi et al. 2008: 335; Winthrop & Graff 2010: 14). The private sector’s education expenditure accounts for about 0.7–0.89% of Pakistan’s GDP, compared to public sector education expenditure of about 2% of GDP (GoP 2004: 6,13).

The characteristics of these newly established private schools differ considerably from those of the private schools established before the 1990s. Early private institutions were predominantly at the high school level or above, were located in urban areas, demanded extremely high tuition fees and served almost exclusively the upper strata of urban society. In contrast, the newly established private institutions are predominantly primary and middle schools, overwhelmingly co-educational, just as present in rural areas, and charge only moderate tuition fees, which allows lower income groups to use such institutions (Andrabi et al. 2002: 5–12; Andrabi et al. 2008: 337; GoP 2001a). The bulk of private schools consists of self-owned (so-called “for-profit”) schools, while the so-called “not-for-profit schools” (i.e. run by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), trusts and foundations) make up only a small minority (Andrabi et al. 2008: 337).

Private schools have mushroomed throughout Pakistan, in both rural and urban areas, but the dynamics and amplitude of the private school boom vary regionally and have created articulated spatial disparities. Some areas, such as rural Sindh and rural Balochistan, have barely witnessed any increase in private institutions, while the Punjab and urban regions such as Islamabad have seen the greatest change and currently have some of the highest private sector proportions among educational institutions (Winthrop & Graff 2010: 14). In educational terms, the Gilgit-Baltistan region in the very north of Pakistan constitutes an exception in many ways and shows unexpectedly high education levels (see Figure 1). Gilgit-Baltistan has the highest share of private schools in the country at about 66%, which is even

higher than in the national capital Islamabad, a well-known hub of private sector education. Because of this exceptional characteristic, a closer look at the educational dynamics in Gilgit-Baltistan may provide valuable insights into the potential of the private sector's contribution to fostering education in peripheral, rural and comparatively poor regions.

Educational expansion and the private sector in Gilgit-Baltistan

In Gilgit-Baltistan formal education provision is dominated by the private sector. It is the only region in Pakistan in which the government sector as an educational provider has been relegated to a minority position. The number of 2861 private schools (in 2005) in the region far outnumbers the 1505 government schools (GoP 2007: 169). In terms of enrolment, the private sector's share is 43.9% for boys and 53.6% for girls (GoP 2006: 30, 36). Within Gilgit-Baltistan, the importance of the private sector varies to a great extent, as can be seen in Figure 2. In the Diamir and Astor districts, private school enrolment plays only a marginal role with the private sector's enrolment share under 12% for boys and under 7% for girls. In the Ghizer district, on the other hand, 72% of girls and 52% of boys are enrolled in the private sector. Interestingly, the gross enrolment rates are highest and the gender gap between male and female gross enrolment is lowest – or even non-existent – in those districts with the highest private sector shares, as can be seen in Figure 2. Similarly, the overall education level – e.g. measured by the adult and youth literacy rates – is highest in these districts. For example, the youth literacy rate (15 to 24 years) in Diamir district in 1998 was 35.4% for men and 4.3% for women, compared to 71.8% for men and 38.8% for women in the Ghizer district.⁵ Therefore a strong relation between the availability of private sector schools, on the one hand, and higher enrolment rates, higher overall education levels and lower gender gaps, on the other, holds in the Gilgit-Baltistan region.

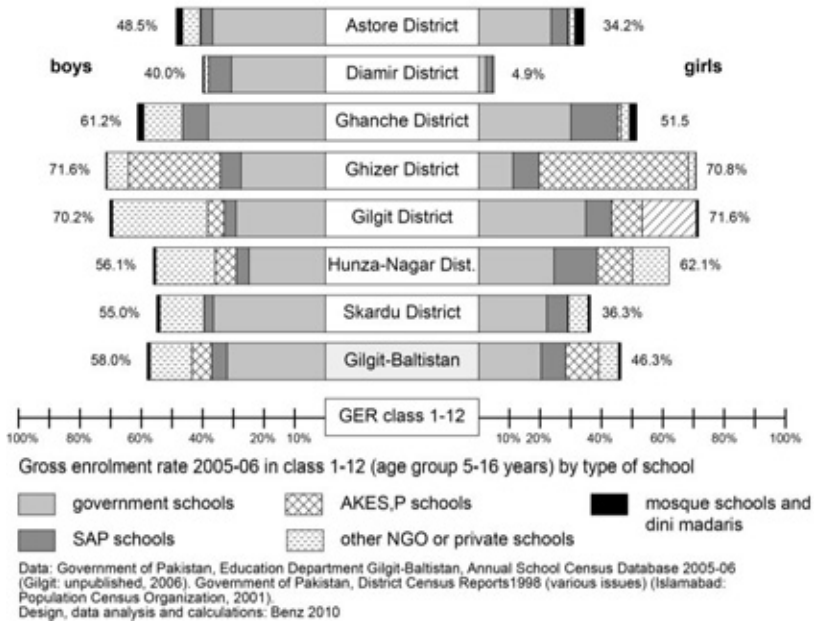
A look into the history of education in the region reveals that the current education and enrolment levels are very recent accomplishments: the region started from adult literacy rates of below 20% for men and 10% for women only about three generations ago. Since then most parts of Gilgit-Baltistan have witnessed an unprecedented and extremely rapid educational expansion, which first affected male education and later, with a time-lag of one to two generations, embraced female education.

⁵ GoP 2001b: 85; GoP 2001c: 71; author's calculations.

Especially the strong rise of female literacy rates in the Gilgit, Ghizer and Hunza-Nagar districts must be attributed to a large extent to the private sector schools. In these areas, the so-called Diamond Jubilee (DJ) School Programme, which was initiated in 1946/47 by the religious and spiritual leader of the Ismaili community, Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III, was the decisive pioneering venture in this respect. Initially it started with about 46 boys' schools in Ghizer, Hunza and Gojal, predominantly at the primary level (Iqbal 2009). In the subsequent years the school network expanded, and in the early 1960s it started to focus especially on girls' education. Currently, the Aga Khan Education Service runs more than 120 DJ schools, including four high-quality so-called 'primary institutions' at the higher secondary level. Additionally, more than 128 community-based schools are affiliated with the network. Other private schools from a variety of types (community, private entrepreneurs, national and international school chains, NGOs, benefactors from within Pakistan and abroad) followed the pioneering Aga Khan institutions, and the private education expansion reached out well beyond the Ismaili settlement areas of the region.

All in all, the private sector expansion in Gilgit-Baltistan can be considered a formidable success story and may serve to illustrate the potential of the private sector in closing the huge education provision gap left by the state's inadequate and low-quality education system. Of course, one has to be aware of the particularities of the Gilgit-Baltistan experience: the high international donor support which has sustained private sector expansion; the particular 'cultural factor' and 'communal spirit' within the minority population group of the Ismaili sect, whose spiritual leader has for decades pursued an agenda of modernization for his followers and strongly advocates female education; and the fact that – in contrast to all other areas in Pakistan – the bulk of private sector institutions is of the "not for-profit" type (Andrabi et al. 2002: 17). Nevertheless, the private sector certainly has the potential to help to overcome the shortcomings of the government education provision, although serious concerns and objections raised in the discourse on private education in Pakistan cannot be ignored or easily dismissed. In the following concluding remarks, some of these objections will be looked at and weighed up against the more optimistic arguments presented above.

FIGURE 2: Gross enrolment rates in Gilgit-Baltistan by district and school type



Conclusion

The government education sector in Pakistan makes a rather gloomy impression, since under-budgeting, political neglect, mismanagement, corruption, political interference, lack of monitoring and supervision and highly controversial curricula, syllabuses and teaching methods characterize the public education sector, with the result that the education provided is of very low quality and relevance. By international comparison, the level of education of Pakistan's population is among the lowest worldwide and falls short of the economic power and potential of the country. The education sector is highly segmented along class and status group divisions. Within Pakistan's education landscape there is an extremely high gender gap and huge disparities between urban and rural areas, between different provinces and regions, and between rich and poor. While the country's elites maintain their own exclusive education systems with separate high-quality English-medium schools,

separate curricula, separate examination systems and highly selective access protected by high tuition fees, the majority of the population is left with the politically neglected, low-quality public education system. The boom in new non-elitist private sector schools can be interpreted as a reaction of civil society against educational deprivation at the hands of the state and its elites, and constitutes an emancipating movement which for the first time provides the opportunity for the middle classes, lower middle classes, and even the poor to gain access to quality education of the type formerly reserved exclusively for the elites. Furthermore, the new private schools also provide access to education to those groups who were formerly deprived of any educational opportunities, especially rural inhabitants, the poorer sections of society and females. The new private schools are starting to fill the huge gap which has been left by the state's dereliction of its constitutional duty to provide compulsory education at least up to the middle level.

This very positive assessment of the rapid increase of non-elitist private sector schools in Pakistan and of the tendency towards increased privatization of education in the country is shared by only some of the experts in the field. Objections and concerns have been raised and many warning voices can be heard even among the advocates of privatization. Currently, there is an ongoing debate within Pakistan about the benefits and shortcomings of the new private schools. The education sector has turned into a lucrative market where parents' demand for quality education and their readiness to pay for tuition have created a huge potential for making profits. Education has increasingly become commodified, commercialized and subjected to the rules of the market economy, where profit-oriented enterprises seek favourable business opportunities.

The government has to date failed to effectively regulate the new education market, where unplanned growth and the absence of any defined quality standards have created a situation in which some for-profit schools are more interested in making money than in providing quality education. There is no mechanism to control the syllabi, education standards, teaching methods, examination procedures, and school fees imposed by private sector schools. Serious concerns have been raised regarding access and equality. Several observers fear that disparities in society will be deepened by the creation of a state of "educational apartheid" between an English-speaking elite and the rest" (Andrabi et al. 2002: 22). Unlike the advocates of privatization, who talk of a "decent quality" (Andrabi et al. 2002: 21) available in private sector schools for appropriate and moderate prices that are affordable even for the rural poor, critics see a "lucid deterioration of educational quality" and an "unprecedented rise in costs" (Mukhtar 2009: 126). Even

low fees may exclude the poor and pose “limitations of the private sector to reach the real poor” (Bano 2008: 473).

The critics of educational privatization point to the comparatively low teacher qualifications in private sector schools, frequent employment of inexperienced newcomers to the profession, lack of professional development and teacher training, substandard teachers’ salaries, short-term contracts and high staff fluctuation, which together result in lower educational standards and quality. The Pakistani government – pushed by international agencies such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund – readily welcomes and supports the rise of the private sector and the privatization of education, while at the same time using it as a good excuse to withdraw from its own constitutional responsibility to provide universal education for all Pakistani citizens (Mukhtar 2009: 132). Moreover, the political and military elites are themselves actively involved in the growing education business, since they personally have invested heavily in the sector and benefit directly from its prosperity, and therefore follow their own interests when they legally and politically support and subsidize the private sector (Mukhtar 2009: 136).

The debate on the role and potential of private schools in Pakistan is ongoing, and well-founded arguments have been put forward by both sides, the sceptics and the advocates of an increased role of the private sector. Recent empirical studies show a certain potential of the private sector to work in favour of pro-poor, pro-female and pro-rural educational expansion, which may contribute to narrowing the huge disparities and to overcoming the gap in the education provision left by the failing government education system, and which could support joint efforts to achieve universal education in Pakistan. But there is an urgent need for a sound legal regulatory regime for the private education sector, in which the positive potential of private schooling can fully unfold and undesired developments and outcomes can be monitored and prevented.

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