

Quality Education in Pakistan: Key to Long-term Peace and Development

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[Center for Universal Education](#) at Brookings, 1775 Massachusetts Ave NW, Washington, DC

Too often the debate on education development in Pakistan is focused on the possible role of madrassahs in provoking violent extremism and sectarian conflict. However, this narrow focus serves to overshadow other factors that contribute to the country's educational system. For example, under-investment by the Pakistani government in basic education over the last 20 years has left the public education system in disarray—lacking the schools, teachers, and materials necessary to ensure that every child receives a quality basic education.

On November 10, the Center for Universal Education at Brookings hosted a discussion with leading Pakistani experts about the current status and future of the country's education system. The discussion was moderated by the Center's Co-Director and Fellow Rebecca Winthrop, and included Brookings' Senior Fellow Stephen Cohen, former Pakistan government official Javed Hasan Aly, Quratulian Bakhteari of the Institute for Development Studies and Practices in Pakistan, and Rashid Bajwa of Pakistan's National Rural Support Programme. More than 30 experts from the U.S. federal government, international nongovernmental organizations, and academic institutions participated in the event.

Pakistani input is vital to the discussion about education's contribution to the long-term development and security of Pakistan. Two recent developments, Pakistan's new National Education Policy (2009) and the commitment through the U.S. Congress' Kerry-Lugar Bill (2009) to invest significantly in the development of modern, nationwide school curriculums for public, private, and religious schools in Pakistan, provided the platform for the participants to offer their perspectives on the role of education and the current debate on reforming development assistance in Pakistan.

As the sixth most populous country in the world with 40 percent of the population under the age of 15, Ms. Winthrop highlighted that Pakistan faces an enormous challenge in providing universal quality education to all its citizens. Following Nigeria, Pakistan has the largest number of out-of-school children and youth, and is estimated to still have 3.7 million children out of primary school in 2015. The solution, however, requires more than just building schools and hiring teachers; Ms. Winthrop defined quality education as contributing to a student's cognitive development, his/her sense of social responsibility, and ensuring an equitable system. Moreover, she stressed the importance of safety, citing the recent bombings of educational institutions in Pakistan as evidence of the real security concerns that are associated with education. Finally, she emphasized the connection between the political developments in Pakistan and the reform of its education system; education itself is a political process because it can play an important role in forging a national identity.

Mr. Cohen continued by describing the Kerry-Lugar bill as the first demonstration by the U.S. government to move beyond a focus on supporting the military and specifically work toward

helping Pakistani society. He stressed the central importance of mass education in a globalized world, and not just providing higher education to the military elites and upper class, citing examples from his work in India. Cohen expressed skepticism about the ability to reform the education system, given a demonstrated unwillingness of the Pakistani elites to implement a strategy that would aim to educate the masses. An educated Pakistan, he said, would be troublesome for the Pakistani elites. However, he also expressed some hope for Pakistan if both its citizens and the international community realize that it is not too late to transform Pakistan, and that a major last effort is needed. Pakistan can change its present course with regards to educating its population through clear leadership from the Pakistani government and a long-term commitment of support from the international community. The longer-term commitment of the United States that the Kerry-Lugar demonstrates one step in the right direction

Drawing upon his extensive experience in government and education, Mr. Aly provided the historical context of public education in Pakistan, focusing on the government's declining investment in human capital and public policy's failure to adequately address education over the past four decades. Pakistan's spending began to decline in the late sixties when policymakers lost focus on education as a means for individual empowerment, social justice and economic development. Similarly, public policy interventions were driven by incentives other than education. As a result, a dominant social mindset was birthed that catered only to the elites. With this poor quality publicly funded education, most Pakistani elites have moved to private schools, leaving the majority of the population to attend deteriorating public schools. Mr. Aly attributed much of the country's current social and political divisions to this socioeconomic educational divide. While he remained skeptical that the recently developed National Education Policy would be effectively implemented due to a persistent lack of political will at the federal level, he highlighted the increasingly vibrant civil society at the provincial level that is beginning to put pressure on local policymakers to improve education at the local level.

With her vast experience working at the community level in Baluchistan, Ms. Bakhteari asserted that education has been used as an instrument to create different socio-economic classes. Addressing the large segment of the Pakistani population that has been left out of education, Ms. Bakhteari pointed to the flawed structure of the education system as the primary reason that children are not receiving a quality education. For example, children's backgrounds are not taken into account when they enter a school, as children from certain rural regions may have different knowledge than those from urban areas. The strict standardization of the schools contributes to the high drop out rate as children are unable to assimilate to the rigorous school system that does not allow them to learn while still working and earning for their family, which is a reality for many Pakistani youth. Furthermore, by taking a community-based approach in her work in rural villages, Ms. Bakhteari has witnessed no resistance to mass education—even for girls. One important part of this approach is empowering teachers as the agents of social change.

As head of the largest non-governmental organization in Pakistan, Mr. Bajwa began by stating that he could provide a “worm's eye view” of the situation and pinpoint some of the priority issues in education. While they have not lost hope, Mr. Bajwa echoed Mr. Cohen's sentiment that this may be the last chance. The three separate education systems in Pakistan demonstrate the importance of considering the economics of education. While the upper class can purchase a

higher quality education in the private schools, the lower and middle classes only have access to the low-quality government schools. Living on very little steady income, the very poorest members of society are drawn to the madrassahs schools that also provide free room and board and basic necessities. While Pakistan's average per capita annual income is approximately \$1,000, it is skewed with almost 40% of the population living on less than a dollar a day. Investments in education are among the lowest percentage of GDP around 1.5 percent. Net enrollment rates of 56 percent (which do not take drop-outs in account) pale in comparison to regional neighbors India (90 percent NER) and Bangladesh (92 percent). With regards to development, Pakistan is no longer keeping up with its South Asian cohort and rather is equated with sub-Saharan Africa.

While increasing GDP allocations will improve the situation, the larger issue is that of education quality. For example, the World Bank's LEAPS study shows that although private school teachers are paid salaries at one-third the level of government school teachers, their students outperform their public school counterparts across several academic subjects by an average of two grade levels, demonstrating that fund utilization is perhaps more important than fund amount. Therefore there is a need for reforms in education policy and service delivery which can improve quality and outcomes even with the existing meager allocations. Mr. Bajwa focused the remainder of his comments on the characteristics of quality needed to increase school participation, including trained teachers with credible levels of attendance and accountability to the community, relevant educational content so that parents find value in sending their children to school, and girl-friendly policies. Additionally, he highlighted the issues of service delivery and governance since more of the same traditions will only produce disenfranchised students. Currently, the total time teaching in a government primary school is around 1,000 hours per year, Mr. Bajwa posited whether doubling the time in the classroom as "second shifts", using the existing level of brick-and-mortar investment, could have an impact on educational outcomes. With both public and private partnerships, the delivery of education services can be doubled while more effectively using available funds and infrastructure.

Throughout the discussion, the effective use of international assistance to Pakistan was highlighted as a major issue. More than half of the education budget allocated to non-recurrent expenditures remained unspent last year, demonstrating a sheer lack of capacity at the appropriate levels. Mr. Aly noted that the declaration of increasing education investment to 7 percent of GDP by 2015 was simply not possible considering the country's current capacity to implement and monitor the policies being planned is extremely weak. A representative from the International Rescue Committee asked the panel about the lack of transparency and the challenge of preventing funds from being sent to personal bank accounts and whether there are levers within Pakistan and the international community—including the increase in assistance from the U.S.—that could incite significant reform. Mr. Aly asserted that the primary goal should now be to create capacity within the government to oversee the various development assistance programs and create an overarching national strategy.

Mr. Bajwa believed that the Kerry-Lugar bill could play a significant role by providing incentives to policymakers to make service delivery reforms. An emphasis on good governance has to be an instrumental part of any development cooperation. If the money is conditional on

service delivery reform, it can deliver a sea-change in Pakistan. If it is not, the new assistance will be providing more of the same mediocre actions. Although Mr. Cohen expressed concern that the existing systems do lack transparency, he hoped that the U.S. Congress would put pressure on the Pakistani government to be accountable for such reforms. Several panelists suggested that a useful strategy could be to focus on supporting state and local governments that have a good track record, along with civil society programming, while national level reforms are being carried out.

A representative from a Pakistani media outlet envisioned that the larger problem was one of democracy and the lack of empowerment of the people. Historically, the Pakistani media has been able to catalyze social movements. In the case of education, the media could be used for a national campaign to put pressure on a government that for the past sixty years has not prioritized education for its people.

The scale of the challenge in Pakistan was further emphasized by a participant from the American Institute for Research, who raised the question of whether the global community had grasped the significant gap in perception and reality in Pakistan. He suggested that perhaps what is needed to improve educational opportunity for the Pakistani people is not just building another several thousand schools, but developing a holistic nationwide poverty-reduction program like BRAC in Bangladesh.

In summary, the issue of mass education in Pakistan in light of U.S. aid was the main theme of the event. The multi-dimensional aspect of quality education – access, cognitive development, responsible citizenship, and safety – are regarded by many as central areas for progress as much remains to be done to bring the Pakistani education system to a level that would sustainably benefit the country and its citizens.