

# THE PUNJAB EDUCATION ROADMAP: TRANSFORMING OPPORTUNITY FOR 20 MILLION CHILDREN

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Recently UNESCO said that, with the present rates of enrolment in the Punjab region of Pakistan, it would take many more decades before every primary age child was enrolled in school and learning. In this article, Sir Michael Barber and Katelyn Donnelly describe an ambitious programme to improve the education system and show that with the right combination of political will and relentless implementation of what works at the door-to-door level, the task could be completed within a decade.

A lone assistant education officer, Saira Malik<sup>1</sup>, in the province of Punjab, Pakistan's largest province, walks down a dusty, barren road. To her left are fields, to her right, a brick kiln where children of school age and their parents eke out a backbreaking living. A tall chimney billows thick, black smoke. Beside the kiln, the children live; no running water, no electricity and no prospects either. The chief minister, Shahbaz Sharif, has given Saira a mission, one that she knows is important and will, as her colleague put it, help "Pakistan stand up proudly among the nations" – namely, make sure every child is enrolled in school and learning.

Her job is not for the fainthearted. She needs to convince local parents that their children will do better attending school every day than working at the kiln for a meagre wage. Given that, until a couple of years ago, the schools lacked facilities, teachers often didn't show up and there had been no new textbooks for years, she knows to expect a degree of cynicism. Generations of betrayal and poverty have destroyed expectation.

Until now... In the last three years, since the chief minister adopted his Education Roadmap, the schools are getting better, facilities are improving, teachers are present every day and textbooks are available. Now, Saira thinks, there is a chance of success. She knows it won't happen automatically,

as night follows day. She and her colleagues across Punjab, along with thousands of teachers trained for the task, will have to tramp these dusty roads day after day to bring the children to school.

There are plenty of speeches echoing round the hallowed, marbled halls of the UN and the sleek, modern atrium of the World Bank. World leaders queue up to decry the shame of 57 million primary-age children still out of school and to assert the moral importance of finally achieving the much-heralded goal of universal primary enrolment.

If speeches made the difference, every child would long since have been enrolled. Moral fervour has its place but it does not get the job done.

The battle for universal enrolment will ultimately not be fought in these halls. No; instead, it will be fought day after day on the dusty roads of Punjab and other places like it. There is no quick fix; only the relentless, uncompromising drive for results.

In the last six months of 2013, building on the experience of previous years, Punjab ran one of the most successful enrolment campaigns in its history. Around half a million extra primary-age children were enrolled in school in those months, mainly in the rural south where enrolment has been lowest and girls most likely to be out of school.

The ingredients of success are clear and practical. After pilots in a couple of villages in different parts of the province, the system learned what to do. First, from the centre, in Lahore, to the smallest administrative unit, the *tehsil*, there has to be someone accountable for delivering extra enrolment. Second, during the enrolment drive the system's leaders need to be on the case. In Punjab, the chief minister approved the plan personally and launched the drive publicly. Meanwhile, the secretary of schools called every one of the 36 districts every day throughout the drive to check on progress. Third, everyone involved was trained on specific, proven tactics just before the enrolment drive began. Fourth, the eleven districts with the biggest challenge were given priority attention.

Fifth, it's all about the 'How?' at the street level. Yes, use the big broad-brush arguments about the value of education but don't depend on them alone. Over 30,000 teachers in the priority districts were provided with training and simple handbooks in Urdu. The key to success with a door-to-door campaign is to take with you a child already in school; let them persuade the children and parents. Take a new textbook too and explain that the books are free. Enrol the child on the spot. Take them to school there and then if possible. If not, come back at school time the following day and bring all the children from that street in together. Make no distinction between enrolment in a private or a public

## The Punjab education roadmap

school; both count toward achieving enrolment goals. Crucially, of course, the school has to be functioning effectively so that when the children attend, they have a positive experience.

The Enrolment Drive of 2013 is just one strand of the Punjab Education Reform Roadmap to which, in December 2010, Mian Shahbaz Sharif, the chief minister of Punjab, had signed up. It was a bold plan, based on the global evidence of what works in school system reform. It has been systematically taken forward for three years now.

Back then in 2010, we had promised the chief minister that, “In two years, Punjab can make a quantum leap in educational outcomes, as similar systems have.” We showed him the progress that Minas Gerais had made in Brazil between 2006 and 2008. By November 2012, through the Roadmap, similar success had been achieved. By the end of 2013 results had improved further.

As of January 2014, on a conservative estimate, there are over one and a half million extra children enrolled in school

since 2011. Student attendance daily is now over 90 per cent. Over 110,000 new teachers have been hired on merit. More than 35,000 extra teachers are present at school every day. Over 90 per cent of schools have basic facilities compared to less than 70 per cent when we began.

Districts are now led by officials appointed purely on merit and trained for the role. They are rigorously held accountable for their performance. Teacher guides, with lesson plans for each day in the basic subjects, have been distributed to all 60,000 government schools; and almost 200,000 primary teachers have been trained to use them. Around 4,000 teacher-coaches are in place, able to offer practical advice each month to teachers in every classroom in the province.

Striking progress - but there is much more to do on each of these indicators and, above all, on teacher quality; and while they have already begun to improve, student outcomes – the acid test – are only now taking centre stage.

Moreover, given the state of Punjab’s education system, although we have moved with breath-taking speed, it is not fast enough.

In addition to the internal management data and the independent Nielsen surveys of enrolment - the basis for the data above - there have been independent evaluations of the Roadmap. The most important of these was conducted in 2012 by a team acting on behalf of the Independent Commission on Aid Impact (ICAI). They say:

[The Roadmap is] an innovative monitoring tool which has proved to be a very good platform for policy dialogue... [There are] some promising early results, including improving education quality.

They add:

The Punjab Education Reform Roadmap is an excellent example of how a well-designed monitoring system can be integral to the design of a reform programme...

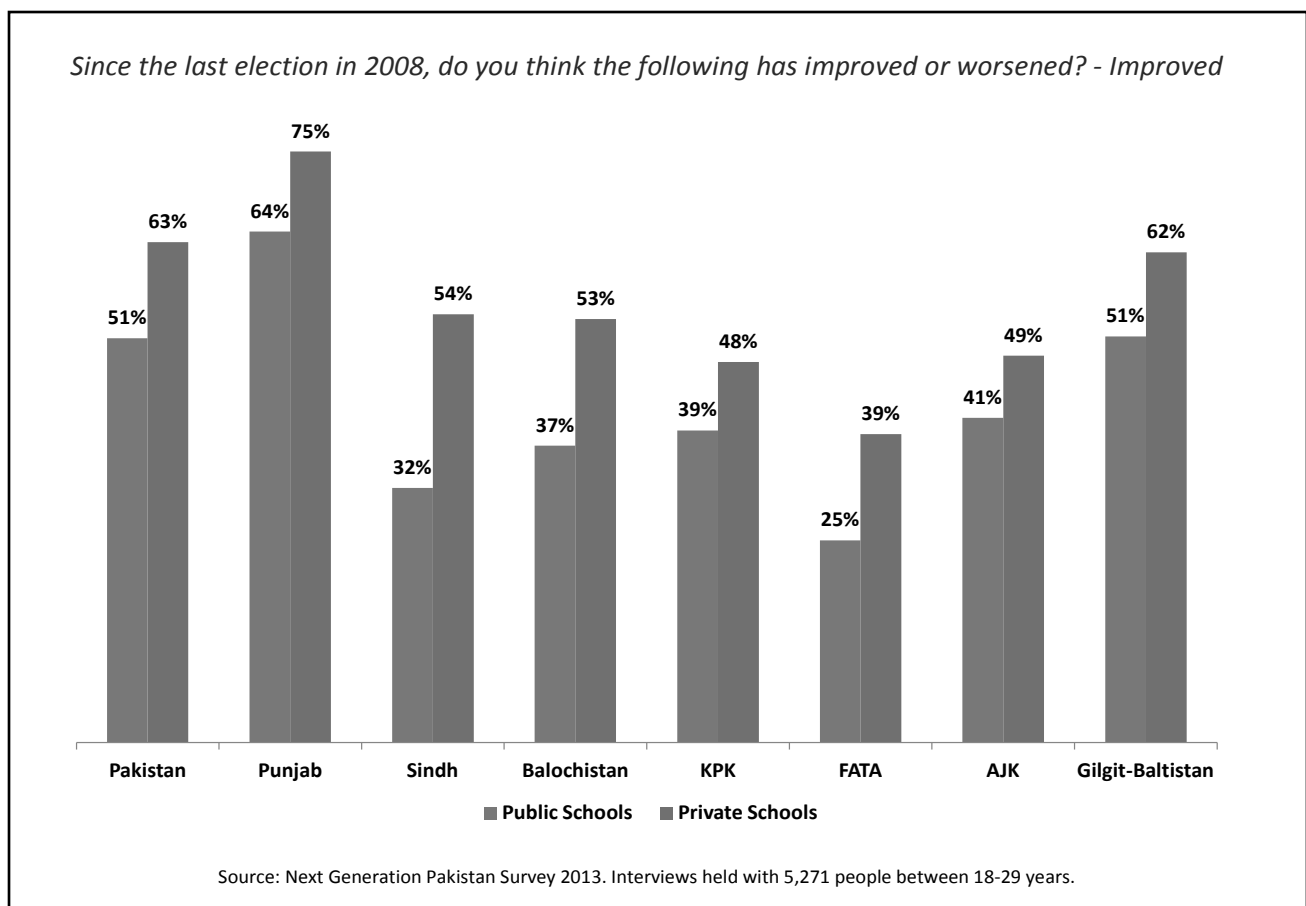


Figure 1: 18-29 year olds that think schools have improved (per cent). Source: Next Generation Pakistan Survey 2013

Breaking down the results by district has a number of advantages. It draws attention to the continued underperformance of schools in the rural south – a result of inequitable patterns of resource allocation, as well as more challenging social conditions...<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, the 2013 Next Generation Pakistan Survey of 18-29 year olds showed that, among this age group, the percentage that thinks schools have improved in Punjab far exceeds that in other provinces.

Overall, therefore, all evidence so far points in the same positive direction. This degree of progress, at this speed, across a province with 20 million school students, 60,000 government schools, 35,000 low-cost private schools and over 300,000 teachers, is remarkable and a tribute to Punjab's government and teachers.

However, there are two major hurdles to overcome before the Roadmap can be considered transformative. First, we will need convincing evidence of improvement in student outcomes. The evidence we do have is promising but it is also flawed. The Punjab Examination Commission (PEC) exam results in 2012 showed significant progress, but there are questions about their reliability and also about corruption. Early in 2014 we put in place a valid and reliable test of a sample of grade 2 children. It will be repeated every six months.

The second major issue is summed up in the question I most often get asked, which is "Is it sustainable?" The answer to that, at one level, is as simple as the question: of course it's not yet sustainable. Whether it becomes so or not depends on what the leaders involved decide to do.

The truth is, at this moment, we don't know whether the Roadmap will turn out to be sustainable. What we do know is that the status quo in Pakistan – in education and more generally – is absolutely not sustainable. Pakistan simply cannot afford to write off another generation. On the balance of risk,

therefore, bold and urgent action at scale looks like the much better option. We should therefore aim for irreversibility, which has a very specific meaning.

Irreversibility means not being satisfied merely with an improvement in outcomes, but asking whether the structures and culture are in place that will guarantee the right trajectory of results for the foreseeable future.<sup>3</sup>

This is a tough test and on this measure it is clear that the Roadmap is still far from irreversible and that it is a minimum of two years away. If, in the meantime, the chief minister stopped paying attention or the normal musical chairs among officials began again, it could rapidly unravel.

So what are the lessons for education in developing countries and the effective use of aid?

### **Lesson 1: Be ambitious**

The world is changing fast and education systems, even in the best-run countries, find it difficult to meet the ever-greater demands placed on them.

How much more so in a country such as Pakistan where the education system has been underperforming disastrously for decades? Moreover, in a system where many have given up hope, a bold, ambitious vision is required.

And tackle the whole system! No point in a few boutique initiatives for a few hundred thousand children when, as in Punjab, there are 25-30 million children and young people who need a good education as fast as possible.

### **Lesson 2: Set clear goals**

Translate the vision into measurable outcomes. Make it real for people at every level in the system. They've heard high-flown rhetoric before. Often. They want to know what is expected of them and when. And they want to know whether they are on track, which means collecting regular data and sharing it with the key decision makers at every level.

### **Lesson 3: Prepare, plan and get on with it; you can refine as you go**

Planning matters, but can be overdone. When there is an education emergency as in Pakistan, it is not sensible to spend a long time planning before acting, because it means giving up on millions more children. Yet when you talk to those involved in classic Education Sector Plans they have often taken years to produce.

With the Roadmap, it was different. Shahbaz Sharif asked us to prepare a plan in November 2010 and he approved it in December 2010. In January 2011 we began implementation. By August it was affecting what happened in 60,000 schools.

### **Lesson 4: Establish routines that work**

Government is driven by crises and events but it is routines that deliver results.

These are my words summarising what I learnt from eight years at the heart of government in the UK.

The monthly (later bimonthly) stocktakes where we report progress to the chief minister, officials are held to account and we all contribute to solving problems, are central to the success of the Roadmap so far. With the chief minister and all the key decision-makers around the table, issues that might take days or weeks to resolve can be resolved in a few minutes. If you want results, routines trump chaos every time.

### **Lesson 5: The conversation must be honest**

One of the reasons for the continuing failure in these situations is an unwillingness to confront the brutal facts. Failure needs to be named and its causes identified. If they include corruption, political interference or incompetence, there is no point avoiding the issue.

Someone has to have the courage to speak up and take the risk of being

unpopular, perhaps even damaging their career. Once new norms are established and speaking plainly has become not just acceptable but expected, it gets easier - but someone has to get the ball rolling.

### **Lesson 6: Know what's really happening**

Punjab is vast: around 100 million people inhabiting everything from desert to sprawling cities. For the education reform to work, you have to know what's happening across the province as near to now as possible. That way, if something isn't working, you can address the problem immediately. This requires a reasonably reliable data system that gets the data in, analyses it and gets it out round the system again in short order.

### **Lesson 7: Refine constantly but don't compromise**

With the routines, the honest conversation and regular data all in place, it becomes possible to refine the plan constantly and improve it in the light of the evidence and changing circumstances. The big risk, though, is that refinement becomes an excuse for compromise; that as the plan runs into difficulties, as good plans always do, it becomes an excuse for reducing the ambition or slipping the deadlines. That is the slippery slope from transformational to incremental change and it is all too easy to slide down it. Someone has to be the unreasonable one.

### **Lesson 8: Create momentum**

Never stand still. Simple really. This is especially true in a place such as Punjab where most of those involved start out expecting failure. They have to be taken through what you might call an emotional trajectory:

1. "Can't think why we would even consider this."
2. "It's a bad idea, but if they insist."
3. "I've seen worse."
4. "You have to respect the way they've gone about it."

5. "Maybe it's beginning to work."
6. "The results are promising."
7. "We should have done this years ago."
8. "I always said it was a good idea."
9. "I'm glad I thought of it."

With the Roadmap in Punjab, we have reached somewhere between stages 6 and 7.

### **Lesson 9: Persist**

The single word says it all. In Punjab, we're just embarking on year four. The results are impressive - but from a very low base - and an education system capable of providing high standards for every child remains years away.

### **Lesson 10: Build a guiding coalition and ever-widening circles of leadership**

Reform of a whole system requires a guiding coalition of political, official and donor leaders who share the objectives, a deep understanding of the strategy and participation in the routines that drive delivery.

Now in a stocktake in Punjab we are in practice acting as a team overseeing the Roadmap. The discussion is about how to achieve the goals, not just each participant representing their organisation. From the guiding coalition outwards, the circles of leadership can be extended wider and wider.

In the crucial foundation stage of the Roadmap, between January and August 2011, we worked tirelessly to build the relationships with officials on which progress depended. We built trust, confidence and shared commitment. And the credit for progress went to the officials, not my team.

The officials came to realise that this was not just another donor initiative; it was a way to help them do their jobs effectively.

The last three years have been a success but in 2014 we will do better still. There is a new confidence and the provincial and district leaders,

have greater experience. Moreover, the schools are continuing to improve. UNESCO said recently that, at present rates of enrolment, it would take many more decades before every primary age child was enrolled in school and learning. This need not be the case. With the right combination of political will and relentless implementation of what works at the door-to-door level, the task could be completed within a decade. We need more people like Saira and fewer speeches...

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### **Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup>Saira Malik is a fictional character based on many personalities met over our time in Pakistan

<sup>2</sup>ICAI Report, p.21

<sup>3</sup>Deliverology 101, p.33

### **References**

Barber, M. (2013) *The Good News from Pakistan*. Reform, London.

A 10-minute film, "Punjab Education Reform Roadmap". which sets out the agenda discussed in the article can be found at: <http://bit.ly/1enK6U7>