

Reaching the unreached

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Pakistan has an estimated 22.8 million children between the ages of 5 and 16 who are out of school. This number is the second-highest in the world after Nigeria. This represents a staggering 44% of the entire population within this age group.

The disparity in educational access is particularly stark when viewed through the lenses of gender, socioeconomic status, and geographical location. In Balochistan province, the issue of out-of-school children is of grave concern, as around 78% of the girls are not enrolled.

Balochistan has lower primary and secondary enrollment rates compared to other provinces. Numerous factors, including the province's remote and rugged geography, the establishment and upkeep of schools, economic hardships, and poverty, deprive children of education there. Likewise, cultural norms and security concerns in certain regions further restrict access to education, particularly for girls.

In January 2023, the Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund (PPAF) initiated a two-year "Bridging Educational Polarisation for Social Harmony" project in the rural settlements of Quetta, Pishin, and Mastung districts, with a budget of Rs. 61.8 million.

The objectives of this project are to engage religious seminaries in mainstream education, provide economic opportunities, and foster religious freedom and interfaith harmony through various initiatives like model worship places, study tours, seminars, and workshops at provincial and national levels.

The project encompasses critical components, including the repair and renovation of five minority worship places and 15 madrassas, with the mainstreaming of 1,168 madrassa students (271 girls) into the formal education system.

Moreover, the project ensures the salaries of 26 teachers, including four females, along with their capacity building through the Accelerated Learning Programme training from the Provincial Institute for Teacher Education, Balochistan.

Each student receives a set of textbooks while also being encouraged to participate in sports and recreational activities. Under the project, 100 youths from madrassas have been provided with technical and vocational training and kits to prepare them for livelihoods.

In 2007, the Chamalang Tribal Education Committee initiated the "Chamalang Education Programme Balochistan" using funds generated from taxes on coal mines in districts Kohlu and Loralai. This programme aimed to admit 3,000 children of coal miners to private schools in the Kohlu, Loralai, and Dukki districts.

The main objective of the programme is to utilise the education sector to provide opportunities to the underprivileged through merit and targeted outreach programmes in Balochistan. The majority of the students have been enrolled in military public schools and private educational institutions.

It is worth mentioning that PPAF provided 7,300 scholarships worth Rs. 104.21 million for students studying in 21 schools of the project districts, covering their monthly tuition fees, exposure visit expenses, and annual school functions.

Additionally, in 2021, PPAF extended two-year scholarship support for 1,838 students (561 girls) in 19 schools and one FC College in Loralai and Kohlu, with a budget of Rs. 50.79 million under its Chamalang Education Programme.

Graduates from various educational institutions under the Chamalang Education Programme have achieved remarkable milestones in their lives. In 2023, all 146 students, including 24 girls, passed the matriculation exam, while eleven of these students got A+ grades and 54 students got A grades.

Malaika Hafeez, a student from Loralai, secured the top position in matriculation in 2020, while Shah Hussain from Dukki district is pursuing an MBBS at the Bacha Khan Medical College. Numerous other young boys and

girls have found employment opportunities in the public and private sectors. PPAF's contribution has been transformative, enhancing the prospects of the future generation and equipping them to take charge of the nation's affairs in the days to come.

Since 2006, PPAF has enrolled 401,968 students, 45% girls, in 2,804 primary, middle, and secondary schools across Pakistan. These schools include both public and community-based institutions, established to cater to areas lacking public sector educational facilities.

PPAF has bolstered the capacities of community members, including school management committees and community resource persons, besides focusing on teacher training through innovative methods to improve the quality of education in remote districts across Pakistan.