

Literacy and vocational skills training in Punjab

Changing lives through effective government intervention

Dr Allah Bakhsh Malik

Introduction

Education is a basic human right and quintessential prerequisite for social capital formation, and for social and economic empowerment. Pakistan has a population of 192 million people, 33 per cent of whom live below the poverty line. The country's overall literacy rate is 57 per cent, with only 45 per cent for women and girls. Punjab, the country's largest province with a population of 92 million¹, has 3.8 million school-age children out of school, and 80 per cent of them have never enrolled in a school. Of those that do enroll, 40 per cent drop out before they reach Grade 4, and 77 per cent of the total enrolled children drop out while in Grade 9². The real challenge is 100 per cent enrolment and retention of the enrolled children in the formal school system. The government of Punjab has drawn up a roadmap that aims to achieve this goal³.

But it is not only child literacy that the Punjab government must tackle – it is also faced with the enormous task of educating the 40 million illiterate adults who live in the province. Various adult literacy programmes have been tried and tested in the past but the target uptake was not achieved for a variety of reasons. One of the main arguments against such programmes was the lack of economic and social benefits of being literate, since millions of graduates are unemployed in Punjab and literacy appears neither to be a guarantee of finding employment nor a means of alleviating poverty⁴.

Illiterate adults also need skills development, but are faced by institutional limitations. Since all technical and vocational institutes, both in the public and private sector, require a matriculation qualification (Grade 10) for admission to courses, illiterate adults are automatically excluded.

Combining functional literacy with vocational skills

In 2010, after the devastating floods in Pakistan, the major challenge was the rehabilitation of the 20 million flood victims. Homes and businesses were destroyed and those affected by the flood suddenly found themselves homeless and penniless. After the flood emergency, the Punjab government launched new adult literacy programmes for those affected. The following two schemes have since proved the most successful, as they focus on the illiterate adult population and provide them with both literacy and vocational skills simultaneously.

Community learning centres

Of Punjab's 36 districts, Muzaffargarh and Dera Ghazi (D.G.) Khan rank the lowest in terms of literacy and poverty levels. Due to the strong socio-cultural norms prevalent in the area – the society is rural and tribal – girls are prevented from attending school. As a consequence, the female literacy rate is less than 30 per cent⁵. Distance to school is another major obstacle⁶. The Literacy and Non Formal Basic Education Department (L&NFBED), with the support of UNESCO Pakistan, opened 30 community learning centres (CLCs) in the flood-affected areas for illiterate women and girls between the ages of 15 and 45 years⁷. The target population was those worst affected by the floods. The vocational skills identified were demand-driven and market-oriented, such as designing and making clothes, and embroidery. A three-month programme that combined literacy and vocational skills was designed for each learner. Students were provided with literacy kits and the necessary material, free of charge, to learn the basic literacy and the chosen vocational skills. Local teachers qualified in literacy and skills development were selected by L&NFBED for a class of 30 adults, and classes were held as close as possible to the women's homes.

Unlike more traditional adult literacy programmes, the idea of CLCs has been a huge success, primarily due to community ownership, convenience of location, and social acceptance by the rural and tribal communities. Running for three cycles, at 30 CLCs, with 30 participants at each centre, 2,700 trainees were taught literacy and vocational skills simultaneously. Equipped with their new skills, female learners felt empowered to become self-employed. Working from home, they attracted customers from nearby villages and neighbourhoods, earning around PKR 10,000 to 15,000 per month per learner. The initiative helped the women become self-reliant, improve their quality of life and make a positive contribution to their local community. The success of CLCs has also made this a replicable model that can be followed by other target groups.

Punjab Literacy and Livelihood Programme

The setting up of CLCs in Muzaffargarh and D.G. Khan districts created awareness, and culminated in an increase in public demand. The public representatives and parliamentarians from Southern Punjab demanded a scaling up of CLCs in eight sub-districts of Multan and D.G. Khan that had the lowest literacy rates. In response to the pressing public demand, the Punjab government allocated PKR 135.71 million for a Punjab Literacy and Livelihood Programme (PLLP)⁸. The specific purpose of the intervention was to replicate the model of CLCs and provide basic

literacy and vocational skills to 7,500 adults, both male and female, who were unable to read or write. In order to provide incentive and attract adults to come forward to learn the basic literacy and vocational skills, a stipend of PKR 500 per month per participant was also offered. The target group was economically disadvantaged illiterate adults between 15–45 years. The gender ratio of the beneficiaries of the programme was 50:50.

A special Project Management Unit (PMU) was set up with qualified managerial staff and an impeccable system of monitoring and evaluation. In order to implement the initiative, the PMU entered into partnership with the Punjab Vocational Training Council (PVTC), an autonomous agency that specialises in teaching vocational skills in the public sector. Need assessment for demand-driven vocational skills for learners was carried out. PVTC institutions in different districts and towns in Southern Punjab prepared customised programmes according to market-oriented local requirements. Taking into consideration the daily routines of the learners – men working as unskilled labour during the day and women carrying out household chores in the afternoon – flexible and convenient classes were arranged in consultation with the learners and local communities. For men, vocational skills like electrician training, plumbing, pipe-fitting, mechanics and machine-operating were identified. For women, training was offered in skills such as fashion-designing, dress-making, embroidery, leatherwork and beauty therapy.

The uptake has been very successful, and so far, 7,500 people have been empowered with basic literacy and vocational skills through PLLP.

The scheme has been acknowledged as a hallmark of success by communities and civil society organisations in the eight target sub-districts. As a result, the Punjab government has expressed a firm commitment to scale up the programme of adult literacy and vocational skills throughout Punjab in order to target the entire population of 40 million illiterate adults. The political and professional leadership of the province is willing to allocate adequate resources for this purpose, enabling the unskilled illiterate people to become skilled and literate, earning their livelihoods through employment or by setting up their own business.

Conclusion

No country can thrive in the new millennium without a skilled and literate workforce and social capital. Punjab, the largest province of Pakistan, is crippled by an education emergency that threatens millions of people. The emergency has the potential for disastrous human, social and economic consequences, especially against the threat of terrorism overshadowing the country.

Previously, the slow pace of progress towards attaining the Millennium Development Goal (MDG)⁹ of halving illiteracy rates by 2015 reflected the low level of political commitment and meagre resource allocation. Adult literacy suffered for decades primarily because the government concentrated on adult literacy as a stand-alone initiative, without the essential component of imparting a life-long vocational skill.

However, initiatives like the community learning centres (CLCs) and Punjab Literacy and Livelihood Programme (PLLP), which blend literacy and vocational skills together, are proving to be much more promising, especially for the less-affluent, marginalised and disenfranchised sections of society.

Notes

- 1 National Institute of Population Studies, Government of Pakistan, Islamabad 2010.
- 2 Pakistan Economic Survey, Government of Pakistan, Islamabad 2009–2010.
- 3 Punjab School Roadmap, Government of the Punjab, Chief Minister Secretariat, Lahore 2010.
- 4 Literacy and Non Formal Basic Education Department: Five Year Strategic Plan 2010–2015, Government of the Punjab.
- 5 Pakistan Economic Survey, Government of Pakistan, Islamabad 2009–2010.
- 6 EFA Global Monitoring Report 2010, UNESCO Paris, France.
- 7 UNESCO Pakistan Implementation Partnership Agreement No. 45129466 for PKR 3.27 million.
- 8 Annual Development Programme, Planning and Development Department, Government of the Punjab, Lahore 2010.
- 9 A.B. Malik (2007). *Freedom of Choice: Affordable Quality Education in Public-Private Partnership*. Maqbool Academy, Lahore.

Dr Allah Bakhsh Malik is Secretary to the Government of the Punjab, Literacy and Non Formal Basic Education Department. A community development specialist with a PhD in Economics, Public Finance and Resource Mobilization, he has a postgraduate degree from Cambridge University, UK, and is a law graduate from the University of Punjab. Please visit www.literacy.gop.pk

Girls' literacy in Pakistan – from UNESCO's Education for All 2011 Report

Pakistan has some of the world's largest gender disparities in education. Young girls are less likely to enter the school system and more likely to drop out of primary school, and few make it through secondary school. Interlocking gender inequalities associated with poverty, labour demand, cultural practices and attitudes to girls' education create barriers to entry and progression through school, and reduce expectation and ambition among many girls.

Developments in Literacy (DIL), a non-governmental organisation (NGO) formed 13 years ago and supported by the Pakistani diaspora in Canada, the UK and the US, runs 147 schools in nine districts across all four provinces of Pakistan. Its goal is 'to provide quality education to disadvantaged children, especially girls, by establishing and operating schools in the underdeveloped regions of Pakistan, with a strong focus on gender equality and community participation'. Working through local non-governmental groups, it delivers education to more than 16,000 students, 60 to 70 per cent of them girls.



Recognising the poor quality of teaching in most public schools, DIL has developed its own teacher education centre. Training in student-centred methods is mandatory for all DIL teachers, 96 per cent of whom are female. DIL has also developed its own reading materials in English and Urdu, designed to challenge stereotypes by showing girls exercising leadership and pursuing non-traditional roles and occupations. Innovative teaching methods have been developed to encourage problem-solving and critical thinking, and to discourage passive learning.

As the programme has evolved, DIL has recognised the importance of helping girls make the transition to secondary school or work. Financial support is provided for girls graduating from DIL, enabling them to continue on to government secondary schools. Transition rates from primary to secondary school have been impressive. In most schools, over 80 per cent of students progress to Grade 9. Many girls who took part in the project in its early years have gone on to university and careers, with some entering teaching and health care, showing how education can create virtuous circles of rising skills and expanding opportunity.

Source: Lloyd (2010)

Reassessing security threats – from UNESCO's Education for All 2011 Report

The US report on the 9/11 attacks set the tone for much of the received wisdom in donor countries on Pakistan's madrasa education: 'Millions of families, especially those with little money, send their children to religious schools, or madrasas. Many of these schools are the only opportunity available... but some have been used as incubators for violent extremism' (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 2005).

Madrasas in several other countries, including Nigeria, have also been identified in security assessments carried out by developed countries as a source of militancy and terrorist indoctrination. Such conclusions are not grounded in evidence. Some madrasas in Pakistan – such as Deobandi madrasas in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas – have been associated with groups responsible for extremist violence. But they are the exception, not the rule. There is no one-to-one relationship between madrasas and recruitment to armed groups, in Pakistan or any other country. Moreover, it is not the case that 'millions of families' in Pakistan send children to madrasas. One detailed estimate found that only about 1 per cent of children attend these schools full time, though many more attend part time.

Why do parents choose to send children to madrasas? In many cases, because they want them to receive a Koranic education. Another important source of demand for madrasa education is the poor condition of the country's formal school system. Attended by two students out of three, Pakistan's public school system is in a state of protracted crisis. Chronic underfinancing, poor quality and corruption have left Pakistan with some of the worst and most unequal education indicators in South and West Asia. The rapid rise of low-fee private schools is symptomatic of the state of public education. For many parents who are too poor to afford these schools, madrasas offer a better alternative.

The crisis in Pakistan's public education system is the real security threat to the country's future, not madrasas. Pakistan has one of the world's largest youth bulges, with 37 per cent of the population under 15, as well as the second largest out-of-school population at 7.3 million. Some commentators warn that those who are in school are not taught critical thinking or citizenship skills, leaving students vulnerable to radical influences outside the school environment.

Fixing the public system and ensuring that children gain the skills they need to find employment form the key to tackling a rise in extremism and setting Pakistan on a path to inclusive development. The public policy challenge posed by madrasas is very different from the one identified by the 9/11 Commission. As a large number of children attend these schools for part of their education, it is important that government agencies and school authorities work together to ensure that the education provided meets basic standards of quality and that learning outcomes are monitored.

Sources: Bano (2007); UNESCO (2010a); Winthrop and Graff (2010)