Establishing Data Regimes to Increase Accountability: Transforming Education in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Introduction

Located in northwestern Pakistan, the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is home to almost 31 million people. The education sector in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa had long been neglected until successive provincial governments in the 2010s developed an interest in meeting the national constitutional commitment to provide free, compulsory education to all children, while also being cognizant of pledges to meet the goals set out by Education for All, as well as the Sustainable Development Goals.1

The magnitude of the educational challenge Pakistan faced was evident from the fact that out of a total 60 million school-age children around the world who were reported to not be attending school in 2014, 5.6 million of those children were from Pakistan (World Bank EdStats). Alif Ailaan, a Pakistani non-profit organization working in the education field, estimated that the number could be even higher, with almost 24 million children in Pakistan out of school and, of those, 2.4 million from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa alone (Alif Ailaan 2014).

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was heavily affected by the war against terrorism, which engulfed Pakistan following the September 2001 attacks in the United States and the subsequent war in neighboring Afghanistan. The porous border between the Afghanistan and Pakistan allowed continued cross-border instability, which severely affected Khyber Pakhtunkhwa’s socioeconomic infrastructure (Mustafa 2012). Although the mismatch in demand and supply of education

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1 Education for All was a global movement on education, started by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. It was aimed at achieving universal primary education.

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was a major hurdle, other problems only exacerbated the challenge, including gender inequity and disparities in outcomes resulting from the province’s sociocultural norms that discouraged female education, a lack of robust accountability frameworks, and weak governance and management practices, combined with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa’s perilous terrain. Also, among children who were enrolled in schools, retention rates were low: the primary school completion rates in the rural district of Kohistan, for example, were at only 1 percent among females and 25 percent for males (Mustafá 2012).

In June 2012, to deal with this education emergency, the government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the U.K. Department for International Development (DfID) launched the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Education Sector Programmes (KESP I and KESP II), which would run from 2012 to 2020. Adam Smith International (ASI), a development consulting firm, supported the programs through technical assistance to the provincial government’s Elementary and Secondary Education Department (E&SED). KESP launched various initiatives, and one of the lead projects was the inception of the Independent Monitoring Unit (IMU), a semiautonomous wing of the E&SED launched to credibly monitor and report on all major school indicators.2

This case study explores the educational challenges that led to the creation of the IMU in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the ensuing delivery hurdles, and the ways they were handled for the betterment of education.

Delivery Challenges

Project Data and Monitoring: Data Availability and Baselines

One of the major delivery challenges was a dearth of education data, which led to difficulties in monitoring the progress of existing reforms, getting a credible picture of the overall education indicators, determining baselines, and identifying counterfactuals for any evidence-based planning. Before the IMU was established in 2013, the main source of data for the E&SED was an annual school census compiled at the provincial level over several months. The accuracy and authenticity of the data was questionable because (a) the head teachers wanted to present a positive picture and (b) the data gathered were too obsolete to inform any timely decision making. Moreover, the data reports were not available in a user-friendly format for the public at large, particularly for parents, who were the main consumers of education services. Any reform policy formulation, planning, and implementation would be futile without a strong evidential base.

Conflict and Instability: Civil Unrest and Armed Conflict

Another major delivery challenge for postconflict Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was that the security threat continued to loom around areas bordering the tribal belt and Afghanistan. Although the number of terrorist incidents in the province had greatly reduced from a 2010 peak of 2,061 incidents (as reported by the National Counter Terrorism Authority) to 489 incidents in 2017, the threat was still very much present. Certain cities, such as Hangu, Tank, and Dera Ismail Khan had also historically been affected by ethnic and sectarian violence (Farooq 2019). Such an environment discouraged school enrollment and attendance and hampered the provision and maintenance of supporting infrastructure. In a province with poor socioeconomic conditions that continuously undermined education delivery, it was critical to monitor and address challenges related to the school environment to improve outcomes.

Human Resources and Organizational Capacity

The most complex challenge was setting up a transparent and efficient accountability framework that used data for decision making and performance management. The bureaucratic system in Pakistan was generally known to be corrupt, exploitative, and historically impaired by continuous political interference that undermined merit and efficiency (Ismail 2016). As a result, school monitoring was a politicized practice with high absenteeism rates for teachers. Anecdotal evidence from 2013 suggested that significant numbers of teachers hired proxy teachers (or no one at all) to perform their duties while they worked in other cities or even different countries. Such absence of accountability was evident in other aspects of school monitoring as well.

2 These indicators include input-based indicators such as student and teacher presence; provision and functionality of basic facilities such as water, electricity, and toilets; infrastructure-related indicators; and provision of books and stipends.
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Addressing Delivery Challenges

The National Sustainable Development Strategies identified by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs in 2011 asserted that though it was imperative for reform programs to set up data management systems, such efforts should not be treated as a one-time exercise (UNDESA 2011). Rather, such systems should be built sustainably by developing the capacity of the stakeholders to collect the information themselves and to share the findings with government counterparts and civil society. E&SED and its technical assistance team were cognizant of this aspect when the IMU was established as a project in 2013, with partial funding from DfID. (The project was later shifted to the government’s regular budget.) E&SED hired almost 550 data collectors, who were responsible for carrying out unannounced visits to five or six schools every day in their respective districts. The data collectors visited all 28,000 schools in the province at least once every month. Some schools were visited more than once in a month so that the head teachers were constantly conscious of being monitored.

The data collectors entered data through a customized smartphone application that, in turn, fed the data into an online dashboard that education providers could access at any time. Indicators for which data were collected included teacher and student presence, enrollment, availability and functionality of basic facilities, and availability of free books and student stipends to cover the costs of attending school. With all the data coming in, Adam Smith International’s technical assistance team held extensive trainings for department officials to build their capacity to access, analyze, and incorporate the data into their routine operations and to make better-informed decisions that were grounded in evidence.

District Monitoring Officers (senior officers from Pakistan’s Civil Services) were posted at the district level and were responsible for overseeing the activities of data collectors, ensuring data quality, and convening District Steering Committee (DSC) meetings. The steering committee was a forum set up at the district level and presided over by the Deputy Commissioner, who was the administrative head and the highest office bearer of a district. The Deputy Commissioner had the influence, expertise, and power to directly implement needed reforms, direct other officials to take actions, fund reforms, or impose penalties on officials. DSC meetings helped create a structured, localized data regime and were successful in bringing together all relevant education providers on a monthly basis to drive actions that improved school conditions, with each provider held accountable for the duties assigned to him or her. To further renew the interest of district staff members in reforms, the E&SED, with support from Adam Smith International’s technical assistance team, initiated a monthly district ranking system in which the top performing districts and their staffs were awarded cash prizes. The financial incentives encouraged district officers to use data on a regular basis.

The security situation was the trickiest challenge faced during the project delivery. The precarious situation directly affected the number of schools monitored per month. Some data monitors, especially women, were not comfortable carrying out the visits and requested security accompaniment during their visits. As a result, monitoring was limited among schools in the suburbs of districts such as Hangu, Dera Ismail Khan, Peshawar, Bannu, and Tank at the outset. Later, the District Monitoring Officers successfully aligned with the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa police to provide security for the data collectors and accompany them during visits to problematic schools in the suburbs that bordered the tribal belt.

The last and the most laborious aspect of driving reforms involved setting up a transparent, credible accountability system that would both catalyze the reforms and be acceptable to the education providers, including teachers and administrators. The DSC forums were a great start but were not enough to bring standardization across the province, as each district had its own set of punitive actions toward education providers who were not performing. Innovation was needed to disrupt the bureaucratic system and overstep its elaborate and repetitive processes, so the technical assistance team set up an Online Action Management System (OAMS) in which actionable indicators from the Independent Monitoring Unit system were added and automated actions were generated for district staff members, who needed to complete those tasks in a limited timeframe. For example, the presence of teachers in schools was a prerequisite for their proper school performance, but teacher absenteeism was rampant in the province so this indicator was added to the OAMS. The OAMS generated penalties for teachers who were willfully absent from their duties depending on their history of absenteeism.
Penalties included salary deductions, stoppage of annual salary increases, and—in severe cases—termination of employment. The online system was transparent, with no human interference, and updated in real time for all stakeholders to view, making it more difficult to engage in corrupt practices of the past.

The results of this real-time data collection system, coupled with the establishment of efficient forums on ways to use data, were evident within a few years. The teacher-presence rate improved from 81 percent in 2013 to 90 percent in 2018. Student absenteeism fell from 38 percent to 21 percent during the same time period, and student retention rates across the province improved from 60 percent to 74 percent. Data on input-based indicators helped authorities make better-informed decisions on provision and monitoring of basic facilities, such as toilets, electricity, drinking water, and boundary walls. In 2018, 78 percent of schools had all basic facilities, compared to 50 percent in 2013.

The foundation of a credible, functional, and sustainable institution such as the Independent Monitoring Unit was its ability to maintain independence in the face of political interference and administrative pressures that could have resulted in data tampering or bias in its actions. To counter this possibility, a national testing agency hired data monitors on merit, and those monitors were offered lucrative salary packages to attract the best talent. Similarly, higher management at the Independent Monitoring Unit consisted of senior, qualified Pakistani civil servants with secure job tenures, who were less vulnerable to external pressures from vested interests. The Independent Monitoring Unit, despite being a wing of the E&SED, was fully autonomous in its operations.

Lessons Learned

The educational challenge of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was as unique and complex as its context, which makes it difficult to establish clear theories of change. Moreover, precise replication of the project in other contexts of the world might not deliver the same results. However, some basic underpinnings and groundwork can be discerned that could be transferred to other development interventions. The major lesson from the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Education Sector Programmes reforms was the importance of a coherent policy framework that was grounded in data and a coordinated response to the educational challenge, the dearth of data, and the lack of utility of that data.

Often, postconflict settings are characterized by weak links and heightened fragmentation between institutions, which makes consensus building an arduous task (UNDESA 2011). In this case, all stakeholders—including political leaders, donors, and education providers—were brought on board before the reforms in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa started. As a result, political leaders did not flinch in the face of adversity. For example, the program received severe backlash from teachers and teachers’ unions in the province following the launch of the Independent Monitoring Unit and the Online Action Management System, because teachers feared the monitoring regime and its penalties. Such protests threatened the ongoing implementation of reforms and also put the security of data monitors at risk. E&SED, which also happened to be the biggest government employer in the province (employing 140,000 teachers), along with the province’s political leadership, did not succumb to this resistance and offered their full support to the IMU staff. To restore teachers’ faith in the system, the program offered cash rewards and recognition to teachers of schools that performed well.

A coordinated response would have been futile without the participation of the consumers of the system—parents, civil society, and the general public. The data collected by the IMU was made public through a website so that parents and civil society could follow up on the progress of the reforms. Publication of the data on a website also allowed the media to access the information and keep the public informed about the school conditions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Such accessible means of transparent information sharing allowed a two-way flow of information for the E&SED, thereby creating more demand for education reforms. Education reforms in the province still had a long way to go, but they had been steered in the right direction.

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3 Provincewide protests were held against the IMU and the OAMS in 2015 and 2016. The Express Tribune (Pakistan) reported details of one such protests that took place in 2015 (Zia 2015).
4 The website can be accessed here: http://175.107.63.45/NewIMUSite/.
References


