

A META-ANALYSIS OF EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES IN PAKISTAN: INSIGHTS IN THE CONTEXT OF SDG-4

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Abstract

In this paper, the researcher applies a meta-analysis of the main issues facing the education system in Pakistan related to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) Quality Education highlighted by UNESCO and the World Bank. Although several initiatives have been made by the government in Pakistan, the education sector still experiences some problems, including poor levels of enrollment, gender disparity, out-dated syllabus, mismanagement of institutions as well as poor teacher training. All this facilitates inadequate learning performance, which increases the discrepancy in meeting the SDG 4 targets. The secondary source of the meta-analysis involves government reports, policy analysis, and statistical evidence of UNESCO, World Bank, and Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. The paper establishes that 22.8 of the total population of children has been out of schools with high gender and geographical inequalities. Also, the literacy and numeracy levels are on the decrease with 30-40 percent of teachers having no formal training, and the academic levels of 40 percent of students being below the minimum standards. Moreover, the education allocate budget of Pakistan does not exceed 3% of the GDP which is still way less than the prescribed UNESCO guideline of 4-6%, therefore, lacks adequate infrastructure, lack of e-learning resources, and teacher training plans. Results indicate that the structural obstacles may consist of unfair investments in education, bad governance, and the digital divide that slow down educational development. The research suggests that in order to focus on filling the education gaps, the funding available to education should go up at least to 5 per cent of GDP, educator training efforts should be enhanced, curriculum reform, and the option of digital learning should also be increased. The debate should be focused on the reinforcements of policy implementation, monitoring mechanisms, and innovative educational policies in achieving equitable and inclusive quality education in Pakistan. Through the reduction of these systemic impediments, Pakistan will be on the right path to aligning its education system to the SDG 4 goals enabling sustainable growth and a level playing field in accessing education to all its human resources.

Key Words: Sustainable Development Goal, Education, Curriculum, Challenges

Introduction

Education is the core element of national development and personal empowerment. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) addresses the area of education with the following 2030 declaration: to provide inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities to all learners (UNESCO, 2021). SDG 4 focuses on access to quality education, its universal character, gender equality, lifelong learning opportunities, and thus, becomes a key to sustainable development all over the world.

Even though there have been improvements, the problems of inequity in access, gender disparities, and obsolete learning paradigms are major indicators of the challenges still facing Pakistan in the education sphere. UNESCO (2021) affirm that in Pakistan, it is imperative to substantially increase education infrastructure and teacher capacity in terms of SDG 4 goals.

The World Bank (2019) emphasizes that low education budget and inefficiency in governments of Pakistan are obstacles to the systemic changes. This paper situates the education system in Pakistan in the international context of standards stipulated in the UNESCO and World Bank and then undertakes the analysis of past and current reform, based on the assessment of the effectiveness to enhance access and quality. By resolving the above challenges, Pakistan will be on a positive track in the achievement of SDG 4 goals and provision of a high-quality endeavor with equity.

Historical Background of the Education System in Pakistan

The short history of the Pakistani education system shows its development under the influence of colonialism and the changes that took place in Pakistan after the period of independence and time after it along with the global aims of educational development that are currently followed such as Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). The old education system only accommodated the needs of the elite before 1947 in the English language, which was aimed at serving the purpose of the colonial administration, and not the masses in their educational desires (UNESCO, 2015). This formed a very expensive system of education thus barring most people.

Once the independence was achieved, Pakistan was left with a poorly developed and unsound educational system. The government realized the importance of education as a pillar to nation-building and it therefore initiated such important programs or initiatives that started with the National Education Conference of 1947 which highlighted on national and accessible education policy. Yet, with limited resources and inefficiencies of policies, there was a slow rate at which progress was made (Government of Pakistan, 2014).

The next decades were marked by various reforms to increase access and quality. The 1950s and 1960s witnessed primary education campaigns, while the University Grants Commission (UGC) was established in 1959 to oversee higher education development. In the 1970s, under Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, educational institutions were nationalized, and free primary education policies were introduced. This period also saw a rapid expansion of universities and vocational institutions (Higher Education Commission, 2017).

Despite these efforts, Pakistan continues to face substantial educational challenges. The literacy rate remains low, with severe urban-rural and gender disparities. Although primary enrollment has increased, dropout rates remain high, and millions of children are still out of school. Furthermore, insufficient infrastructure, a shortage of trained teachers, and outdated curricula continue to hinder progress toward achieving SDG 4 objectives (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2020).

In conclusion, while Pakistan has made considerable progress in expanding its education system, sustained efforts are required to overcome persistent challenges and ensure that quality education is accessible to all, as envisioned in SDG 4 (World Bank, 2019).

Structure of the Education System

The educational system in Pakistan is structured to provide to various age groups and educational requirements of the school going children, encompassing multiple levels:

1. **Preschool Education:** Children below six years old are targeting, this non-mandatory stage includes institutions such as kindergartens and nursery schools, focusing on numeracy and basic literacy skills only. en.wikipedia.org
2. **Preprimary Education:** Comprising grades 1 to 3 for children aged 5 to 8, this stage lays the foundation for 3 Rs (Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic). The medium of instruction varies, with some schools teaching in Urdu, while others use English or regional languages. en.wikipedia.org

3. **Primary Education:** Embracing grades 4 to 5 for children 9 to 11 years. Primary education is important because it offers the ground work on learning for the following years that is marked on basic abilities to read, write, numeration and basic Islamiat. At this level, the medium of instructions also remains changeable where some school follow Urdu while some follow English.
4. **Elementary Education:** Covering grades 6 to 8, this stage builds upon primary education by introducing specialized subjects such as science, mathematics, and social studies, preparing students for secondary education. en.wikipedia.org
5. **Secondary Education:** Encompassing grades 9 to 10, is divided into two streams, academic education and technical and vocational education. Grades 9 and 10 is also equivalent to British O-Level. The general education stream ushers students to higher secondary education and the technical/vocational stream offers skills as a preparation for whoever intends to actively participate in the job market immediately after their courses. en.wikipedia.org
6. **Intermediate (Higher Secondary) Education:** Intermediate education is a stage of education that takes two years to complete through spanning grades 11 and 12, equivalent to the British A-levels, this stage allows students to choose subjects aligned with their career aspirations, including sciences, commerce, and humanities. en.wikipedia.org
7. **Tertiary Education:** Pakistan's higher education sector comprises colleges and universities offering undergraduate and postgraduate programs. The sector has expanded over the years, driven by the growth of private universities. en.wikipedia.org
8. **Non-Formal Education:** This category includes madrassas (Islamic seminaries), vocational training centers, and non-formal basic education for adults, providing alternative educational opportunities outside the formal system. en.wikipedia.org

Facts

The Pakistan Institute of Education (PIE) puts together a report and publication called 2021–22 that has descriptive data on a number of education-related factors. Some of these indicators are the number of schools and students, the number of students who enroll and participate, pupil teacher's ratios, and the facilities available at schools, how well students are learning, and the overall level of education.

Span of education System in Pakistan

Pakistan's educational landscape comprises a diverse array of institutions, accumulating approximately 313,418 establishments across various categories:

Elementary through High Schools: Approximately 227,506 institutions (73%) serve students from primary to secondary levels.

Religious Schools (Deeni Madaris): About 43,613 institutions (14%) provide religious education.

Non-Formal Basic Education Centers: There are around 25,106 centers (8%) offering non-formal basic education.

Technical and Vocational Schools: 10,087 institutions (3%) approximately, focus on technical and vocational training.

Degree-Offering Colleges: 2,487 colleges (1%) around, provide degree programs.

Universities: Pakistan is home to approximately 220 universities.

Teacher Training Schools: There are about 217 institutions devoted to training educators. Collectively, these institutions enroll approximately 54,870,964 students across all educational stages. The educational personnel comprises around 2,139,631 individuals employed across various levels and different types of schools nationwide. en.wikipedia.org

Public Private Education Institutions in Pakistan

Following table summarizing the data on private and public educational institutions in Pakistan:

Category	Public Sector	Private Sector	Total	Source
Number of Schools	176,184 (56.2%)	137,234 (43.8%)	313,418	pie.gov.pk
Student Enrollment	30,359,376 (53.5%)	25,511,588 (46.5%)	-	pie.gov.pk
Teaching Staff	889,885 (42%)	1,249,746 (58%)	-	pie.gov.pk

This table provides a clear comparison of public and private sector contributions to education in Pakistan.

Gross Intake Ratio (GIR)

Under mentioned these statistics highlight the challenges Pakistan faces in achieving equitable access to primary education across different regions and between genders.

Indicator	Overall (%)	Males (%)	Females (%)	Source
Gross Intake Ratio (GIR) - National	96	96	96	epdc.org
Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) - National (Primary: Grade 1-5)	-	105	90	pcst.org.pk
Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) - Thar Parkar (Primary)	84	96	71	en.wikipedia.org

Gross Intake Ratio (GIR)

Under mentioned table provided the information of male and female ratio:

Indicator	Overall (%)	Males (%)	Females (%)	Highest (%)	Lowest (%)	Source
Gross Intake Ratio (GIR) - Primary	81	87	74	ICT (113)	Baluchistan (54)	pcst.org.pk
GIR for First Year of Elementary School	-	87	74	-	-	pcst.org.pk
Gross Intake at End of First Grade	65	-	-	Punjab (74)	Baluchistan (35)	pcst.org.pk
Gross Intake for Last Middle Grade	47	-	-	ICT (82)	Baluchistan (20)	pcst.org.pk

Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER)

The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in Pakistan has experienced notable changes across various educational levels between the academic years 2016–17 and 2021–22.

Educational Level	GER (2016-17) (%)	GER (2021-22) (%)	Change (%)	Source
Primary (Classes 1-5)	97	76	-21	pie.gov.pk
Middle (Classes 6-8)	-	51	-	pie.gov.pk
High School (Classes 9-10)	-	32	-	pie.gov.pk

These statistics underscore a significant decline in enrolment ratios, particularly at the primary level, over the specified period.

Out of School Children by Province

Below cited table clearly presents the number and percentage of out-of-school children of aged 5 to 16 across different regions in Pakistan during 2021-2023 academic year

Province/Region	Out-of-School Children (Millions)	Percentage of School-Age Children Out of School (%)	Source
Punjab	11.73	24%	arabnews.pk/
Sindh	7.63	44%	arabnews.pk/ pie.gov.pk
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)	3.63	30%	arabnews.pk / capitalfm.co.ke
Balochistan	3.13	65% (Highest)	arabnews.pk / capitalfm.co.ke
Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT)	0.08	25%	arabnews.pk / capitalfm.co.ke

Trends over Time: In 2016–17, 44% of Pakistani children were out of school, totaling 22.02 million. By 2021–22, this percentage decreased to 39%; however, the absolute number of out-of-school children increased to 26.21 million. This paradox is primarily attributed to population growth outpacing enrollment rates. pie.gov.pk

Pupil-Teachers' Ratio & Pupil School Ratio in Pakistan (2021-2022)

Basic Facilities in Schools (2021-2022)

Facility	Availability (%)	Source
Electricity	70%	Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2022
Functional Washrooms	79%	Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2022
Boundary Walls	79%	Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2022
Clean Drinking Water	78%	Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2022
Furniture Availability	72%	Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2022
Adequate Classrooms	74%	Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2022

Statement of the Problem

Pakistan faces significant educational disparities, with millions of children out of school, gender-based inequalities, and an outdated curriculum that does not meet global education standards. These challenges hinder the country's ability to achieve SDG 4, which advocates for inclusive and equitable education for all. Despite government initiatives, insufficient funding, inadequate teacher training, and lack of infrastructure **continue to impede progress.**

The paper will discuss these obstacles, paying attention to the process of matching the education policies and practices in Pakistan with SDG 4 to guarantee a quality education and access to lifelong learning.

Rationale of the Study

The significance of education as one of the most important human rights and an element which promotes sustainable development necessitates the development of this research. SDG 4 offers an inclusive framework that is used to deal with the inequalities in education in Pakistan and enhance the outcomes of learning. This research will help in pursuing SDG 4 goals by examining government policies, enrollment patterns and reforms effectiveness. Findings will assist policy makers, educators and stakeholders to devise ways of alleviating education access, quality, and equity in Pakistan.

Significance of the Study

The given study is relevant because it is connected to SDG 4, which could give evidence-based recommendations that are to enhance education policies and reduce the gap related to disparity issues. The factors causing low education levels in the country, as revealed in the research by poor enrolment, lack of trained educators, and a lack of adequate structure will be used by policymakers in deciding how to improve the quality and the level of accessibility to education. Moreover, the paper will point out the importance of international standards, the UNESCO and the World Bank, in the regulation of Pakistan educational structure. It adds to greater discussions that aim to attain sustainable and equitable access to education by everyone.

Theoretical Framework

Three theories form the foundation of this research that have a reference to SDG 4:

Human Capital Theory (HCT)

The theory is based on the idea that education is an investment which enhances economic progress and better performance by an individual. The attainment of SDG 4 objectives necessitates significant investment of funds in training of teachers, curriculum design, and infrastructures to ensure learners acquire the necessary skills they need to get hired in the future.

Social Justice Theory (SJT)

SDG 4 recognizes the fact that education is a right and all people, irrespective of their gender, socio-economic status and geography, can enjoy equivalent access to quality learning opportunities. The theory backs up the overall objectives of this study to diminish educational disparities and introduce more inclusiveness.

Policy Implementation Theory

SDG 4 goals require the proper policy implementation of education. This theory assesses government actions, spending budgets and institutional initiatives towards enhancing the quality and access to education to the students in Pakistan.

Such research questions and objectives represent the proposed theoretical framework and are appropriate not only in secondary data analysis but also in the interpretation of the results. Using the theories, the study will endeavor to help the researchers establish different elements that contribute to the differences in educational outcomes in Pakistan and then recommend how the system can be improved.

Literature Review

Educational Access and Enrollment Disparities

Pakistan has persisted with low rates and high dropout rates, especially among the girls and rural learners. It has been stated that 22.8 million children are out of school; thus, Pakistan contributes to the worldwide out-of-school population to a large extent (World Bank, 2020). SDG 4 intends to achieve the goal of universal primary and secondary education, but socioeconomic challenges, and the absence of infrastructure still hinder its achievement (UNESCO, 2021).

There have been multiple initiatives such as the Punjab Education Initiatives Management Authority (PEIMA) or the Benazir Income Support Program (BISP) to raise enrolment as part of conditional cash transfer and public-private partnership (World Bank, 2019). These programs nevertheless need to be more scalable, well governed and be monitored to ensure that they meet the SDG 4 goals.

Quality of Education and Curriculum Development

The present taught curriculum is obsolete where repetitive memorization is the key, over critical thinking, analytical skills and problem solving. Pakistan Institute of Education (2022) emphasizes that in order to accomplish quality learning outcomes within the SDG 4, curriculum improvements have to meet the expectations of global education. Moreover, Single National Curriculum (SNC) that has been implemented in 2020 is meant to harmonize education in both public and private schools, yet some are facing the issues associated to this curriculum delivery in terms of implementation and teacher readiness.

Teacher Training and Professional Development

The quality of teachers contributes to education quality; however, there are major challenges of shortage of trained teachers in Pakistan. According to UNESCO (2021), approximately 30-40% of teachers in primary schools have no formal training, meaning that they teach in an inefficient way and resultantly, their students do not perform well.

In an attempt to enhance the quality of teaching, continuous professional development (CPD) schemes, online training systems, and incentive-based teacher recruitment policy must be introduced (World Bank, 2020). In line with SDG 4, Pakistan needs to give more attention to the preparation of teachers drawn on the marginalized and rural population.

Education Budgeting and Infrastructure Challenges

The Pakistan education budget is still lower at below 3 percent of GDP, way off the 4-6 percent stipulated by UNESCO (World Bank, 2019). There is a lack of financial means which are used to invest in the school infrastructure, digital education, teacher training.

To decrease education inequality and attain SDG 4, a rights-based model of financing with justified distribution of resources, well-trained educators, and favorable learning conditions is needed to satisfy the needs of the marginalized communities (UNESCO, 2021).

Role of Technology, Innovation and creativity in Education

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted how the use of technology in education is crucial, but a mere 35 percent of pupils in Pakistan could access the online course tools (World Bank, 2020). One of the greatest barriers is the digital divide as, due to a low level of internet accessibility and the lack of affordability, students cannot get access to remote learning.

Pakistan needs to increase digital education initiatives and be able to train its teachers in the use of ICT and enhance the broadband connection in rural communities to achieve SDG 4 (UNESCO, 2021). Blending Artificial Intelligence (AI), gamification, and individualized learning tools would help indicate educational gaps and engaging the students.

To conclude, although there is some progress, there is still a lot to be done in regard to achieving SDG 4 goals in Pakistan. It is important to deal with the matter of equitable access, quality learning, teacher training, education financing, and technology integration to get an inclusive and equitable education of all.

Objectives of the Study

The goals of the study are in line with SDG 4 (Quality Education):

1. To analyze disparities in educational access and enrollment trends in Pakistan from 2019 to 2023, identifying key factors affecting equitable education.
2. To evaluate the effectiveness of government policies and reforms in improving learning outcomes and teacher training in alignment with global education standards.

3. To assess the role of technology and innovative teaching methodologies in improving education quality and accessibility.

Research Questions

1. What are the major educational challenges Pakistan faces in achieving SDG 4?
2. How effective have government policies been in improving access to and quality of education?
3. What strategies can enhance the integration of digital learning and equitable education opportunities?

Methodology (Meta- Analysis)

This study employed a **meta-analytic approach** to synthesize the results of existing research on educational challenges in Pakistan. A comprehensive literature search was conducted to identify eligible studies, and secondary data were collected from government reports, UNESCO assessments, and World Bank publications. The research systematically reviews statistical trends in enrollment, literacy rates, and gender disparities from 2019 to 2023. The primary objective is to analyze enrollment trends, literacy rates, gender disparities, and regional differences to provide insights into the barriers to achieving SDG 4 goals. The study focuses on identifying common themes, comparing policy effectiveness, and assessing systemic educational challenges.

Data Collection

The data collection was done through a formal retrieval and compilation of applicable data using government reports, UNESCO reports, and World Bank evaluations in 2019-2023. The next steps were realized:

1. **Identification of Relevant Reports:** The research strategy involved the selection of government publications and reports issued by international agencies on the Pakistani education sector but the research was narrowed down to publications which contained statistical information on enrolment, imbalance between males and females, literacy level, infrastructure and education funding.
2. **Data Extraction:** The most important indicators such as rate of enrollment, literacy levels, budgetary allocations to education, and, qualifications of teachers were taken out of the chosen reports. The data obtained were arranged into structured spreadsheets to easily compare them.
3. **Data Validation:** In order to obtain a reliable and accurate data, data extraction was cross checked where necessary with more than one source of information. As an example, statistics on enrolment procured by the National Education Management Information System (NEMIS) were compared using those of the Economic Survey of Pakistan to check consistency.

Data Analysis

Meta-analytic analysis was applied to the collected information aiming to make any tendency, regional imbalance, and policy effectiveness. The analysis was formulated as such:

1. **Trend Analysis:** Past trends about enrollment rates, literacy rates among all age groups, and gender disparities were considered during 2013-2023 by using the longitudinal analysis methodology. The comparison was done between data of various years in order to draw a pattern and systematic problems in the field of education.
2. **Regional Analysis:** These figures were disaggregated by province to bring out inter-regional inequalities. The comparisons were made to analyze the disparities between the education infrastructure, learning results as well as government expenditure on education in provinces.
3. **Comparative Analysis:** Comparison of findings on the various reports was done in order to check on the consistency of findings and the efficacy of various policy

interventions. The analysis was extended to studies which have evaluated the success of previous government education programs.

Findings

The review of previous studies and reports made by researchers uncovers a number of consistent obstacles within Pakistan education system especially when it comes to meeting the goals of SDG 4:

Challenge	Key Statistics	Source
Out-of-School Children	22.8 million children remain out of school	World Bank (2020)
Gender Disparities	52% of girls complete secondary education vs. 60% of boys	UNESCO (2021)
Teacher Training Gaps	30-40% of teachers lack formal training	Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2022)
Student Performance	Only 40% of students meet minimum literacy & numeracy levels	World Bank (2019)
Education Budget	Less than 3% of GDP allocated to education	UNESCO (2021)
School Infrastructure	60% of public schools lack electricity, water, or toilets	Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2022)
Digital Access	Only 35% of students accessed online learning during COVID-19	World Bank (2020)

Details of Findings

1. Persistent Disparities in Access and Enrollment

- Regardless of the policy action, 22.8 million children are not enrolled in school yet, so Pakistan continues to be one of the leading countries causing world exclusion in education (World Bank, 2020).
- Gender disparities remain significant, with only 52% of girls completing secondary education compared to 60% of boys, particularly in rural areas where cultural and financial barriers persist (UNESCO, 2021).

2. Teacher Training Gaps and Quality of Education

- According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2022), 30-40% of teachers lack formal training, which directly impacts instructional quality.
- World Bank (2019) reports that only 40% of students achieve minimum proficiency in literacy and numeracy, indicating a severe learning crisis.
- The lack of modern pedagogical approaches, such as critical thinking and problem-solving strategies, further limits student development.

3. Low Public Investment in Education

- Pakistan’s education budget remains below 3% of GDP, which is significantly lower than the UNESCO-recommended 4-6% (UNESCO, 2021).
- 60% of public schools lack essential infrastructure, such as electricity, clean drinking water, and toilets, particularly affecting female students (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

4. Curriculum Deficiencies and Learning Outcomes

- The Single National Curriculum (SNC) was designed to standardize education, yet concerns persist about its alignment with global educational benchmarks (Pakistan Institute of Education, 2022).
 - Rote memorization continues to dominate the learning process, failing to cultivate critical thinking and competency-based skills.
5. **Digital Divide and Inequitable Access to Technology**
- The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the digital divide, with only 35% of students able to access online education due to poor internet connectivity and lack of devices (World Bank, 2020).
 - Many teachers and school administrators lack digital literacy training, limiting the effective use of ICT-based learning tools.

These findings are the systemic barriers that hinder Pakistan's progress toward achieving SDG 4, and highlighting the need for stronger policies, increased funding, and innovation-driven solutions.

Ethical Consideration

Since this study relies on secondary data, ethical considerations include ensuring data credibility, transparency in analysis, and accurate citation of sources.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into current challenges and issues in Pakistan's education system, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations of data availability and consistency and lack of qualitative insights.

Recommendations

1. Increase education funding to at least 5% of GDP to improve infrastructure, teacher salaries, and school resources.
2. Improve teacher pre-service programs through structured professional training with competency based-instruction and continuous professional development (CPD) programs.
3. Explore more growth of digital learning in remote and underserved communities through investing in affordable ICT devices and internet connectivity.
4. Augment curriculum reforms in the area of STEM learning, critical thinking and digital literacy as part of classroom pedagogy.
5. Establish a strong monitoring and evaluation system to examine the productivity of the education policies and define changes to improve.

Conclusion

The education sector of Pakistan is multi-dimensional and needs policy inputs using evidence-based policy interventions. The meta-analysis establishes the fact that low enrolment rates, teacher training, absence of infrastructure and inefficiencies in the curriculum are core barriers of achieving the goals of SDG 4. With proper alignment of the educational policies with the international best practices, enhancing the amount of investment by governments and making sure the adoption of technology, access to quality and fair education can greatly increase. The implementation of the policy, its funding, and the capacity of teachers should be enhanced to achieve long-term growth. Through these structural issues, Pakistan will be in a better position in meeting its objectives in education and promoting long term national progress.

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