

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: UK aid to Pakistan, HC 102

Tuesday 18 May 2021

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Mrs Pauline Latham (Chair); Theo Clarke; Navendu Mishra; and Mr Virendra Sharma.

Questions 17 to 33

Witnesses

I: Adnan Junaid, Country Director, Pakistan, International Rescue Committee; Amir Ramzan, Country Director, Pakistan, British Council; Fajer Rabia Pasha, Executive Director, Pakistan Alliance for Girls Education.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Adnan Junaid, Amir Ramzan and Fajer Rabia Pasha.

Q17 **Chair:** Welcome to our second evidence session on the UK aid to Pakistan. This evidence session is going to be focused on education. Before the Committee begins its questions to our witnesses, I wonder if the witnesses could introduce themselves please.

Fajer Rabia Pasha: Hi, everyone. My name is Fajer Rabia Pasha. I head an organisation called Pakistan Alliance for Girls Education, which is a national organisation working on improving access to girls' education in Pakistan.

Amir Ramzan: Hello, everyone. I am Amir Ramzan. I am country director of the British Council here in Pakistan. Education is a large part of what the British Council does globally, as well as in Pakistan.

Adnan Junaid: Hi, everyone. Good afternoon. My name is Adnan Junaid. I am the country director for International Rescue Committee in Pakistan. We have been in Pakistan for the last 40 years, working on humanitarian development programmes. We have been implementing UK aid-funded programmes for the last five years. Currently, we are doing an education programme sponsored by the UK.

Q18 **Chair:** I am going to kick off with a question for Amir and Adnan. Do you see a clear strategy to the UK's development work on education in Pakistan? What are the main features of the strategy, if you see one?

Amir Ramzan: Yes, I see a clear strategy. I am quite close to the strategy. We work very closely with the British high commission in Pakistan. We are actually co-located with them. As the country director of the British Council, I am part of the cross-HMG country board, which sets the strategy for Pakistan for all our programme areas.

Once we have set the broad strategy, our organisations, or the organisations that are working on education—so the British Council, the Department for International Trade, former DFID, now development section—have cross-working teams that work together to look at the data, analysis and context to try to identify where we want to focus and can make a difference. They develop proposals, which come back up to the country board. We approve them and/or give feedback, so we are very much part of all that process.

There is a very coherent strategy for education in Pakistan. If I could elaborate on it slightly, the goal in the cross-HMG country plan is for Pakistan's education system to be built back better after Covid and strengthened to ensure quality for all, especially girls and the most marginalised. There is a focus on reducing barriers to access and improving digital access, retention of children in schools and their transition between educational levels, and supporting crisis-affected children, for example due to Covid, with continuous quality learning.



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Once the strategy is developed, it obviously goes to implementation. Again, there are cross-HMG teams working on implementation and regular progress checks against the outcomes, outputs and KPIs that are set, which our individual departmental country plans all align with and feed into.

Adnan Junaid: There is a clear strategy by the UK aid when it comes to education. I am building on our experience as a humanitarian and development organisation, working on the ground. The education sector reform programmes for KP and Punjab have had an instrumental impact on advancing education, at the structural and governance levels, in the budgetary impacts and on the ground.

The key feature, as you have asked, is targeting the most vulnerable population and segments of society. We talk about southern Punjab, northern Sindh and the north-western province, which has been conflict affected. As IRC, we are working in Balochistan, which is the most remote area of Pakistan. Only 2% of girls are actually enrolled in education or into schools. The strategy is very clear, coherent, supported by the Government and aligned with the Government's strategy on that. Since it has been devolved, after the 18th amendment, different provincial Governments have different priorities, but the direction is okay.

I would like to highlight that the recent uncertainties around the aid cuts will have a significant impact in the long term. Education is not a one or two-year programme; it has to be sustainable and long-term programming. You have to work with the communities to engage them, make them aware and convince them to send their girls to school, which we are facing.

To give you an example, we are waiting on the second phase of our programme. If it does not come through because of the expected aid cuts, 9,000 to 11,000 girls will not be able to go to school. We have prepared the parents. You can imagine how difficult it is to convince them to send them to school. The strategy is good and it is long term, but some of the elements need to be kept in focus.

Chair: That is quite a lot of girls who are going to miss out on education, which we are very keen on.

Q19 **Theo Clarke:** This is a question to Adnan and Amir. Do you think that UK aid is being spent on the right types of education projects and, particularly, in the right parts of the country?

Adnan Junaid: Like I said, yes, definitely. As we have seen in the past four or five years, they have been targeting the right segments of the society, the most vulnerable population. They are targeting the hardest-to-reach and most impoverished students, girls and communities. Both from the targeting point of view and from the approach point of view, it is not only about going into schools, the public and Government schools, providing aid and supplies, and making sure



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the girls attend the school; it is from the structural and policy level down to the community level—merging and bringing both of these together has been the key feature. The UK aid's focus has been very critical.

A key feature I would like to highlight is the consultation, not only with the Government and the stakeholders, but also with the partners on the ground. The flexibility and adaptability of listening to the people on the ground and the communities has been very effective. In my experience, UK aid has been most effective in adapting to this changing situation and the needs. Yes, in a nutshell, it has been very effective in terms of its target and thematic focus.

Amir Ramzan: I would second that. UK aid reaches the parts of Pakistan that are most in need. We know that the majority of out-of-school children in Pakistan belong to households in poor, rural and remote areas. Girls are worse off: 32% of primary school girls are out of school, compared with 21% of boys. By grade 6, this rises to 59% of girls, compared with 49% of boys.

The UK aid programmes, including the British Council's programmes, work across the country. They work in the remote areas through our partners. They work in areas such as Balochistan, which is most affected by out-of-school children and girls. They work through communities. I would very much second that.

I would also like to add something else. UK aid does not just work in the school sector; it also works in higher education. We do lots of work in higher education, because it is really important that there is a full education pipeline. We have been working in the higher education sector for a long time now to improve equitable access and quality access with people going into higher education.

Through our programmes, we have established 165 joint links between UK universities and Pakistan universities. Some 98% of senior leaders in the Pakistan higher education sector have benefited from leadership programmes. There are numerous research initiatives addressing key issues, which is also really important for broader society. UK aid definitely reaches the areas where it should be going.

Q20 **Theo Clarke:** Fajer, do you think that UK aid-funded programmes have resulted in more enrolments in school?

Fajer Rabia Pasha: Definitely, yes. If there is money trickling down and partners are delivering, it has an impact. The bigger problem we have here right now is that the scale of the problem in Pakistan is too huge, so we do not see the impact. For example, the population growth rate is still so high that, while we are trying to address the out-of-school children issue in Pakistan, you have a much higher number adding to that population.



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With Covid especially, we know that at least another million children have dropped out of schools. A lot of work that has taken place in the last many years has pretty much gone to waste. We are seeing that within our own programmes, that children are dropping out of schools. Girls particularly have dropped out of schools. Many girls have been forced into early marriages.

UK aid is great, and it is fantastic that Pakistan is one of the largest recipients, especially on the education side. We need that. We probably need more because, as Adnan said, a lot of work is project-based. That is a complaint that we get from the communities as well. If we go into a community, the first thing they will say is, "Yes, so-and-so organisation was there and it did this work. It was fantastic and then it just wrapped up and left". It upsets people and it actually gets more difficult for new organisations to go in and work, because the trust level is not as high. You have to go through the whole process of community mobilisation, engagement and building that trust level with the communities, and then you get started again.

I second Adnan's point that we need more long-term planning. I would say it again and again: Pakistan is not a place where you could have a project-focused approach, be that in health or education. So many sectors are suffering so much and these are long-term issues. The stakes are very high. We need a very holistic approach to education, where we could perhaps not see education as just education. Education has to be seen as the driver of change in Pakistan. Because I advocate for girls' education day in, day out, I strongly believe that girls can bring that change if they are supported correctly and properly.

Education is not just going into school; it is also looking at the safeguarding. We have huge issues of safeguarding in Pakistan. Nobody looks at it. There is a lot of abuse. There is abuse in schools that nobody talks about. These cases are not reported. When UK aid is planning its projects, I would like to see that change, that there is a more integrated approach to education. It is not just education, technical skills and higher education but also looking at other areas where girls need support. If we want to really bring that change and push them forward, and we want them to be the leaders of tomorrow, I feel that is what needs to happen.

Great work is going on—there is no doubt about that. So much work has been done, especially in Punjab. We have seen a huge amount of change. We have seen a reduction in numbers of out-of-school children as well, which is great. That is primarily because of UK aid work. That needs to continue. We need to make sure that a more integrated approach is taking place with girls.

Secondary education needs a lot more funding and support. We are running a programme in primary education. It is an ALP, accelerated learning programme, and we have a huge challenge where our girls are



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completing primary education but we cannot progress them to secondary education because there are no schools to send them to.

Theo Clarke: I know my colleagues have more questions on that later in the session.

Q21 **Mr Sharma:** My question is to all three of you. In your experience, are UK-funded education projects joined up with what other donors are doing?

Adnan Junaid: They are, and not only with other donors, but it depends on the policy of the Government of Pakistan, the education sector programme. All the donors complement and join hands.

Building on the point Fajer was making, I would like to highlight that it is very difficult to implement standalone projects. The UK Government have their own policy and plans. When you talk about USAID, it has its own plans. We ran a five-year programme: \$174 million on reading packs and reading projects.

The complementarity is important, not only in bringing education sector programmes together, but also, as Fajer was highlighting, one of the critical areas in Balochistan and the north-western part is parity. People do not, cannot and do not want to send their children to school because of the cost associated with that, alongside the safeguarding issues.

Among the major donors, there needs to be more co-ordination when it comes to targeting a certain geography and the plans that are put forward for education, so we do not miss out on the critical elements that support educational attainment, especially for girls in the remote areas.

Fajer Rabia Pasha: I second Adnan's point. To be honest, I do not see much of a joined-up approach, even though the forums exist. The donors sit together. They talk to each other, but, when it comes to the funding disbursement and programmes, everyone has their own priorities. I do not see that as a joined-up approach, to be honest. Let us pick up a village in Punjab. I would expect that, if UK aid is funding education in that village, another donor would be working on health in that village and somebody would be working on crime rates or whatever.

I do not really see that. That is where a very inclusive, holistic approach needs to be implemented. Regardless of what financial resources we have, if we start picking up, village by village, city by city, and start addressing all the issues in those areas, where all the donors pool money in together, based on their priorities, that may help.

For example, climate change is such a huge issue in Pakistan. There is no awareness. People do not understand. It is not even considered a problem in Pakistan. The donors that want to spend money on climate change should be working in the schools and educating children about it. That is what needs to happen. I do not see it.



When it comes to girls' education in Pakistan, I have been trying to do something for quite some time where we can pull together all the donors and the Government of Pakistan to come together and have one strategy for girls' education in Pakistan. That is not happening because nobody is ready to sit together, talk to each other and understand what the scale of the problem is and what support girls need exactly, apart from school.

I keep saying to everyone that it is not just literacy and numeracy. It is not just giving them the reading and writing skills. It is a lot more than that when we are talking about girls. I would really like to see all the key stakeholders sitting together and working together on the issues.

Amir Ramzan: There are degrees of being joined up. With our UK aid or ODA funding, we do not do anything unless it is in partnership. Our flagship programme, which is called Take a Child to School, focuses on getting girls back into school. That is in partnership with Educate a Child from the Qatari Government. It is \$12 million over four years and it is on a matched basis. Our flagship higher education programme is in partnership with the Higher Education Commission, £9 million over three years, again on a 50/50 basis. We have done work in TVET with partnership funding from the Scottish Government and the EU.

At an operational level, there are degrees of being joined up. There are also degrees of co-ordination. For example, I am aware that the EU's focus provinces in Pakistan have been Sindh and Balochistan, whereas former DFID focused more on Punjab and KPK. There is a degree of co-ordination. With saying that, I am also aware that, while there are mechanisms in Pakistan for donor co-ordination at the education level, at both federal and provincial, they could be a bit more systematic in defining what that co-ordination should look like and prioritisation. There is more that could be done in this area as well.

Q22 **Mr Sharma:** I know that you all touched it but, very briefly, could you all say something on how UK projects fit with the Pakistan Government's education programmes? Government have a programme. How are our UK aid projects also helping in that? What is the co-ordination?

Fajer Rabia Pasha: That fits in perfectly fine. The Government have very clear priorities around education, and the UK aid priorities fit in perfectly well with the Government priorities as well. I do not think there is any difference.

Adnan Junaid: I completely agree with Fajer. They are more aligned with the SDGs and especially the SDG 4. The Government's 2030 policy is also aligned with that. That is the important aspect—that the UK aid policy is aligned with and supporting Government initiatives. The problem that we should highlight is that, since it is a devolved subject, education is a provincial matter now. Some of the provinces are advancing far ahead in those strategies and some are lagging far behind. I think UNICEF has been approaching the Government of Balochistan and trying to set up their plans.



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Because of different factors, there is an inconsistency in implementation and the support of the donors, especially UK aid. As Fajer and Amir said, they have priorities in terms of the geographies, but there is a need to align and combine the resources to make sure there is substantial and sustainable advancement, so we do not lose the progress that has been made over the years.

Amir Ramzan: I agree with what has been said. The UK has very good access and relationships in Pakistan. To some degree, it has a natural advantage in Pakistan as being a preferred partner. The relationships with the Ministers of Education are very good. The alignment with the 2030 education strategy is very good, with the caveat that different provinces, as Adnan said, are in different places in implementing that. That contextual analysis of Government strategy is a key part of deciding where projects happen and what projects happen as well.

Q23 **Chair:** Amir, could you tell us how you think the UK aid programme could help to improve the quality of teaching in Pakistan?

Amir Ramzan: There are several areas where UK aid can make a difference. We have touched upon out-of-school children. Pakistan has the second largest number of out-of-school children in the world, depending on which stats you go with: between 19 million and 22 million, which is substantial. With Covid, 50 million children were out of education with rigorous lockdowns in place from March 2020, on top of that 20 million. That has impacted on continuity of learning.

There are quality issues in the Pakistan system, as there are in many education systems: teacher quality, curriculum quality. These are all areas where the UK and the British Council are implementing projects. To go back to Fajer's point earlier, the scale of the challenge in Pakistan is quite large. It is huge. The more resource we can put into it, the more of a difference we can make. I do not think there are areas that UK aid is not addressing. I do not believe that, but, with more resource, more could be done to help Pakistan in this area.

Q24 **Chair:** Do you think teacher training is an area that we could contribute to?

Amir Ramzan: Yes. Teacher training is really important. It is an area that we at the British Council have been working in. We have been working in it through our Connecting Classrooms programme, which is nationwide. It looks at developing core skills, so training teachers to develop core skills in students, such as critical thinking, citizenship and communication.

There is a big change happening in Pakistan at the moment in education, with the advent of what is called the single national curriculum. That is meant to be an equaliser in terms of curriculum, starting off at primary level. All students, whether they are public or private, will follow the same curriculum and education will be equalised. That has some quite big



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shifts in terms of medium of instruction, requiring mother tongue medium of instruction in some of the subjects.

We have been working with the Punjab Government in particular in helping them develop their strategy and programmes for English teaching throughout the early years, so when children reach secondary school they are competent enough to carry on their education in English. Through this, we have managed to reach about 250,000 teachers in the Punjab, all primary school teachers. That is in a subject area. There are many other subject areas that could benefit from UK expertise and teacher training.

It is fair to say that pre-service teacher training and in-service teacher training could both benefit from UK expertise. Quite often, people go into the teaching profession because maybe it is deemed as the best option available to them, in the absence of other preferred options. It is not necessarily a vocation by choice; it is something people do. The more work we can do with teachers, the better the learning outcomes will be in schools. Teacher training should definitely be a big focus area, and it is.

Q25 Chair: I have a question about schools. Do you think the physical infrastructure of schools is a barrier to improving the education in Pakistan? If so, what steps should the UK take to target its funding towards better building of schools?

Adnan Junaid: It definitely is an issue. The situation of schools is bad. As Amir was saying, there are not enough schools. I am especially talking about the remote areas. In the urban centres and areas, the situation is much better, especially in the provinces like Punjab. If you go to rural areas, there are hardly any schools. It is from 10 kilometres to 30 kilometres on average.

You can imagine that the infrastructure is poor and then they lack basic facilities, like running water—I am not talking about clean water, just running water—latrines and boundary walls. In Balochistan, 75% of schools do not have a boundary wall, latrines and toilets. In our experience, this is why parents do not want to send their girls to school. It is because of a lack of toilet facilities and boundary walls, which is a safeguarding concern.

UK aid has been investing a lot in making sure there is a direction in this line. There was a huge programme that constructed a large number of schools. Again, it depends on the target areas and geographies. I liked the education sector reform programme, which was a 10-year programme, if I am not mistaken, for Punjab, but it needs to be replicated and contextualised for the most remote areas.

Of course, infrastructure is important. If you look at Covid, the children could not attend the public schools, so we had to adapt to home-based schooling, where two to three children could come together. In a place like Balochistan, there are five to 10 houses in a hamlet and you can



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imagine the travel times for the girls. Infrastructure is a big issue. If you go into interior Sindh, they are hardly used for students. They are used to hold cattle and stuff. That is a big problem.

The important thing is that the Government have a priority. They have a plan. We need to advocate and the UK, an influencer and a global force, can do that. The UK Government can do that, increasing the proportion of GDP going into education and making sure, by involving third parties and the ground implementer, that it is invested and implemented in the right direction. The UK Government have made a huge difference, but they can do more, with the support of the Government. Government have the capacity and capability to do that, as well as the plans.

Fajer Rabia Pasha: When we talk about infrastructure, of course infrastructure is needed. There is a problem with missing facilities and then there is a problem of a complete absence of schools. There are two different issues. When you are talking about girls particularly, you need the toilets at least and the running water for the girls to be able to come to school. That seems to be one of the major reasons why girls tend to drop out as soon as they complete primary education. Some 85% of our girls drop out by the time they complete primary education. That is a huge number and this is one of the major reasons.

On the other hand, the scale of the problem is so huge and whoever is investing in education needs to be very careful as to where the investment is going in. If you look 30 years back in Pakistan, into villages, the teachers were of really good quality. They wanted to teach children. They would sit under the trees and teach children. Those children are the ones we see in politics now or in high bureaucratic positions et cetera.

I personally think that perhaps we are at a stage where we should not be investing in infrastructure, in building buildings, because that is a huge cost. I would rather invest in teachers and technology, and create that access for girls, especially at secondary level. Yes, where we have schools we improve those facilities, because you want a child to come into a happy, vibrant environment and at least have access to basic facilities. If you want to invest money, please invest in teachers. Please invest in creating good teachers who will teach properly regardless of where they are sitting. These are Covid times; open air is better anyway. God knows how long this is going to last.

Amir Ramzan: I agree with a lot of what has been said, so I will not repeat it. I would make two points. This is a great area for donor co-ordination. I am aware some donors, in terms of out-of-school girls, have been focusing on infrastructure, the development and building of sanitation facilities in schools. Some donors, including us, have been working with the communities to change the mindset about girls going to school. This is a really good area for donor co-ordination, so that is one point.



The second point is around infrastructure. Covid taught us and demonstrated to us the digital divide in infrastructure, whereby children in public schools did not have access to internet at home. They were not necessarily digitally literate. Therefore, compared with those in private schools, you had digital haves and digital have-nots. It is really important to invest not just in the bricks and mortar, but in the digital infrastructure to support continuity of learning and key skills that people will need in the job market going forward.

Chair: It was interesting to hear that.

Q26 **Mr Sharma:** Fajer, while you were addressing us earlier on, you reminded me of the open-air schools and teaching under the trees. I remember those days; thank you very much for reminding me. In your opinion, what are the factors limiting girls from accessing education in Pakistan?

Fajer Rabia Pasha: Number one is access to education. If there are no teachers, no schools, or at least no initiative to bring the girls into schools, that does not happen.

Second is poverty. There is a huge amount of poverty and that is one of the biggest reasons. The parents cannot afford the costs of travel. It is a small amount of money, but it means that a girl drops out. They cannot buy uniforms, for example. It is just small bits and pieces. Thankfully, at least the Government schools are free. They tend to get their books for free, but there are still small costs that are associated. The poverty level is so high and Covid has not helped. We have had huge financial implications within the communities especially. Those are two major reasons why girls are restricted from accessing education.

There is not so much of a problem around culture now. As far as my own experience is concerned, I have travelled across Pakistan in some of the most deprived areas of Pakistan, Balochistan and the areas called FATA previously, where it is considered that girls are not allowed to go to school. I feel that is not the case. Parents are actually desperate to educate their children.

As stakeholders, organisations, donors and the Government of Pakistan, we are being unfair right now with our people and with the children. We are not giving them that facility, which is their constitutional right. It is not so much the cultural issue. It is access and poverty that are the huge problems we have at the moment.

Q27 **Mr Sharma:** Do you think that UK aid is really getting more girls into school? How joined up is the FCDO's approach to education with tackling the factors that keep girls out of school? It is a long question.

Fajer Rabia Pasha: I cannot answer number-wise, because we are not a partner with UK aid ourselves. I am not sure what impact number-wise we have had. Given my knowledge and understanding of other organisations that are delivering UK aid projects, I know that bringing



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girls into education is always a priority. That is a good thing and I am sure that has an impact on the ground as well.

I have not seen a joined-up approach much on the ground. Where we end up maybe lacking or going wrong is that we may partner up with one or two organisations to pool money together, pull funding in together, or work with the Government of Pakistan, for example, but when you are on the ground you do not see that impact. That is where we need to rethink our approach around partnerships, especially around how UK aid can work with grassroot organisations and how they could be supported with capacity building. You see that sort of impact on the ground.

Your local actors and local organisations are always best suited to deliver and bring in communities because they have that trust level already established with the communities. That is something when we are talking about partnership building. I come from Manchester myself and I have done a lot of work within the voluntary sector in Manchester. We were used to having infrastructure support organisations in England. We do not have that in Pakistan at all.

We probably need those networks to be created. I know a lot of work was done back in the days when we had the floods and the earthquake in Pakistan. That needs to happen again. Networks need to be brought together. These organisations need to be brought together. The grassroots organisations need to be brought together and supported to deliver these grassroot programmes.

The current Government is very open to public-private partnership programmes. We have multiple programmes running with the Government of Pakistan, the Ministry of Federal Education and various provincial Ministries. It is a good time to push for that as well, because we have not seen that approach in the previous Governments. It is a good time to do that.

Q28 Navendu Mishra: My question is to all the witnesses; I will come to Ms Pasha first, if that is okay. It is wonderful to hear you are from Manchester. I represent Stockport. My next-door constituency is Manchester Gorton.

Do you think that UK aid is promoting a sufficiently inclusive approach to education in Pakistan? Is it reaching marginalised communities? The Committee has read reports regarding people from religious minorities, Christians, Sikhs, Hindus maybe, perhaps facing discrimination in the education system or in the public service. Ms Pasha, I know you mentioned an inclusive and holistic approach a couple of times earlier, so I am really keen to hear from you on this.

Fajer Rabia Pasha: Things have changed quite a bit in Pakistan. It may be a problem that exists in small pockets in Pakistan, where you have issues around the religious minorities. It is not exactly a huge issue in Pakistan. Especially when it comes to education, a lot of work has been



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done and children from all backgrounds are welcomed in the Government schools. That is a great thing and I have seen that first hand in Punjab. I have seen that first hand in KPK and Balochistan, so that is something really good. There is space for improvement for sure, but that needs to keep happening.

One area that we really need to focus on is children with disabilities. There is not much work done when we talk about the policy level. There is very little work done on supporting and providing inclusive education to children with disabilities. It is still a stigma in the society. Parents do not tend to send children with disabilities to schools or they are not accepted in the schools. Work needs to be done there, on that side, by the Government, around awareness raising and educating children and their parents, especially with transgender people in Pakistan as well.

I do some work with transgender people and we see really sad stories where they are just not accepted in the society at all. They are actually given up by their parents as soon as they are born, because they know they will not be accepted. They cannot go to schools. They cannot access education, work opportunities or anything at all. That is the sort of work that needs to be done. When we are talking about religious minorities, we have made huge improvements. People are much more educated and much more accepting towards each other. That is a good thing. That is a positive sign in Pakistan.

Adnan Junaid: I completely agree with Fajer. There are pockets in Pakistan, in interior Sindh and some parts of Balochistan. We understand that it is the tribal areas. The tribal issues also come into play. I will not go into the details of that. Generally, the public schools are welcoming to all minorities, and all sections and segments of the society.

Physical challenges and disability is a big factor, not only from the perspective that Fajer has highlighted but also from the perspective of the teacher training. I think Madam Chair was actually referring to that. In our experience, in our schools or in our community-based schools, the teachers are not equipped to understand. Forget the parents. They know their child is disabled, so that is it, but there are different levels of disabilities. They are physical, mental, behavioural and psychological. There is understanding and awareness on that. We are trying to make sure that it is part of our curriculum and training for the teachers, but it is not widely rolled out as a policy of any programme that I have seen, honestly.

When you come to infrastructure, it is not disability-sensitive in many parts of the country. That is an area that requires a lot of focus, and clear focus, I would say. UK aid has done a remarkable job in making sure safeguarding becomes a fundamental core of every programme that we do. It should be a similar case with disability and inclusiveness.

There are a huge number of transgender people in Balochistan as well, where people think there might not be. As Fajer said, there are, but they



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are unidentified. Nobody understands and knows where they are. We have transgender programmes as part of one of the donors, where we have transgender people and colleagues working for us in IRC. Creating that awareness is important.

It is not an issue of having minorities or not having minorities but keeping that inclusive from the policy and at the ground-level implementation, whereby the teachers especially, and the parents, understand what that means. It is not a stigma, as Fajer was saying. We need to work with these children and provide those opportunities.

Q29 Navendu Mishra: Mr Ramzan, the Committee heard that, in some of the Government schools, the textbooks used had some hateful content regarding minorities. What is your experience?

Amir Ramzan: I cannot comment. I do not know the detail of the content, but I understand that there were concerns with some of the textbooks. The British Council and the FCDO worked together, through our relationships with the Ministers, to raise these issues.

A lot of the textbook publishers in Pakistan are actually UK organisations. They are UK companies that have been operating in Pakistan for a very long time and there have been some changes in regulations and requirements. We have worked with the FCDO to raise these issues with Ministers and with the curriculum text approval boards, with some success, in terms of getting textbooks accepted and getting clarity on the approval process, as well as getting clarity on the guidelines.

Q30 Navendu Mishra: The points raised by all of you regarding physical disabilities and learning disabilities are really important, so thanks for that. What impact has Covid-19 had upon education in Pakistan? I know a couple of you mentioned comments around investment in teachers, open-air classrooms, obviously Covid times and all of that.

Amir Ramzan: Covid had a huge impact on education in Pakistan, as it has on many countries around the world. As I mentioned earlier, from March 2020, when Pakistan went into a rigorous lockdown and then came out of lockdown but with the various waves, schools have spent large periods of time closed. As I mentioned, there are already 20 million children out of school. There are 50 million children, or 50 million students, not getting an education because their schools were closed. While some of the private sector was able to pivot online, largely the Government sector was not. It did not have the infrastructure in place for internet-based learning.

This was a real big risk to continuity of learning. We have just done some research on this, which I would be happy to share shortly, when it is published. At the same time, the Pakistan Government recognised this and put in place new products and services. For example, the Ministry of Education launched a television channel for education, on which we partnered, providing English language content. About 2 million students a



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day were tuning into the television channel and we believe 9 million benefited from our programmes.

We worked with the higher education sector in developing Pakistan's first national open and distance learning policy. That was something that previously had not really been developed, because the traditional thinking was that people go to university, whereas in the UK we are very advanced in this. That has been rolled out.

Our research has shown that the transition to online and remote learning in Pakistan will take quite a lot of resource and focus for it to be successful and sustainable. It is definitely an area we continue to work in. A lot more work is probably required in this area for the future.

Q31 Navendu Mishra: You made a point about some research. I am sure the Chair will be happy to hear from you in writing. That goes to all of our witnesses. Ms Pasha, could you also tell us about what more needs to be done in order to improve access to education? How effective have the interventions been in tackling the education challenges due to Covid?

Fajer Rabia Pasha: Education has been probably one of the main sectors that have been affected, because so many millions of children have not been able to access education at all. The television was a great initiative and that has improved access to education. I know a lot of organisations also invested in radio programmes, because you have many rural areas where you do not even see TVs, so they utilised radios as a tool to continue education. Still, a lot of children suffered, especially girls.

So many people lost work and any employment opportunity they had. A lot of people who were on daily wages lost work. That also had an impact, because it meant that child labour increased as well. A lot of children were not able to access the TV and radio opportunities because they were helping their parents generate whatever income they can. That is really sad. That is why I say we need a very holistic approach. We need to look at families and their situation, and see how those families can be supported, so the children, especially girls, can come to school. That is what needs to be done.

I agree with Amir. We need to invest in technology, but we are so far away from making sure that every single child in Pakistan has access to online learning. We do not have internet access everywhere. That is a huge issue. That is, again, a policy-level issue as well. A huge amount of investment needs to go into that, then obviously making sure children have access to laptops and tablets, whatever. A cultural issue there is that girls are generally not allowed to access the internet. I know that, in a lot of families that were middle class and able to provide laptops to their children at home to continue online learning, they had huge problems.



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Girls have faced a lot of other issues at home because they were not allowed just to get online and talk to their teachers or friends. There have been a lot of mental health challenges as well, which again are not being highlighted at all. We do not know the real impact. We will probably know at some point, but we do not really invest in that kind of research in Pakistan, so we do not know. These are the sorts of things we really need to do, where girls especially are really supported, in terms of the additional challenges they face because of which they cannot access learning.

Navendu Mishra: Your point about digital infrastructure is really important. Quite a lot of it is relevant to families in the UK as well: lack of access to fixed broadband, lack of access to laptops or tablets.

Adnan Junaid: To add another perspective, I agree with what Fajer has said. I keep referencing Balochistan because, as you know, it is the hardest-to-reach and remotest area. From our experience in Balochistan, Government's policies were okay, in terms of closing down schools, but they did not go any further ahead in what can be done to make sure the learning continues. As part of our programme, as a humanitarian and development organisation, we had to make sure of this, as Fajer was saying.

We started with the distribution of PPE kits, protective equipment, masks, and dignity kits for the girls. That is what we started doing, then implementing the SOPs and going to home-based classes wherever possible, three to five students, increasing the number of teachers. Then we had huge radio lessons, as Ms Pasha was saying. We developed radio lessons with the Government and now they are being rolled out across Balochistan.

The secondary impacts are quite important, as Ms Pasha has referred to. Because people lost jobs, they were at home of course and that was an issue. In our experience, 80% of the enrolled students dropped out. They did not go to any learning facility. Based on our engagement with our clients and communities, we fear that the number will be very large, in terms of those coming back to schools, because they have reverted to other means and sources. The awareness and the effort that has been put in might go to waste.

The secondary impact I was talking about was domestic violence. We have incidences of girls being abused by their brothers and parents because they were sitting at home, struggling with the income sources, so they were paranoid and taking it out on the girls. We had to intervene. That is something for the partners on the ground, as Fajer was saying.

There were co-ordinated efforts. We have referral pathways, GBV networks present on the ground, bringing LEAs, law enforcement agencies, into play. There are sensitivities around that, so we also have to look at the secondary impacts.



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Bringing the children back to school is important. Because I do not think Covid is going to go away, we have to adapt to it, but adaptation needs to make sure it is contextualised. Most of Balochistan does not even have electricity—forget about internet, mobile phone usage and tablets. We have to look at that.

We are working with the Government, but the Government—apologies for saying this—has not been proactive in that sense. Of course they have learned from partners like UK aid and us, so they have adapted that, which is a good sign. We need to focus our efforts more on what other ways there could be to make sure the learning continues and they do not drop out.

Navendu Mishra: I am very grateful to all the witnesses for their contributions. I would reiterate that, if any of you want to provide a written contribution, any research or anything you did not want to say on the record, you are more than welcome. I am sure the Chair will repeat this.

Q32 **Chair:** We have ended our formal questions. Adnan said that 9,000 to 11,000 girls would be out of school because of the cuts. Are these all age groups of girls? Are they girls who have got to a certain level of education and then been told, “You cannot come back any more”? Are they girls at the beginning of primary education who are told, “Sorry, we cannot do that any more”?

Fajer Rabia Pasha: It applies to all age groups. Generally, during Covid especially, we have seen that a lot of families migrated from one place to another in search of income opportunities. That has meant that girls have dropped out. Wherever they go, we do not know if they are already in schools there. The whole process has to pretty much start again. That is the issue that we have seen in our own school system, where parents have moved and we have lost contact because they have left. They did not inform anyone and they left. That is going to be applicable to all age groups.

With secondary age group girls, it is a huge problem anyway. Only one out of 10 girls in Pakistan completes secondary education. It is quite a shocking figure. If you look at a graph, you see that there is an over 85% drop out. Then it is only one out of 10 girls who complete education. As they grow older, because there is a lack of schools anyway, the drop-out rate is higher and higher. Because of the poverty, they want to get the girls married off as early as possible. With Covid and because poverty has increased, we would automatically be seeing that.

I know a girl who I literally brought into school nearly five years ago myself. She was a refugee child. She is 14 now. She was married last year by her family and she is pregnant right now. She is 14, so you can imagine. There are some really, really sad stories that you will not hear about and you will not see, because we do not get to see that. It has huge impacts.



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When we talk about numbers, we have done a report on Covid impacts on girls' education last year. These are still just all assumptions, to be honest. We will know the real impact probably in a year's time, once the schools are back open completely, properly, and we are able to assess how much loss there has been to education, especially girls' education.

Q33 Chair: Amir, are the cuts from the British Government going to have an impact on girls in particular—as well as generally—going on to higher education?

Amir Ramzan: If I speak on behalf of the British Council, we have had an incredibly difficult year, as I am sure many of you will be aware, with a lot of our paid-for services being suspended due to Covid or not running at full capacity. That has had knock-on implications for other parts of our operation. We have had what we think is a fair settlement from the UK Government for 2021-22. It has seen a reduction, but we think it is a fair settlement.

It is about prioritisation. Pakistan is a priority country for the British Council, the UK and FCDO. Education and girls' education is a priority area. That is an area in which we will do our level best, through our partnerships and leveraging our UK aid, to try to maintain momentum, to minimise negative impact. Our budgets for 2021-22 are still being finalised and then we will approach the next CSR. As I have said, girls' education is a really important area.

To answer your question more broadly, if there are fewer girls going through the school system, inevitably there will be fewer girls going into higher education. Could I make one more point? It is about this segment of girls who are maybe too old to go back into school and have not been to school, those 14, 15 and 16 year-olds Fajer mentioned. That is a really important segment that we cannot forget in all this. We have to make sure they are not lost in the system because priorities are elsewhere.

Something we have tried to do is set up community clubs, so girls do not have to travel far. We have put IT and internet in them, and focused on English and digital skills to try to help them develop skills for employability. They have been incredibly successful. They have been accepted by the community. There has been a good take-up, and that is something we would like to do more of, to make sure we target that segment that does not fall into one of the formal education channels.

Chair: That sounds really interesting, so thank you.

Adnan Junaid: You were talking about the aid cuts and we are facing that dilemma at the moment. In our project that is focusing on education for adults and girls 10 to 19 years, we have two pathways. One is the accelerated learning programme and then there is the Girls Earn programme, where we give them skills.



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We were asked in March to pause the programming and are still waiting to hear whether the second phase of the funding will come through. If it does not come through, 11,000 girls will not be able to go to school. It is a small number when you compare it to bigger ones, but in Balochistan it took us one and a half years to prepare the Government and the communities to make sure they allow their girls to come to school.

To give you an example, the impact of awareness that we have made through UK aid's funding is great. One of the learning facilitators, as Amir was saying, was pressurised by her family and by her cousin to stop going to school and teaching children, and to get married. When she could not take it any more, she said, "This is my right. If you pressurise me, I will go to the law" and the guy backed off. That is a level of awareness when you talk about Balochistan. If we are not there to support, and if the UK Government are not there to support, the Government of Balochistan and the non-formal education, you can imagine their future hanging in the balance. The impact is quite significant, especially for our 11,000 girls. I just wanted to make that point.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. We have come to the end of our hour. On behalf of the Committee, I thank all three witnesses for appearing before us and giving us some real food for thought. You have all made very interesting points. Thank you very much for your time today. We really appreciate it.