

## **Education and mobility in Gilgit-Baltistan**

### **1 Introduction - Facts and figures on education in Gilgit-Baltistan**

Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) is comprised of 10 districts with three divisions spread over an area of over 72,000 km<sup>2</sup> housing a population of 1.4 million. At the time of Pakistan's independence in 1947 there were only 80 primary and three middle schools in the entire region.

Today, the department of education works under a full-fledged Minister of Education from the elected member of the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly. The Secretary of Education is the principal officer assisted by three directors on the operational side. Furthermore there is one officer for planning & Development, who is responsible for educational policy administration in the province.

As of 1998, the overall adult literacy rate in Gilgit-Baltistan is 66.08% for the male population and 38.83% for the female population, with an overall rate of 53.33. However, in terms of regional disparity there is a huge variance across districts, e.g. with Diamer as low as 12% and Hunza, Gilgit and Ghizer with over 76% literacy rates.

There are over 2,543 educational institutions in Gilgit Baltistan operated by public, private and non-profit organisations, out of which 1,618 are schools (primary, middle and high), 93 Madrasas, 63 colleges and one Public Sector University-KIU. In total 294,582 people are enrolled in these institutions. The private and NGO schools comprise of 496 schools with an enrolment of 92,976 students, while the majority of 201,608 students attend public sector institutions. There are 13,074 teachers teaching in these institutions, out of which 8,090 are in public sector educational institutions. A current survey estimates the out-of-school children ratio to be 30% (UNICEF 2016).

### **2 Positive influences of education and mobility in mountain regions**

There have been tremendous changes over the last three to four decades in Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) owing to education, the construction of the Karakorum Highway and intervention of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN). There is no doubt that education in rural areas has led to upward social mobility of many individuals and groups. People were able to increase their income levels as well as social status and increasingly moved from the old professions of farming and livestock keeping and low government services to new professions and trades which potentially bring more prestige, income and respect both individually and collectively.

Education has helped people to adapt to change and has helped many to move upward in social status while at the same time marginalising others who were not in the position to acquire it. Social mobility is taking place in every region of GB, but with a different pace due to cultural and other conditions. The more liberal the tribal or religious outlook, the more open are the people to educating their children, both boys and girls. A considerable number of educated people have returned to the village and community and provide their time, knowledge and technical skills to build new institutions and help guide the community improving their quality of life

Education has diversified the economic base from agro-pastoral or subsistence farming and livestock herding to new trades and professions leading to overall economic growth and social development. It spawned the adoption of modern technologies including mobile, access to IT education and internet, which has influenced both positively and negatively the attitudes, habits and ideas of people.

### **3 Challenges for education and mobility in Gilgit-Baltistan**

The population of GB is scattered and thinly spread across inaccessible and remote mountain valleys, sometimes with no road access, telecommunication networks and even electricity. It becomes very difficult for the Government to allocate resources to such areas, especially in a situation in which each small village for reasons of physical mobility would like to have higher schools and colleges in each village.

There is also a growing dependence on Punjab/Pakistan for food provision and other basic necessities that make the crafting of a livelihood in the upper and distant valleys very difficult and forces households to send members for work into the low lands. This is against the background of a wide spread inequality across regions and income groups, with over 30% of the population in GB living below the official poverty line of one dollar a day.

Illiteracy can also be seen as an important factor in social and gender inequality. Addressing illiteracy and inequality is a key challenge and I firmly believe that only through education we shall be able to reduce inequality. There are many other reasons for illiteracy including poverty, conservative tribal/religious influences in some areas, lack of awareness and lack of proper investments in the education sector in such areas by the government and other actors.

Physical mobility and migration is linked to affordability and availability of quality educational institutions in remote areas that push people to leave their villages to more resourceful urban pockets. This situation (affordability, quality and mobility) has obvious

stresses and strains the individual, family, village and the whole community in terms of economic, social and psychological impacts.

Children of rich parents have more access to quality education and are more mobile than the poor and medium income groups. As such, inequality is likely to traverse from generation to generation. There is also a mismatch between the demand and the supply of skills in the market. Unfortunately, the education system fails to provide market-driven skills in adequate numbers. There is undersupply in the skills required by the market, and oversupply in those traditional areas of expertise that are today not so much required by the labour market. Brain drain is another phenomenon taking place in a region where the opportunities of employment are quite limited. Furthermore, the public schooling system is not that strong and has nominal linkages with market and industries. The improvement of public schooling requires long term planning, dedicated resources to improve the curriculum, teaching and school facilities as well as tests and assessment methods and regimes. This is likely to be a slow process that may take a whole generation or longer to progress.

In spite of all these problematic issues it needs to be stated that Gilgit-Baltistan has made tremendous progress since the 1970s in terms of education and social mobility, as well as in the capacities of people to adapt to changing situations. This also led to the migration of many to urbanised pockets with relatively better services and employment opportunities. In most cases, the educated people have returned to their villages to earn a living locally and to contribute positively to community development. However, there is still a mismatch between the supply and demand of education in rural areas, as well as there are limited job and employment opportunities to absorb all educated people in the local economy. Hence the obvious choice for young men and women and parents is to move their children out of the remote areas to more urbanised areas in search of quality education, quality earning and better quality of life and aspirations. The Government has too limited resources to establish high quality educational institutions in each area and in order to create employment opportunities for all. Still, proper planning and improving quality education in the public sector may present a way forward. A regulation of the private sector and the integration of technical and entrepreneurial education and information and communication technologies in schools shall be made a priority. Furthermore, lowering the cost of education and supporting local self-employment in the rural areas will likely help to keep the educated people in the area.

#### **References:**

UNICEF (2016): Profiling of Out-of-School Children in Gilgit-Baltistan (in press).



*Aga Khan Higher Secondary School offers quality education in Gilgit  
Photographs © Sabine Felmy 17 & 24 February 2011*