

How Information-Based Planning Can Flourish Where Traditional Politics Reign: An Example from Pakistan

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The benefits of decentralization in education are often undermined by a number of factors. In Pakistan, under a national devolution program, elected district governments have been given budgetary and operational responsibility for social sector service delivery, but severe capacity gaps within education departments have in places led to increased local political meddling in resource allocation. The USAID Education Sector Reform Assistance program has conducted a series of district-level planning exercises using EMIS data that interactively allows education officials to set objective prioritization criteria for the allocation of physical inputs to schools framed to appeal to representatives in the district assembly. The resulting priority criteria, budgets and resource allocation lists have given department officials the ability to quantify their needs, justify budgets, fend off political interference and generate political backing for their proposals. The paper outlines the process and tools that were utilized, emphasizing elements critical to success.

Keywords: *Decentralization, Corruption, Needs-based planning, Pakistan*

INTRODUCTION

Decentralization in the education sector has been and remains a significant policy direction in many parts of the world, and in developing countries it continues to receive considerable donor support (Winkler 2005). Although the motivations for decentralization vary, it is often assumed that it will lead to a variety of positive outcomes. It may increase efficiency by allowing greater flexibility in local resource allocation, and it may foster innovations that lead to quality improvements by giving local governments and education departments greater autonomy. Decentralization can also increase accountability by shortening the distance between voters and policy-makers, allowing parents to more effectively demand better education in return for their taxes and votes. It can also decrease the distance between policy-makers and schools which in turn can result in more responsive system management. (Winkler and Yeo 2007)

However, these improvements in efficiency, responsiveness and quality are not automatic and are often not immediately realized. Decentralization may lead to a deterioration of education services

when local governments are less technically able to administrate public services, or lack the information or tools to plan, budget, procure supplies, or monitor and evaluate the impact of their efforts. (Galiani, Gertler, and Schargrodsky 2005). In addition, central governments may decentralize the problems but not the authorities and resources necessary to solve them.

Finally, decentralization can contribute to the intensification or revival of corrupt practices by decentralizing the opportunities for corruption and increasing the number of political and bureaucratic actors presented with opportunities to abuse their office (Bardhan and Mookherjee 2005). This is particularly true in environments where there is an absence of clear norms and standards, opacity or uncertainty in procedures, a monopoly on discretionary power, low management capacity and poor public information (Hallak and Poisson 2007).

Winkler (2005) outlines three types of decentralization: devolution, deconcentration and delegation. Devolution involves the transfer of decision-making authority to lower levels of government. Deconcentration is the transfer of decision-making authority to lower level actors within the same level of government. Delegation is the assignment of decision-making authority to other public or private agencies.

Pakistan has recently gone through a radical devolution process by which significant decision-making authorities were transferred to elected districted governments. Pakistan's experience with devolution has elements of all the promises and pitfalls outlined above. The distance between policy maker and parent has indeed been shortened, but the opportunities for political interference have been greatly increased in a context where education departments have been given tasks for which they are not prepared. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-funded Education Sector Reform Assistance (USAID/ESRA) project in Pakistan undertook a range of approaches at the district level in Pakistan designed to not only address the gulf between local needs and administrative capacity but to win political support and reduce or minimize the levels of political interference in scarce education resource allocation that has become endemic. Centered around a simple planning tool, these approaches not only built local capacity in needs assessment, planning and budgeting, but provided a springboard for the formulation of win-win solutions that aligned the interests of parents with those of representatives seeking political legitimacy.

This paper highlights some of the critical elements that impede district-level progress in education service delivery in the context of devolution, outlines one of the processes by which very basic capacity building was used to tackle these, and describes how this provided the foundation upon which USAID/ESRA further pursued advocacy and transparency strategies designed to increase public debate and accountability more broadly at the district level on the subject of education. The lessons drawn from this experience may offer opportunities for similar interventions at larger scale within Pakistan and possibly more broadly in other countries with similar contexts.

DEVOLUTION IN PAKISTAN

With the passage of the 2001 Local Governance Ordinance (National Reconstruction Bureau 2001) Pakistan radically altered the district level administrative and governance structures that had remain largely unchanged since the colonial period. For the first time the district

administration is answerable to a district assembly of elected representatives headed by a District Nazim as outlined in Figure 1.

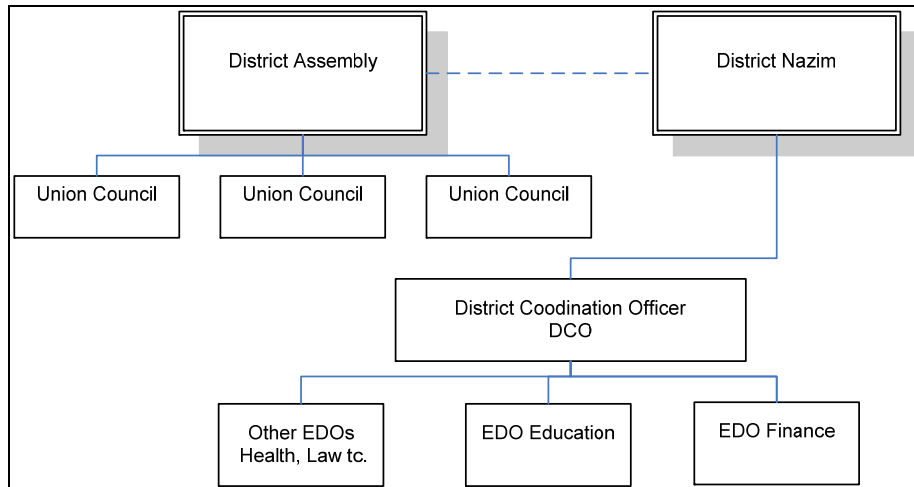


Figure 1: District Governance and Administrative Structures Under Devolution in Pakistan

The District Nazim is elected by the District Assembly from among its members, who are in turn the elected Nazims of the district's Union Councils (UC), which are the lowest level of political representation in Pakistan. The top civil servant at the district level, the District Coordination Officer (DCO), is responsible to the District Nazim and is in charge of the district administration. The various line departments (e.g., education, finance, health etc.) are each headed by an Executive District Officer (EDO) who reports to the DCO. Of these departments, finance is usually the most powerful and influential, controlling both the budget development process as well as the disbursement of resources.

The stated goals of this radical process of devolution, as articulated by the National Reconstruction Bureau are summarized by the Five D's of Devolution:

- Devolution of Political Power – elected politicians articulating the goals of their communities;
- Decentralization of Administrative Authority – autonomy of district departments;
- Distribution of Resources to Districts – taxation powers and transfers;
- Deconcentration of Management Functions – specialization of staff, performance-based appraisal;
- Diffusion of the Power Authority Nexus – checks and balances through monitoring by citizens. (National Reconstruction Bureau 2001)

Under devolution, district governments are able to make their own decisions regarding social sector budgets. District assemblies are able to divide up their capital investment budgets (locally known as “development budgets”) across the social service sectors based on local needs and priorities. The NRB web page (www.nrb.gov.pk) echoes the sentiment that by having resource allocation decisions made at the local level by locally elected officials, priorities can be set according to local needs and the aspirations of the electorate, thus leading to more responsive and effective social service provision. In practice, results have been very mixed, both as assessments

sponsored by the Asian Development Bank (2004) and DFID (Watson 2005) as well as ESRA's own observations highlight.

At the district level, education officials often have little or no training or experience in planning or budgeting for the education sector. Many of them have risen through the ranks on the basis of seniority or political patronage, usually with little or no formal training in management, education finance, administration, planning or budgeting. Although they can state general areas of need (more schools, more classrooms, furniture etc.) they have difficulty quantifying or prioritizing these needs in any rational fashion and are thus at a considerable disadvantage when attempting to advocate for increased allocation to the education sector or even to defend nominal increases in previous non-recurrent budgets.

These local education department weaknesses have left a vacuum that is often quickly filled by the District Nazim, DCO, and EDO Finance who in many instances together use the education budget as a political bargaining tool with individual local politicians in a process that becomes opaque and highly personalistic, not unlike recent observations of county government funding in China (Wang 2002). As a result, in many district education departments the EDO and his staff have been sidelined, disempowered and demoralized as scarce resources are diverted towards more visible and short term investments such as roads, electricity and water schemes or new schools in educationally inefficient but politically advantageous locations (Watson 2005).

In Hyderabad district in Sindh, for instance, which is largely urban or peri-urban, 64 percent of primary schools are one-teacher schools, often in close proximity to each other. Classrooms are allocated to high-profile and sometimes under-subscribed higher secondary schools while many primary schools are without adequate shelter, either with too few classrooms or with no shelter at all. Estimated at little more than two percent of GDP, Pakistan already invests a meager amount in public education, but continued gross political interference¹ in this investment continues to erode public confidence in government schools, perpetuating high drop-out rates and an exodus to private schools. The situation is in crisis and devolution does not appear to have led to significant improvements. In places it may have made things worse.

THE ROLE OF USAID/ESRA

With an estimated population of more than 150 million, Pakistan is the world's sixth most populous nation. Nearly 40% of its population is below the age of 15. For a nation with a per capita GDP of \$690, Pakistan has very low education indicators. It invests only 7.0% of its per capita GDP per primary student, which is less than many countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Although primary participation rates have increased in recent years, approximately 30% of those that enroll in class one will drop out before completing the five year primary school cycle. This low level of investment in education is reflected in low literacy rates for men (63%) and women

¹ In the past elected representatives have had the privilege of directly appointing teachers and their direct involvement in teacher posting and transfer as well as decisions governing the opening and location of new (and often unneeded) schools continues.

(36%)². In an effort to address the weaknesses of its education sector, the Government of Pakistan unveiled the Education Sector Reforms action plan in 2001.

Pakistan's devolution process was still in its infancy when USAID/ESRA began in January of 2003. With the aim of supporting the Government of Pakistan's Education Sector Reforms, USAID/ESRA targeted four districts in Sindh and five in Baluchistan³ as well as the Islamabad Capital Territory that together encompass more than 11,000 primary schools. The five key focus areas were:

- Improving policy, planning and the translation of education policy into practice;
- Enhancing professional development opportunities for educators, trainers, administrators and officials;
- Increasing literacy of out-of-school youth and adults, with a focus on young women and parents of children in school (who might also be School Management Committee (SMC) members);
- Promoting and facilitating partnerships between public and private sectors and with local communities and NGOs, with a focus on mobilizing private sector support for education and strengthening local SMCs;
- Introducing cost-saving information and communication technology (ICT) into various aspects of the education system.

Early in the project it became clear that, combined with project resources, improved planning and advocacy for education at the district level could result in significant increases in the efficient use of resources available to schools or even increased resources allocated to the education sector. Conversely, unless the district education department could quantify the investment needs of the district, set realistic priorities and advocate for these within the district administration and district assembly, little of sustainable value was going to be achievable at the scale of a district for lack of sufficient targeted resources. USAID/ESRA therefore took on the task of building district education department capacity in simple planning, prioritization and advocacy. As it turned out, the departments were universally desperate for this assistance, but it took an outside agent such as USAID/ESRA to initiate the change.

CRITICAL AREAS OF DISTRICT DEPARTMENT WEAKNESS

In attempting to advocate for increased education expenditure and to combat the habit of local politicians to assign school infrastructure and staff where and as they pleased, the district education departments in USAID/ESRA target districts faced five significant hurdles:

Lack of standards

It is important here to clarify between design specifications and standards for infrastructure provision. The Communication and Works (C&W) department has on record standard primary

² World Development Indicators, The World Bank Group, 2007

³ Sindh districts include Thatta, Sukkur, Khairpur and Hyderabad which has now been split into the four districts of Hyderabad, Tando Allahyar, Tando Mohammad Khan, and Mititari. In Baluchistan ESRA is working in Gwadur, Kech, Killa Saifullah, Chaghai and Noshki.

school packages with dimensions and numbers for classrooms, store rooms, staff rooms, toilets, boundary walls and furniture, usually designed around assumptions of 40 students per class and a total of five teachers. This standard package, however, does not assist a district department to determine when an existing school requires additional investment or what to provide to a new school whose projected enrolment is considerably less than the assumptions of the C&W model. How many rooms should a given school have? Should decisions be based on the number of classes (five), the number of teachers (often as few as one) or the number of students? Without clear and objective standards there is no way to estimate or budget for the total capital needs of a district's primary schools. Attempts at having individual schools identify their needs and aggregating these to form an estimate for the entire district are typically viewed by the District Nazim, DCO and EDO Finance as unreliable, unrealistic and unhelpful wish lists. Thus the lists of needs occasionally estimated by the department did not have legitimacy in the eyes of the finance department or the district assembly.

Lack of information

Although there has been considerable donor investment over the past two decades to develop Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) in each of Pakistan's four provinces, very little of the available information is used at the district level for anything other than making lists of schools with enrolment broken down by grade and gender. USAID/ESRA and other observers (Urban Institute 2006) have noted that generally the EDO Education keeps a printed copy of the district EMIS report, but typically does not use the information for planning or management purposes and often does not share the information with subordinate staff. The EMIS databases contain rich information regarding numbers of rooms and their condition, teaching staff, toilets, electricity, water and furniture, but most district education departments cannot access this information, and in any case would not know how to use it other than as a checklist for use during school visits. Education department officials repeatedly stated the general need for additional classrooms and boundary walls, but had no means of estimating the scale of the problem or of identifying needy schools other than by recalling the several schools they had most recently visited.

Lack of clear and realistic priorities

As a result of historically low and inefficient capital investment in education in the past, even using minimal standards the classroom, toilet, boundary wall, electricity, furniture and water needs of a district's primary schools are typically overwhelming and nearly every school is needy by one measure or another. Thus without objective priorities, the district assembly can distribute resources on the basis of political expediency and still claim to be meeting needs. District education departments lack the means to identify those schools most in need of investment or for identifying the most efficient areas for investment in terms of educational outcomes. If asked to identify the twenty schools most in need of additional classrooms, education officials commonly rely on anecdotal reports rather than the EMIS due to a lack of measures to compare the relative classroom needs of schools. Education departments lack the means to set criteria by which schools can be ranked in terms of investment priority. Thus the education departments are often no more able to identify the most deserving schools than local politicians, and this inability contributes significantly to the low esteem in which the education departments are typically held as well as their consequent exclusion from the decision making nexus.

Lack of planning and prioritization tools

Prior to devolution, districts were not responsible for detailed budgetary planning. As a result, there is no culture or pool of skills necessary for using information in planning or management and evaluation of social service delivery. Yet even if the skills were available, there are no existing tools available at the district level that would enable the use of EMIS data in planning and budgeting. Although the EMIS data is available in Microsoft Access or Excel formats, district officials have no accessible way of identifying or counting schools that meet agreed capital investment criteria or of translating identified needs into estimated costs. Without simple and straightforward analysis, planning and budgeting tools the existing EMIS data serves no purpose at the district level other than for reporting summary statistics.

Lack of a plan to win political support

Under devolution, the district development budget is approved by the elected district assembly. Thus both the sectoral and geographic distribution of capital investment resources is a highly politicized affair. Even the most rational and well-thought-out budget submitted by a district department would risk being torn to shreds in the district assembly in which elected representatives vie with each other to bring highly visible investment to their constituent UCs for which they can claim personal credit (Watson 2005). However, in USAID/ESRA's experience, education officials tended to see their planning processes in bureaucratic terms rather than in the context of the local political economy. The unpredictable nature of the negotiations between the District Nazim, DCO, EDO Finance and the District Assembly served as a serious disincentive for serious planning efforts. It became clear that without addressing this serious gap in the process, district education officials were not enthusiastic about investing time and energy in a systematic planning and prioritization exercise. In fact, some education EDOs reported that the development budget for education was used as a bargaining tool by the Nazim and DCO in return for concessions from local politicians in other areas. Sometimes the education departments were not even consulted in the infrastructure budgeting process, but merely instructed to sign the proposal.

THE USAID/ESRA APPROACH

To address these obstacles, USAID/ESRA organized a series of district-level needs-based planning and advocacy workshops designed to give district education officials simple and effective planning and budgeting tools as well as a workable strategy to successfully navigate the complex local political landscape so as to attract and target resources where they were most needed. The resulting plans and budgets had to be defensible and marketable not only within the bureaucracy but in the district assembly as well. Participants were initially skeptical that both requirements could be met, but as the process unfolded it became clear that indeed, budget proposals could be framed in ways that were not only defensible, but attractive and compelling in both fora. The account below is based on an education infrastructure planning and budgeting workshop held jointly for the districts of Hyderabad, Tando Allahyar, Tando Mohammad Khan

and Matiari in the province of Sindh in 2006, with approximately 8 education department representatives from each district, including the respective EDOs for education⁴.

Using standards and EMIS data for planning

The discussion on standards began with a statement by one of the EDOs for Education that the “standard” primary school physical facilities should include five classrooms with space for 40 students each, one boundary wall, toilets, clean water and electricity for lighting and fans. The group was then asked to apply these standards to a variety of actual schools picked at random from the EMIS database. The group quickly realized that with regard to classrooms having a notional “standard” school didn’t result in criteria that could be applied to estimate the needs of existing schools. Should a school have one room per teacher, one per 40 students or one per class level?

By using a simple Microsoft Excel tool linked to the district EMIS database, the group was able to immediately see the total new infrastructure needs of the district based on varying standards as well as to observe how the standards applied to individual schools. Many participants were adamant that each school required five classrooms since primary schooling comprises five classes. By applying this standard with the Excel tool the unrealistic nature of this standard became immediately apparent when the numbers of schools needing additional rooms and the total district classroom requirement was displayed. Measured against this standard, the needs of one district exceeded the entire provincial educational infrastructure budget/resource allocation. Additionally, by observing how this standard applied to individual schools the absurdity of giving five classrooms to single teacher schools with less than 30 children caused much laughter and the comment that these schools were opened purely based on political considerations. Likewise, the tool highlighted the inequity of assigning classrooms by the number of staff since it mirrored the inequitable and politically driven distribution teacher allocation practices common in Pakistan.

As a result, a consensus quickly focused on classroom allocation based on enrollment with agreement that students per classroom should not exceed 40. The required number of classrooms could thus be calculated by dividing the total school enrolment by 40 and rounding to nearest whole number. By subtracting existing classrooms from required classrooms the classrooms needs of any school could be easily calculated. Participants quickly realized the power of this simple algorithm, particularly when Excel enabled its automatic application to all schools in the EMIS database. In all instances, this was the first example of the direct use of school level information for need identification in the participant’s experience, and its power and simplicity introduced a tangible energy to the proceedings. A process that had previously seemed insurmountably complex or time consuming suddenly became remarkably simple.

After completing the classroom example, setting standards for the remaining capital investment categories and incorporating them into the Excel tool took very little time. The result was a complete inventory of additional capital requirements for all primary schools in the district that each participant could explain and defend. Unit costs supplied by the C&W department were then applied to each category to arrive at the total capital investment necessary to bring all existing schools up to the agreed standards. The results were sobering, with totals in many cases

⁴ This workshop was organized and led by the author together with other ESRA staff.

exceeding historic capital budgets by a factor of 20 or more, and a feeling of helplessness returned to the group. The key to further progress lay in setting priorities.

Setting priorities

Beginning again with classroom requirements, participants were asked how they would identify schools most in need of additional classroom space. To put the question in more concrete terms, they were asked how they would allocate 20 classrooms to the most needy schools. Suggestions fell into two categories: allocate the rooms to the largest schools (since these presumably need the most space) or allocate them to the schools that appeared most overcrowded based on personal observations. Surprisingly there was no suggestion to devise a definition of “overcrowded” nor was there any reference to using the EMIS data for answering such a question. As participants defended their suggestions for specific overcrowded schools, their passion to advocate for schools with the worst crowding was infectious, but as no one had seen all schools in the district there was no consensus on which schools were most needy. It was clear that some objective measure of need or crowding was necessary.

After considering a variety of classroom need measures, most of which were initially biased towards larger urban schools, consensus centered around ranking schools by the percentage by which their enrolment exceeded their capacity as determined in the previous exercise. A school that exceeded its capacity by 50 percent would be given priority over one that exceeded its capacity by 30 percent, although both were clearly needy. Using the same EMIS-based Excel planning tool linked to a budget template, the group queried the EMIS database on how many schools exceeded their capacity by 30 percent, by 50 percent, by 80 percent and on up until the number of needed classrooms approached a figure that might be realistically considered by the EDO Finance and the district assembly. How could the district assembly not agree to give first priority to schools that exceed their capacity by 80 percent?

In the same manner the group set priority criteria for boundary walls (for urban schools and schools with more than X girls), toilets (for schools with more than Y children or more than Z girls) and electricity and water (for schools with more than X children). Based on these criteria, the Excel tool identified the number of schools that met or exceeded the criteria thresholds and linked the resulting infrastructure requirements to a budget template. The group could then adjust the priority thresholds to raise or lower the budget as needed in each infrastructure category, keeping a careful eye on the development budget total. With this step complete, it was time to craft a draft budget designed to appeal both to the DCO and EDO Finance as well as the District Nazim and assembly.

Targeting the budget to the audience

By this stage the group had a clear understanding of how the budget was being built based on school level EMIS data and objective standards and clear but flexible prioritization criteria. They also realized that they could now build a budget with varying emphases by adjusting prioritization criteria in ways that would appeal to known actors in the decision making process. The budget template also enabled participants to immediately see the tradeoffs between investment in high priced items such as classrooms and boundary walls versus cheaper investments such as toilets and water supply. The workshop had been planned to go through one district budget as an

example for the entire group and for the remaining district representatives to then craft their own budgets facilitated by a trained project staff person. However, the first budget example generated such animated discussion among all four district teams that they requested to jointly participate in the development of each district budget.

Participants were immediately shocked at how few classrooms their relatively small development budgets could afford, and the discussion quickly jumped to the cost per classroom which the C&W department had costed at Rs. 750,000. One district representative pointed out that private contractors were building classrooms to the same design specifications at a cost of Rs. 200,000 which would allow them to budget for nearly four times as many rooms. This was valuable information. C&W would oppose outsourcing classroom construction, but District Nazim and assembly members would be able to claim credit for more classroom construction and each district group concluded they could win an internal battle over outsourcing with the Nazim on their side. This realization gave the participants a sense of empowerment that gave the process an immediate boost and ideas began to flow quickly. How many classrooms would they lose if they built 50 toilets? Were boundary walls more important or classrooms? Which items had the greatest impact on the school and which would sell best in the district assembly?

Immediately boundary walls were scrapped as too expensive. In the case of district Tando Allahyar, the group then discovered that at the cost of less than two classrooms, all schools could be provided with a hand pump for drinking water. Such a claim would resonate with local politicians and would play well in the local press. In fact, the participants began playfully crafting catchy campaign slogans suited to known powerful politicians. While this initially generated much merriment and play acting, when the win-win nature of their discovery became apparent, the sense of hope and empowerment within the group soared. Their goal of an internally generated development budget draft gaining District Assembly endorsement suddenly seemed within reach. It could be presented with the political and educational benefits as mutually reinforcing features.

When the draft budgets for each district were complete, the Excel tool was used to sort the schools in the district in order of priority based on the criteria agreed upon above. The results posed a significant problem. The neediest schools were not evenly distributed within the district, but were concentrated in areas whose political representatives were relatively weak. The district assembly support for the proposed budget would unravel if the more powerful representatives did not see a significant share of the resources going to their constituencies. A rank ordered list of priority schools was thus generated for each UC. The participants knew that the development budget would be divided across UCs based on backroom negotiations, but at least within each UC, the resources would go to the most deserving schools.

The decision was thus made to attach to the budget proposal a list of schools by UC in rank order of need for each capital investment category. In subsequent discussions with the DCO and Nazim it was agreed that the list of target schools would form part of the formal budget approved by the district assembly with first available resources going to the neediest schools in rank order down the list until resources were exhausted. This would allow each representative to take credit for the resources that came to his or her UC and to claim that they were targeted to the most needy schools. With the most needy schools officially identified with the approved budget, shifting the resources to other schools for political purposes would be more difficult and could be challenged

in the district assembly or in the press, either of which would be embarrassing to a politician seeking to use education resources as a means to gain political legitimacy.

RESULTS OF THE PROCESS

The process described above achieved a number of important goals. It established the school capital investment needs of the district, based on objective data in the EMIS database and agreed standards rather than on vague estimates that were vulnerable to challenge. This in itself reinforced the value of the data in the EMIS as useful at the district level rather than merely something to be passed on to the provincial and national levels. The process also enabled the district education department to establish normative priorities that resulted in a more realistic and defensible budget submission, based on a tool in which priority criteria could be easily changed to meet new needs.

In all four cases the internal logic and reasonable, and in some cases compelling, nature of the priorities enabled the proposals to win the support of the District Nazim the DCO and the EDO Finance. This support was a critical political victory as these three individuals exert considerable influence over the political and bureaucratic dimensions of the budget approval process. This in turn significantly raised the confidence of the education department in setting the direction for education investment in the district.

More critically, this process established that, in general, district education departments have a sufficiently sophisticated understanding of the local political economy to identify win-win solutions that align the desire of individual politicians to bring visible resources to their constituency with objectively prioritized needs of specific schools. This element is often missing from capacity-building efforts that exclusively emphasize the mechanics of planning and budgeting.

Finally, this process potentially widened the pool of resources for education capital investment since the district government could at any time submit a list of pre-identified priority education investments, complete with standards and EMIS-based analysis with specific school names, to any external source of funds (such as international donors, or the ADB Devolved Social Services Program).

In an effort to publicize the concept of objective information-based planning and prioritization and to foster improvements in education as a route to political legitimacy, USAID/ESRA used the processes and results of this budgeting and planning exercise to inform multiple rounds of capacity building workshops and policy dialogues with District Education Monitoring Committees and local civil society in the project target districts of Sindh and Balochistan province. A wide cross section of civil society including bar associations, non-government organizations, community-based organizations, school management committees, press clubs and political parties participated in these dialogues. The dialogues helped to put education higher on the agenda of local leaders and civil society and laid the foundation for the formation of civil society networks that can press for political accountability in the allocation of public resources and the setting of

local priorities. In particular, the dialogues emphasized the need for objective standards, reliable information and transparency in the resource allocation process.

At the time of this writing, information regarding the outcome of the district budgeting process is incomplete, and the outcomes are not yet clear. The budget proposals submitted by the education departments will doubtless be subjected to the vagaries of struggles within the district bureaucracies as well as the political dynamics at the district level and between district and provincial entities. The outcomes across individual districts will likely be uneven. Already, however, the elements of the planning tool used in these budgeting and planning workshops are being incorporated into the Sindh provincial EMIS systems with the potential for adoption across all districts in the province.

GENERAL LESSONS

Although this process is in an early stage, it provides some general lessons that may apply more broadly within Pakistan or beyond. It is clear that the process of initiating change at the district level required an outside agent, in this case USAID/ESRA. The education department was too overwhelmed and intimidated by the established political structures and culture of interference to resist the blatant way in which it was ignored and sidelined. The education department desired to play a useful role and contribute to a solution, but needed not only a set of new approaches and tools but also a sense that their input had a chance of gaining the buy-in of local political and bureaucratic entities. The education department officials proved to have an excellent understanding of the local political economy, and when prompted were adept at framing proposals and priorities in terms that would resonate locally. Their experience and understanding of local political processes was a critical resource that in many contexts is not tapped.

In Pakistan, the process of setting standards and priorities had to begin with extreme simplicity. Some of the criteria may have been over-simplified, but this proved to be a strength rather than a weakness in that it was easy for all stakeholders to grasp and in turn, to explain and defend. Further sophistication can be added to the process as skills develop and as a more nuanced approach becomes the expected norm.

The resulting plan utilized a two pronged strategy by framing some priorities in terms that would be embarrassing for politicians to oppose or flout and by framing others to coincide with representative's desire to claim achievements for their constituency. Both strategies are strengthened when standards, prioritization criteria and the priority lists of schools are widely disseminated within the education department, district administration and assembly, and ultimately among the broader public. In this manner, expanded access to information can be a strong accountability measure for curbing political interference in resource allocation (Mitchell, Humayun and Muzzaffar 2005).

Finally, as in all democratic systems, the final recommendation had to incorporate some compromises (setting priority schools by UC, rather than by the district as a whole). Yet, any improvement from the status quo is an improvement, and it will likely take many budget cycles before the culture of political interference in resource allocation significantly diminishes and devolution lives up to its promise of more responsive government and improved local social service delivery.

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