Despite this government commitment, the number of out-of-school children in Pakistan remains significantly high. UNICEF estimates almost 13 million, out of the 27 million children of primary school age (5-9), remain out of school. 7 million of these out-of-school children are girls (SPARC 2004). Furthermore, Pakistan's adult literacy rate of 50 is considerably below the South Asian regional average of 58 (UNICEF 2007). Pakistan's low ranking on the world Human Development Index (HDI) scale (number 136) is due to Pakistan's poor performance in education and in child health care (Lieten 2004; Khan 2005; UNDP 2007). In addition to gender disparities and a low adult literacy rate, education in Pakistan is characterised by urban-rural inequalities, low enrolment, and a high dropout rate. Many institutions within Pakistan, including the government, recognise the poor condition of Pakistan's education system. The Social Policy and Development Centre (SDPC) describes the state of education in Pakistan as “deplorable” (Social Policy and Development Centre 2003).

How can this poor state of education in Pakistan be explained? Experts usually cite the high costs of education, parental disinterest due to social and cultural norms (especially for girls), and the low quality of education due to disinterested teachers, lack of proper physical infrastructure, overcrowded classes and irrelevant curricula. An additional curse in Pakistan’s education system, as Chuman and Lloyd (2007) have argued, is the fact that teachers are often absent; in their sample from Northwest Frontier Province and Punjab about 35 percent of teachers in government girls’ schools and 22 percent of teachers in government boys’ schools were absent during unannounced school visits.

Escaping the cycle of poverty

In 2006, the Foundation for International Research on Working Children (IREWOC) conducted an anthropological study at household and village level in rural Pakistan concerning non-enrolment, non-attendance and/or dropout (De Groot 2007). One of the research settings was a fishing village on the coast of Karachi-West in Sindh province. Anticipating a troublesome future, many villagers here believe education to be important, and a means with which their children will be able to break free of their current style of livelihood, and to gain access to other occupations. A worried mother of two young boys explained:

I do not want my son to be a fisherman like his father. The job is very hard. When a fisherman is young and strong, he has to do hard work. When he gets old and weak, he cannot work and will be without a source of income.

However, even though education is perceived by parents and children alike as a way to escape current poverty, many children are still found out of school. The first explanation relates to the child’s own calculations. Another explanation relates to the expected future opportunities. Ever since education until class 10 (secondary level) has been available in the village, a significant number of young men and some girls have completed secondary school, but do not seem to be able to escape the cycle of poverty. If they found a job, it was at an abysmally low salary. As a fisherman’s wife explained: “Many boys in this village passed class 10, but there are no jobs available to them. In this way education is not good.” Some boys therefore chose to become fishermen after all: “It is better to fish, than to be jobless! But now I work as a fisherman. We are from a poor family, so we cannot afford to go to the city for further education.”

Quite a number of villagers, however, do perceive education as relevant for everyone, including those involved in traditional occupations. They value how educated men know how to take fish to the market and how to sell it with profit and how they can control all the counting. They realise the benefit of learning Urdu in school, which makes it easier to communicate with people from outside their Balochi village, and they also believe that school teaches them to respect others. Also, the villagers recognise how reading and writing will reduce their dependency on others, and help them to learn...
about the world. Reading and writing skills are thus perceived as impor-
tant by the majority of the village population. Basic skills such as knowing
what is right and wrong are perceived as useful for everyone. However,
these skills can already be attained with just a few years of schooling, and
do not necessarily require ten years of education.

Boys and girls who are not enrolled in school believe that jobs in the
city are out of their reach, and they expect to become like their fathers and
mothers. They would rather spend time on the beach with friends and
relatives, than in a school environment which they find unattractive, and
where they cannot learn what they learn in real life.

Most parents have never been to school and they quite often fail to grasp
the importance of regular attendance, particularly if teachers are often
absent. In a village where men are out at sea, sometimes for more than
20 days, and where the women tell their children to go to school in the
mornings, but then leave the village to fetch water and wood for fuel,
who makes sure that the child actually goes to school? In the absence of
supervision, the children are somewhat free to decide for themselves
what they do all day. If a boy would rather be on the beach, many parents
do not concern themselves with his choice. It is therefore also relevant
to consider the perspectives of the children themselves. Why do they, or do
they not, go to school?

The boys who are normally found on the beach rather than in school can
be divided into two groups. First of all there are a number of boys who are
asked by their caregivers to help earn money for the household. These
boys often show an interest in school, but have come to terms with the
fact that school is not an option for them. Secondly, there are the boys who
are not interested in school and who generally come from households that
do not require them to work or to earn money for their daily needs. These
children can be found playing on the beach, or trying to catch some fish
from the shore. In their eyes this is a much more exciting activity com-
pared to attending classes where teachers scold or even beat them.

The girl child

Women are not expected to be involved in the fishing profession. The
importance and relevance for the girl child in this fishing village has been
to be seen in a different context. Educating girls is a relatively new concept and it
has less priority than the education of boys. Many villagers share the view
that it is okay to educate younger girls until they become teenagers and
are old enough to help their mothers in the household; from that point
onwards they should prepare for their futures as a mother and housewife.

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Nonetheless, a large number of young girls, not yet old enough to assist in
any household work, are still out of school. Some parents consider the dis-
tance from their house to the school an unsafe walking distance for their
children, and some children are afraid that other children will bully them.
Girls themselves also express a fear of punishment by teachers. Others do
not know what school is, and are simply not interested in going; especially
if none of their siblings, nieces, or friends go to school. Thus, educating
Girls has not yet established itself as a social norm.

Parents explained that in Balochi culture there should be at least a sepa-
rare school for girls, which at the time of research was not available in the
village. This school should have female teachers only, which is especially
essential once a girl grows up. Girls who are out of school replied that the
skills they need for the future include cooking, stitching, embroidering,
washing, and cleaning, which they can learn at home from their mothers.
A minimum level of education would be sufficient for a girl to learn how to
read and write. Such education might be helpful for girls of all ages, “but
not for a job”, as was often stated. However, traditions can give way and
women’s liberation has its advocates, such as Haqim, a father of small
children, who considers education as important for his girls as it is for boys:

Now women do not know anything. They do not speak Urdu. Urdu would
help them, for example when people from Karachi come here for a picnic,
or when they have to go to Karachi for shopping or to see a doctor. Now
they are like animals. They can only speak Balochi.

The considerations among poor people in a poor community in Pakistan
help to explain why, in addition to all other constraining factors, the coun-
try is far from achieving Millennium Development Goal 4 (achieving uni-
versal primary education), which in Pakistan has been a constitutional
commitment for more than 60 years.

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