

## Inclusive Education and Sustainable Development in Pakistan

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### Abstract

Inclusive Education (IE) has emerged as a significant focus in educational frameworks globally and is widely acknowledged as an essential catalyst for realizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As a signatory to the SDGs 2030 Agenda, Pakistan has pledged to provide inclusive and equitable quality education in accordance with SDG 4, which highlights the importance of lifelong learning opportunities for everyone. This commitment is further supported by the Constitution of Pakistan. Article 25 ensures equality among all citizens, while Article 25-A mandates that the state must deliver free and compulsory education to every child aged 5 to 16 as a fundamental right (NAP, 1973).

In the twenty-first century, education systems are quickly adapting to contemporary demands, and inclusive education is receiving growing attention in both advanced and developing nations. This study aims to assess the status and significance of inclusive education within the modern educational landscape of Sindh. The results suggest that, despite policy commitments, considerable efforts are still necessary to effectively incorporate inclusive education into Sindh's current education system. The study advocates for the strict enforcement of government rules, regulations, and policy statements to achieve universal enrollment and meet the objectives of SDG 4.

### Introduction and Literature Review

The concept of inclusion or inclusive education is not a recent phenomenon in Pakistan. For many years, it has been mentioned in various national policy documents; however, empirical studies in this field remain scarce. Most existing research has primarily concentrated on integrating children with disabilities into regular schools, while wider aspects of inclusion have not been thoroughly explored.

Pakistan is actively updating and enhancing its educational policies at both the federal and provincial levels. Key initiatives include the National Education Framework (2018), Punjab's New Deal (2018–2023), provincial Education Sector Plans (2019–2023), and the Inclusive Education Strategy of Punjab, which is currently being developed. Despite these efforts, there is a pressing need for well-structured research to facilitate the effective execution of inclusive education.

The Shadow Voluntary National Review (VNR) prepared for the High-Level Political Forum in 2019, with input from civil society organizations such as Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA), Sightsavers International, and STEP, identified several obstacles related to special and inclusive education. A significant issue raised was the extremely limited number of educational facilities available for children with disabilities—around 600 across a population exceeding 208 million (MICS Punjab, 2017–2018).

UNICEF (2004) indicated that Pakistan's inclusive education efforts had not been successfully institutionalized. The mainstream education system functions independently from special education institutions, which are specifically tailored for children with disabilities. This separation is also evident in many private schools. Moreover, schools that do provide quality education are often not accessible to children with special needs, particularly those from rural and economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

In a similar vein, the British Council (2019) noted that children with special needs are mainly educated in separate institutions rather than in mainstream schools. This segregation, combined with inaccessible facilities, rigid curricula, unsuitable teaching methods, and negative attitudes within schools, creates significant obstacles to the successful implementation of inclusive education throughout Pakistan.

### **Evidence from National Studies**

In a significant attempt to produce evidence-based data, ITA carried out a large-scale study utilizing the Child Functioning Tool in Punjab and Sindh during 2017–2018. The survey included 8,345 children and revealed that 15.15% experienced at least one moderate to severe disability (MICS Punjab, 2017–2018).

The research indicated that 22.71% of children with disabilities were not attending school, while 77.29% were enrolled. Only 14.5% were in special education institutions, whereas the majority were in mainstream schools. Gender disparities were apparent, with boys being identified as having disabilities more often than girls. Most enrolled children had mild to moderate disabilities (Inclusive Education Assessment Report, 2019).

Further research by Singal et al. (2019) demonstrated that children with communication, mobility, and learning challenges had lower enrollment rates compared to their peers. Those with moderate to severe disabilities were more likely to attend government schools, which frequently lack the resources and capacity to meet their specific needs. These findings highlight the urgent necessity for inclusive strategies within mainstream education.

### **Initiatives for Inclusive Education in Pakistan**

Numerous programs have been initiated to tackle educational exclusion. The Federal Directorate of Education launched an Inclusive Education Project in Islamabad during the 2005–2006 period as a trial in 20 schools; however, this initiative was subsequently halted (Malik et al., 2014).

In Punjab, initiatives like the Insaf Afternoon Schools Program and the Punjab Schools Transport Program have enhanced educational access for marginalized and remote communities. These efforts represent encouraging progress toward inclusion, although their lasting effects rely on effective oversight and growth.

The Punjab Inclusive Education Project, executed through the Punjab Education Foundation (PEF), assisted children with special needs in specific districts via public-private partnerships. By 2016, more than 1,250 children with disabilities had benefited from this endeavor (Thakur & Abbas, 2017). The government continues to assess these programs to fortify curriculum development, teacher training, and service delivery.

### **Inclusive Education in Sindh**

The Sindh Education Sector Plan and Roadmap (2019–2024) aligns with the province's dedication to SDG 4 and builds on previous sector plans. The School Education and Literacy Department (SELD) is tasked with delivering education at the primary and secondary levels in line with Article 25-A of the Constitution. The plan highlights equitable access, enhanced learning outcomes, and strengthened governance.

Despite these commitments, considerable challenges persist. These include the lack of a clear definition of inclusive education, insufficient categorization of vulnerable groups, disparities between policy and execution, limited comprehension of inclusion, gender-based segregation, rural-urban inequalities, rigid curricula, inadequate resources, and the absence of reliable data.

### Findings and Conclusion

The research indicates that while both federal and provincial governments have shown commitment to inclusive education, execution remains feeble due to structural, attitudinal, and resource-related obstacles. In Sindh, facilities for children with special needs are scarce, especially in rural areas, making the attainment of SDG 4 difficult.

Nonetheless, inclusive education in Sindh is attainable with continued political commitment, sufficient funding, teacher training, curriculum reforms, and effective oversight. Recent legal advancements, including the Disability Rights Act (2022) and the Sindh Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Act (2019), establish a robust legal framework to promote inclusive education.

### Recommendations

The Sindh Government should prioritize the execution of inclusive education policies in line with the 18th Constitutional Amendment.

Free and compulsory education, as ensured under Article 25-A, must be provided for all children without discrimination.

The National Education Policy (2017) and SDG 4 commitments should be implemented in both spirit and practice.

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