

Policy Brief

A FRAMEWORK FOR SCALING EDUCATION INTERVENTIONS IN PAKISTAN: ENABLERS, BARRIERS, AND EMBEDDING GESI

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The Data and Research in Education-Research Consortium (DARE-RC) aims to understand the challenges facing Pakistan's education system and to expand the existing evidence base that explores potential solutions to these issues.

The consortium undertakes **three main activities** to support these aims:

- Strengthening of high-quality research on what works to improve education
- Promoting in-country research capacity building
- Enhancing stakeholder engagement, communication, and dissemination of findings.

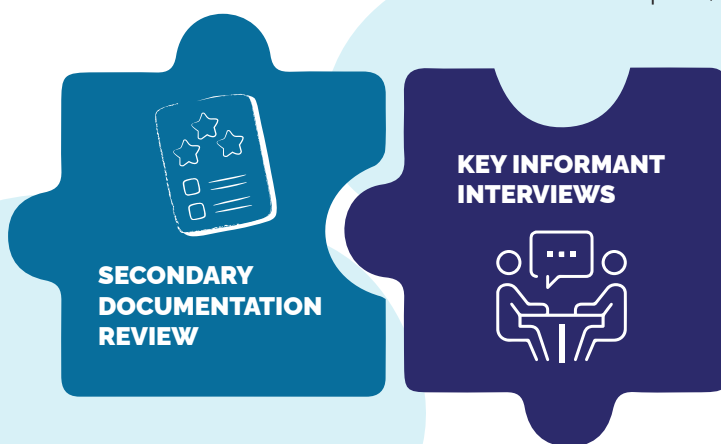
The report on which this policy brief is based contributes to DARE-RC's aims by presenting a comprehensive scoping of scalable education interventions in Pakistan. The review, conducted by the REAL Centre at the University of Cambridge, explores the enablers of and barriers to scaling, and identifies the conditions under which education interventions can be sustainably scaled while embedding gender, equality, and social inclusion (GESI), to achieve equitable and systemic impact.

The report on which this brief is based draws on insights obtained from project evaluations and key informant interviews.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

The scoping review employed a two-part methodological approach:

12 semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including project implementers, education policy experts, and government officials.



Over **30** reports, evaluation studies, and policy documents on education interventions implemented between 2015 and 2025 were reviewed.

Qualitative data were coded thematically to identify enablers of and barriers to scalability and to propose an adapted conceptual framework for scaling education interventions in Pakistan.

A TYPOLOGY OF EDUCATION INTERVENTIONS

The report categorises interventions based on whether they have been successfully scaled, partially scaled, or failed to scale in Pakistan. Factors influencing each category were analysed, offering lessons for future programme design and implementation.

INTERVENTION CASE STUDIES

Education interventions can be categorised as pilot-to-scale interventions, designed-for-scale interventions, or system-level reforms.

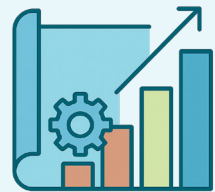
Pilot-to-scale initiatives



Pilot-to-scale initiatives often start with non-government organisations (NGOs) or donors. This was the case for Sustainable Transition and Retention in Delivering Education (STRIDE), by the Institute of Social and Policy Sciences (I-SAPS). They may later be adopted by the government if they are successful, as seen in the case of the Waseela-e-Taleem programme. Some pilot-to-scale initiatives originate under technical assistance programmes, like the Punjab Education Sector Reform Programme (PESP) and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Education Sector Reform Programme (KESP).

Designed-for-scale interventions

Designed-for-scale interventions are government-led from the start, and are often managed by foundations, like the Punjab Education Foundation (PEF) and the Sindh Education Foundation (SEF). They often involve large-scale public-private partnership (PPP) models.



System-level reforms



System-level reforms are programmes associated with broader structural changes in education governance, policy, or institutional frameworks that impact multiple schools or programmes. These may include teacher recruitment policies or changes to budget allocations. These are likely to have specific interventions or programmes associated with them, which can provide lessons for scaling.

CONCEPTUALISING SCALING

Scaling would mean an intervention which can eventually reach out to all targeted populations – if we are doing an intervention for out-of-school children, then that means reaching a larger population.

-Key Informant



1 Scaling as increasing reach

Stakeholders interviewed viewed scaling in Pakistan's education sector as a complex, multi-layered process that extends beyond simple replication or expansion. Some respondents associated scaling with increasing reach, which reflects a conventional understanding of scalability: moving from a pilot to broader application.

Scaling from a government perspective means any intervention that has a legal framework or policy and then funding allocation at some scale-up level... if the government has not adopted it and created no institution for it, then it's no scale-up.

- Government informant



2 Institutional embedding

Most stakeholders emphasised sustainability and institutional embedding as essential to scaling. In line with this view, scaling means interventions continue effectively without external support, which occurs when interventions are deeply integrated into existing education systems, rather than merely expanded as standalone initiatives.



3 Scaling impact

Some stakeholders also distinguished between scaling an intervention and scaling its impact, the latter being more nuanced and inclusive of both positive and negative systemic effects.

In conclusion, successful scaling requires not only broader reach but also depth, sustainability, and meaningful system integration.

Gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GE[DISI]) is a concept that examines unequal power relations between different social groups. The GE[DISI] approach... focuses on the need for action to re-balance these power relations and ensure equal rights, opportunities, and respect for all individuals regardless of their social identity.

- GESI Working Group 2017

SCALING EDUCATION INTERVENTIONS



KEY FINDINGS

A BARRIER-ENABLER MATRIX

The report presents a matrix that maps five cross-cutting themes: political will and bureaucracy; human resources; cost effectiveness; data systems; and alignment with government/donor agendas. The matrix identifies the conditions under which each theme acts as either an enabler or a barrier.



01 Political will and bureaucracy

Political buy-in is a precondition for scale. However, frequent leadership changes and lack of continuity undermine sustainability. Reforms linked to individual champions may not survive political turnover. For instance, ownership by Punjab's Chief Minister led to the expansion of PPP schools in the province. Yet champions are imperative for any intervention to be scaled.

There is a system problem in Pakistan linked to **senior bureaucracy**. If a secretary is transferred, then everything is gone.

-Key Informant



02 Human resources and expertise

A lack of institutional memory and capacity within government structures often leads to the discontinuation of interventions when donor funding ends. Long-term success requires embedding skills and ownership within local systems. For instance, STRIDE was able to be sustained due to I-SAPS's institutional capacity and established presence on the ground.

We keep on shifting the goal posts. For example, UNESCO started off with campaigns on literacy. We called it LND [Learning and Numeracy Drive], then learning poverty... it confuses the government officials.

-Key Informant



03 Cost effectiveness

Interventions that use existing infrastructure and show value for money are more likely to scale. Demonstration of cost effectiveness is essential for government uptake. For example, interventions such as the Climate Resilient Classroom project in Punjab struggled to scale due to high costs and budget constraints. Cost effectiveness is often given priority over equity considerations.

Government doesn't think much about equity – because they don't have such deep capacity – they are always thinking about cost – operating cost and capital cost – then equity access, marginalised communities comes much later.

-Key Informant



04 | Data, monitoring, and evaluation

Scalability is linked to rigorous monitoring and the availability of reliable data. However, data fragmentation and lack of public access to data hinder informed decision-making. Robust evaluations are usually available for large-scale donor-funded programmes, such as PESP II and KESP II. By contrast, many smaller-scale interventions may lack systematic evaluations, which means reliable data required for informed decision-making are not available. Moreover, the available data are rarely disaggregated by GESI dimensions, which limits analysis of who is being reached and how.



05 | Alignment with donor and government agendas and timelines

When donor timelines do not align with government cycles, scale-up is compromised. Mutual planning is required for long-term sustainability. For instance, the successful implementation of the 'Reading hour' pilot programme in schools in Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT), Punjab, and Sindh (in which one hour was dedicated to reading activities within the school curriculum) was partially possible due to the strong support from the Federal Education Secretary and collaboration with civil society organisations.

The Social Welfare Department has four different portfolios linked to disabilities, girls' stipend programmes, and literacy. Non-formal education has its own datasets. None of these datasets speak to each other. Secretaries don't talk, and when decisions are taken, they are based on limited data.

-Key Informant

Even if I want to support an intervention, as secretary education department, I have less flexibility. If I have a foundation, I have more space even though it falls under the remit of government, but it has less bureaucracy.

-Key Informant

AN ADAPTED FRAMEWORK FOR SCALING

GESI considerations are often donor-led and rarely embedded in government-led programmes. This can result in marginalised learners being excluded from interventions intended to operate at scale.

Building on global best practices and grounded in the Pakistan context, the report proposes a framework that integrates GESI considerations at every phase: design, pilot, scale-up, and institutional embedding. This framework is informed by insights from the Scaling Access and Learning in Education (SCALE) and the What Works Hub for Global Education (W/WHGE) frameworks, which focus on embedding interventions in government policy plans and regulatory frameworks (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: FRAMEWORK FOR SCALING INTERVENTIONS IN PAKISTAN



Towards a framework for scalable, inclusive interventions: The proposed conceptual framework recommends the following steps:

EARLY ENGAGEMENT WITH GOVERNMENT

Establish partnerships at the start of intervention design. Even for donor-funded pilots, involving government early can ease later integration into national systems. It is essential to understand government incentives and to tailor advocacy to government interests.

Institutional capacity building



Ensure interventions reinforce, rather than bypass, public systems. Allocate at least 25% of time and resources at the beginning of the project to establish the necessary systems and personnel to sustain that project for the long term. This includes training implementers, decision makers, and frontline staff, to ensure the transfer of knowledge.

Moreover, ensure a non-salary budget component is included in funding calculations.

Evidence of value for money



Integrate costing models and fiscal sustainability. Interventions that demonstrate clear cost savings – such as afternoon school models that utilise existing infrastructure like STRIDE – may be particularly appealing for governments, and more likely to receive government endorsement, especially when they are aligned with broader educational priorities and evidence of impact. As the [Girls Education Challenge model](#) has shown, it is possible to achieve value for money while reaching the most marginalised. During pilots, avoiding government funding can prevent delays. Instead, engage provincial foundations, NGOs, and private partners. Financial models must reflect local constraints to support adaptability and early-stage scaling across provinces.

Robust monitoring systems



Effective interventions require built-in monitoring and evaluation, using continuous data to guide improvements. In Pakistan, scaling efforts are hindered by limited disaggregation of data for GESI assessment, and by poor data use. Although different government departments hold large datasets, they are often underutilised and do not speak to each other. An implementation science approach – linking evidence with practice – builds credibility. Governments are more receptive when implementers present data, case studies, and proven pilot outcomes.

A SCALABILITY CHECKLIST

Scaling education interventions in Pakistan is complex, particularly due to decentralised governance, financial constraints, and limited departmental capacity. Since key decisions are made at the provincial level, aligning with local priorities and structures is essential. **Budget limitations make cost effectiveness critical, while capacity gaps require institutional strengthening to ensure long-term sustainability.**

GESI integration is also vital to reach marginalised groups. Table 1 introduces a scalability checklist tailored to Pakistan. Building on the Management Systems International (MSI) scalability checklist and using insights from the GESI assessment framework created by the authors of the report, in addition to incorporating findings from the report, the checklist supports the design of adaptable, sustainable, and inclusive education interventions across diverse provincial contexts.

This practical checklist has been provided to help project implementers and policymakers design interventions with scalability, sustainability, and GESI in mind. It highlights early engagement with government, institutional capacity building, as well as ensuring cost effectiveness and evidence-driven scaling, while embedding GESI throughout.

TABLE 1: SCALABILITY CHECKLIST

Scalability component

Key considerations



Government involvement and policy alignment

- Engage government stakeholders from the design phase to ensure government ownership and integration into national systems.
- Align the intervention with national and provincial education policies and regulatory frameworks.
- Address bureaucratic and political incentives to position the intervention effectively.
- Establish multi-stakeholder coordination mechanisms to ensure collective buy-in and sustainability.
- Develop a strategic plan for scaling that allows for policy coherence across governance levels and adaptability to provincial contexts.



Capacity building and institutional strengthening

- Allocate a proportion of resources to human and institutional capacity building.
- Train government staff, teachers, and local implementers to ensure knowledge transfer and long-term ownership.
- Ensure non-salary budget allocations to support operational costs beyond donor-driven salaries.
- Use scalability assessments to identify capacity gaps and design targeted capacity-building plans.
- Create partnerships with universities, teacher training institutions, and research organisations to enable professional development.



Embedding GESI

- Promote intersectional approaches to the design and conceptualisation of interventions that consider gender, socioeconomic, geographic, and disability-related inequalities in education access and outcomes.
- Develop GESI-sensitive indicators within monitoring, evaluation, and learning frameworks to measure equitable outcomes.
- Ensure inclusive participation of diverse stakeholders, including local communities, in programme design and decision-making to ensure the relevance of the intervention design and implementation.
- Ensure there is gender diversity in the implementing team's composition.
- Ensure GESI-sensitive methods for dissemination of intervention outputs are developed. This includes applying community-based approaches and inclusive language and representation, and using multiple formats for dissemination.



Cost effectiveness and financial sustainability

- Demonstrate the intervention's cost effectiveness to provide evidence to decision makers operating under fiscal constraints. This should take account of the potential higher costs of reaching marginalised populations, while assessing the potential benefits of doing so.
- Ensure financial models are adaptable to provincial budget constraints and funding limitations.
- Secure diverse funding sources (provincial education foundations, private sector, NGOs) to reduce dependency on government budgets in pilot phases.
- Showcase value for money with equity considerations in terms of measurable long-term benefits, including for marginalised populations, rather than just focusing on low short-run costs.



Evidence-driven and adaptive scaling

- Implement robust monitoring, evaluation, and learning systems to track the effectiveness of implementation, including for those from marginalised backgrounds, to inform real-time adjustments that will ensure the effectiveness and equity of the scaling process.
- Use GESI-informed implementation science approaches that allow for adaptation based on emerging challenges.
- Document qualitative case studies to document evidence on the effects of the scaling process, including for marginalised groups, to attract government and donor support.
- Ensure data collection includes GESI variables to assess impact across different population groups.
- Leverage existing government data systems to enhance institutional decision-making and sustainability, where possible.

Source: Developed by authors based on documents and interviews analysed in the paper and informed by the MSI scaling checklist.

CONCLUSION

Scaling education interventions in Pakistan requires navigating a complex terrain of politics, resources, and system capacity. Success is contingent on political commitment, financial viability, institutional ownership, and inclusive design.

This policy brief highlights that scaling is not an afterthought but must be an integral component from the outset. Scaling is a dynamic, iterative process that requires ongoing adaptation, collaboration, and engagement with multiple stakeholders. It is not a linear path, nor is there a one-size-fits-all solution.

Effective scaling must integrate GESI considerations to ensure that all learners are included and benefit equitably. While contexts vary, the framework outlined in this report offers a useful guide for implementers aiming to design, pitch, embed, and expand their interventions in a way that is responsive, inclusive, and grounded in practical realities.

For more information

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This policy brief is a summary of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations of the scoping review on scalable education interventions in Pakistan which is available at: <https://darerc.org/resources/>
For more information about the DARE-RC programme please visit: <https://darerc.org/>