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PUBLIC EVIDENCE SERIES

UNICEF in Pakistan, 2000 to 2025, Volume III: Learn & Develop

Education, Learning and Equity. Twenty-Five Years for Children in Pakistan: An Independent Assessment

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About the Public Evidence Series

This knowledge product was independently initiated by the Centre for Social Analytics and Development Support (CSADS) under its Public Evidence Series. It was not commissioned, requested, reviewed or endorsed by any organization it covers and is not an official position of any of them. Drawing on public sources, it synthesizes what the evidence says about its subject, identifies where the evidence is too limited to support stronger claims, and considers implications for future policy, programming and planning. The Series offers briefs, reports, scorecards and notes that separate evidence from judgment. AI tools supported research and drafting, every statistic is traced to a cited source, and all content was reviewed by the principal investigator.

About this volume

Supporting documentation. Detailed technical evidence studies, analytical files and source level verification materials are maintained as supporting documentation and are available on request.

Volume III consolidates the verified evidence from the longer technical study Education, Learning and Equity in Pakistan, 2000 to 2025. It is designed for senior programme, evaluation, planning and government audiences who need a concise account of what changed, where UNICEF's contribution is most defensible, where evidence is mixed, and what the findings imply for future strategy.

The volume intentionally avoids treating UNICEF programme reach as equivalent to national education impact. It prioritizes government education statistics, household surveys, national assessment evidence, joint reviews and crisis response evidence, while using UNICEF programme reporting mainly to establish the organization's activities, geographic focus and intended mechanisms.

This revised edition rechecked the headline statistics against current official and harmonized sources in October 2026. Outcome claims remain bounded to 2000 to 2025. Where a source published after 2025 is used, it is identified as such and it describes a 2025 or earlier observation.

How to use this volume

Table 1 How to use this volume

Reader	Decisions this volume can inform	Start with
UNICEF education and emergency specialists	Where to concentrate effort on out of school children, foundational learning, early childhood education and continuity, and what claims are defensible	Key messages, Executive Summary, Sections 18 to 21
Federal and provincial education departments, PIE	Which UNICEF supported models have been adopted into public systems and what financing and data they need to persist	Sections 8, 12 and 19
Development partners and evaluators	How to separate reach, system contribution and population outcome in education programmes	Sections 1 to 3, 16 and 18; Annex A

Source: Author compilation

Abbreviations

Table 2 Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning
ALP	Alternative Learning Programme/Pathway

Abbreviation	Meaning
ECE	Early Childhood Education
EMIS	Education Management Information System
FLN	Foundational Literacy and Numeracy
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
ICT	Islamabad Capital Territory
NAT	National Achievement Test
NFE	nonformal Education
OOSC	Out of School Children
PIE	Pakistan Institute of Education
PSLM	Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement Survey
SMC/PTC	School Management Committee / Parent Teacher Council

Source: Author compilation

Executive Summary

KEY MESSAGES

- An estimated 25.15 million children aged 5 to 16, about 35 percent, were out of school in 2023 to 2024, and about 75 percent of ten year olds could not read a simple text before the pandemic, a figure estimated at 79 percent afterwards.
- UNICEF's clearest contribution is catalytic: Alternative Learning Pathways moved from fragmented provision toward more standardized provincial approaches (Grade A/B), but nonformal education still serves a small fraction of children out of school.
- Evidence for girls' education, early childhood education, foundational learning, data systems and community governance is weaker and graded B/C or below.
- Humanitarian and COVID continuity roles are well documented as service contributions, not as learning gains.
- For 2026 to 2030, the priorities are precision targeting of out of school children, measured learning recovery, government financed alternative learning and evidence designed into programmes.

Pakistan's education trajectory between 2000 and 2025 combines institutional expansion with persistent exclusion and a severe learning crisis. The school system became larger, constitutional recognition of the right to education strengthened the policy framework, provincial education systems gained greater responsibility after devolution, and education data and assessment systems became more visible. Yet the scale of unmet need remained exceptional. Pakistan Education Statistics 2023 to 2024 estimated about 25.15 million children aged 5 to 16 to be out of school, roughly 35 percent of the age group, with the burden concentrated among poor, rural, female, disabled, displaced and geographically marginalized children (Pakistan Institute of Education 2025a). At the same time, national and international learning evidence indicates that many children who are enrolled do not acquire foundational literacy and numeracy at the expected age. The central planning challenge is therefore no longer access alone, but the combination of access, progression, learning, equity and resilience.

This independent, non commissioned volume assesses what changed in Pakistan's education sector and what UNICEF can reasonably be said to have contributed. It does not treat national gains as UNICEF results. UNICEF operated within a crowded reform environment shaped by federal and provincial governments, constitutional reform, public financing, private provision, the World Bank, ADB, GPE, bilateral partners, civil society, demographic growth, poverty, conflict, displacement, COVID-19 and major climate shocks. The evidence is strongest when UNICEF's role can be traced to a specific model, system or institutional mechanism; it is weaker for national population outcomes where many actors and determinants overlap. Detailed technical evidence studies, analytical files and source level verification materials are maintained as supporting documentation and are available on request.

The clearest contribution case is Alternative Learning Pathways (ALP). The 2014 to 2015 joint review by UNICEF and the federal education ministry documented a fragmented nonformal education field, inconsistent definitions, uneven geographic alignment and weak transition arrangements. Subsequent support to accelerated curricula, facilitator preparation, learning materials, assessment and accreditation helped move ALP toward more standardized provincial approaches. This is best understood as a catalytic and system contribution rather than evidence that UNICEF reduced Pakistan's national OOSC burden. The latter remains far larger than the scale of UNICEF supported provision.

UNICEF's contribution to girls' education is substantial but shared. Its strongest value lies in targeted pathways for girls and adolescents facing distance, mobility, safety and social norm barriers, particularly through community based or alternative provision. However, national gender trends cannot be attributed to UNICEF because public investment, private schooling, demographic change, provincial policy and household decisions are powerful competing explanations.

Early childhood education became more visible in policy and programming, and UNICEF supported ECE models, standards, teacher development and school readiness approaches. Yet evidence of system contribution is less mature than for ALP because comparable longitudinal measures of ECE quality and school readiness remain limited, and provincial adoption is uneven. The volume therefore treats UNICEF's ECE contribution as plausible to substantial at the model and policy support level, while avoiding claims of national learning impact.

Foundational learning is the most important unresolved outcome challenge. UNICEF's recent FLN programming is well aligned with the problem, but programme reach does not establish learning effect. Stronger future claims will require comparable diagnostics, pre/post learning measurement, implementation fidelity data and credible comparison or dose response designs. The same discipline applies to education data and planning: Pakistan now has stronger EMIS, assessment and planning infrastructure, but the magnitude of UNICEF's specific contribution should not be overstated without jointly owned or independently corroborated evidence.

Humanitarian education is another area where UNICEF's role is clearly documented. Across earthquakes, floods, displacement and COVID-19, UNICEF supported continuity planning, temporary learning, supplies, reopening and remote learning modalities. The contribution is substantial for emergency service continuity and system adaptation, but emergency reach should not be equated with long run learning. COVID-19 demonstrated both the value and limits of digital continuity: remote platforms and television extended the response, while unequal access to devices, electricity, connectivity and adult support excluded many of the children most at risk.

The principal strategic conclusion is that UNICEF's comparative advantage is strongest where it connects evidence, demonstration and implementation support to government owned systems. For 2026 to 2030, the portfolio should prioritize precision targeting of OOSC, government financed ALP/NFE, measurable foundational learning recovery, ECE quality linked to school readiness, adolescent transition pathways, shock resilient education systems, and an exposure and results architecture that allows future evaluation to distinguish reach from durable outcome change.

Executive Contribution Ledger

Table 3 **Executive Contribution Ledger**

Outcome / system	Pakistan trajectory	UNICEF pathway	Evidence grade	Sustainability	Main caveat
Access and OOSC	System expanded; 25.15m children aged 5 to 16 estimated out of school in 2023 to 2024	Targeted access, ALP/ NFE, planning	B for supported pathways; no national attribution	Moderate	Scale of UNICEF reach is small relative to national need
Girls' education	Long run improvement, but rural/provincial gaps persist	Targeted girls' access, ALP, community mechanisms	B for supported pathways	Moderate	National gender trends have many drivers
Early childhood education	Greater policy recognition and provision	ECE standards, classroom models, teacher support	B/C	Moderate	Quality and school readiness outcomes incompletely measured
Foundational learning	Learning crisis remains severe	FLN models, teacher support, assessment use	C/B by mechanism	Moderate	Programme reach is not learning effect

Outcome / system	Pakistan trajectory	UNICEF pathway	Evidence grade	Sustainability	Main caveat
Alternative learning	More standardized provincial approaches	Evidence, accelerated curricula, accreditation, centres	A/B	Moderate to High	Scale remains far below OOSC need
Education data and planning	Stronger EMIS/assessment infrastructure	Technical support, planning, equity analysis	B/C	High	Magnitude of UNICEF specific role requires stronger pinning
COVID continuity	Mass disruption mitigated through mixed modalities	Response planning, remote learning, reopening	B	Moderate	Digital divide limited reach and effectiveness
Humanitarian education	Repeated shocks disrupted schooling	Temporary learning, supplies, sector coordination	B	Moderate	Emergency reach ≠ long run learning
School community governance	Expanded use of local structures	Capacity development, community school links	C/B	Mixed	Functionality and continuity vary
System resilience	Preparedness more explicit after COVID/floods	Continuity frameworks, DRR, resilient learning	B/C	Moderate	Durability under repeated shocks remains untested

Source: Verified Master Claim Evidence Contribution Ledger, Tier 1 verification pass

Part I: Framing the Learn & Develop Assessment

IN THIS PART

1. Why access, learning and development should be read together

2. Research questions and claim boundaries

3. Methodology and evidence hierarchy

1. Why access, learning and development should be read together

Education, learning and child development need to be read as a continuum rather than as separate programme categories. A child may enrol in primary school yet fail to progress because foundational skills are weak; an adolescent may complete primary grades but leave school because no accessible middle school pathway exists; an out of school child may enter an accelerated programme but still remain excluded if accreditation or transition arrangements are unclear. This continuum is particularly important in Pakistan, where the education system has expanded while demographic growth, poverty, gendered mobility constraints, provincial differences and repeated shocks have kept exclusion high.

UNICEF's education contribution should therefore be judged against several levels of change: direct service reach; improved access or continuation for defined groups; adoption or scale up of alternative delivery models; stronger standards, data or planning systems; and population level changes in enrolment, completion or learning. These levels are analytically distinct. Evidence that UNICEF supported an ALP centre or ECE classroom is an output or service contribution. Evidence that a province adopted an accelerated curriculum or accreditation framework is a catalytic or system contribution. Evidence that national OOSC prevalence declined would be a population outcome, but attribution to UNICEF would require much stronger causal evidence.

2. Research questions and claim boundaries

This volume asks four linked questions. First, how did education access, progression, learning and equity change in Pakistan between 2000 and 2025? Second, what education models, institutional systems and response mechanisms did UNICEF support over that period? Third, where is there credible evidence that UNICEF contributed to observed change, and where is evidence insufficient for stronger attribution? Fourth, what should UNICEF and government partners learn from twenty-five years of education programming for the next planning cycle?

Claims are bounded accordingly. National and provincial trends are treated as context unless a specific contribution pathway can be demonstrated. UNICEF annual reports are used primarily to document what the organization reports having supported, where and at what scale. Government statistics, household surveys, independent assessments and joint reviews carry greater weight for sector outcomes. Where evidence is mixed, the report uses calibrated language such as strong contribution evidence, substantial contribution, plausible contribution, mixed evidence, or activity documented but outcome contribution uncertain.

3. Methodology and evidence hierarchy

The assessment applies the same longitudinal contribution framework used across the broader Twenty-Five Years for Children initiative. It combines portfolio reconstruction, trend analysis, theory based contribution analysis, process tracing, system analysis, equity analysis and, in principle, geographic or quasi experimental comparison where exposure data are adequate. For education, the main units of analysis are national and provincial trends, programme/system mechanisms, selected populations such as OOSC and girls, and crisis episodes. The source hierarchy gives priority to government education statistics and surveys, joint or independent evaluations, national assessment evidence, recognized multilateral analysis, and then UNICEF programme records.

Indicator harmonization is essential. Enrolment, attendance, OOSC, completion and learning are not interchangeable. Administrative enrolment counts differ from household survey attendance measures; OOSC estimates depend on age definitions and denominators; NAT rounds use changing frameworks; and programme reach cannot be added across

years as if it represented unique children. The volume therefore avoids false precision and uses trend statements only where definitions are sufficiently comparable. Contribution grades are assigned after considering temporal fit, geographic fit, mechanism, scale, independent corroboration, alternative explanations and sustainability.

> Claim boundary National education trends are context. A UNICEF contribution claim requires a documented pathway linking UNICEF supported evidence, technical assistance, service delivery or system support to a specific institutional or child level result.

Part II: What Changed in Pakistan?

IN THIS PART

4. Access expanded, but OOSC remained exceptionally high

5. Gender and geographic inequity remained central

6. ECE gained policy prominence, but quality evidence remains limited

7. Foundational learning became the defining system challenge

4. Access expanded, but OOSC remained exceptionally high

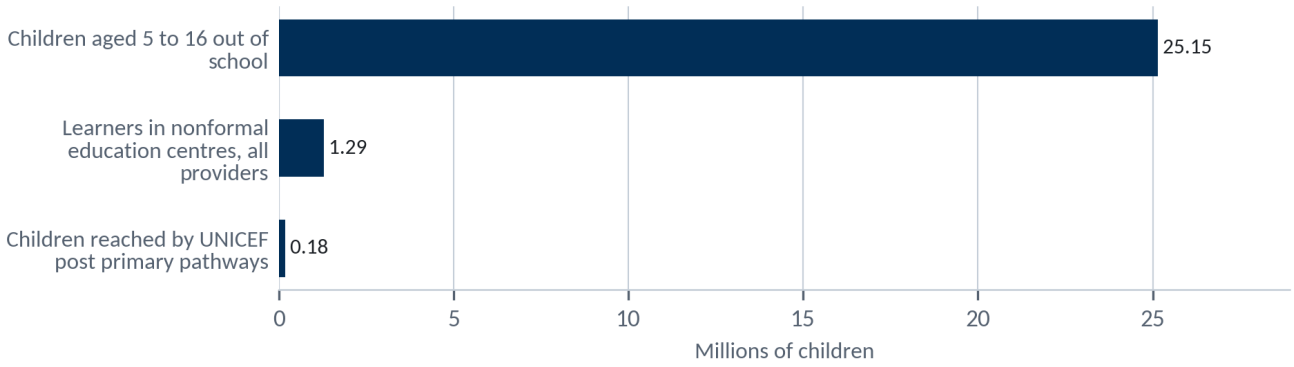
Access expanded over the twenty five year period, but demographic growth and weak retention meant that the absolute OOSC burden remained very large. PIE's 2023 to 2024 education statistics estimate 25.15 million children aged 5 to 16 to be out of school, around 35 percent of the relevant age group (Pakistan Institute of Education 2025a). This finding is central to interpreting sector progress: even a much larger education system has not absorbed a sufficient share of the school age population. The distribution is highly unequal, with much higher exclusion in Balochistan and Sindh than in Punjab or Islamabad Capital Territory.

OOSC is not a single population. It includes children who never enrol, those who enrol late, children who drop out, adolescents who cannot transition because nearby middle or secondary provision is absent, working children, children with disabilities, displaced children and girls whose schooling is constrained by safety, mobility or social norms. UNICEF's shift toward alternative pathways is therefore analytically appropriate, but the national scale of exclusion means ALP must be assessed as a system component rather than a marginal project modality.

The formal system expanded substantially in enrolment and institutional numbers, but progression through the education cycle remains a major weakness. The structure of the school network is still heavily weighted toward primary schools, meaning children who complete primary education can face reduced physical availability at middle and secondary levels. Household poverty, distance, transport, school quality and gender norms then compound the supply bottleneck. This helps explain why access indicators tend to be stronger at younger ages than among adolescents.

For contribution analysis, this means that UNICEF supported primary enrolment gains should not be treated as durable success unless children persist, transition and learn. Recent UNICEF programming has moved in this direction by supporting post primary alternative opportunities, afternoon schools, accelerated learning and adolescent skills. The shift is important because it reframes success from entry into school toward successful completion of a meaningful basic education pathway.

Figure 1 Scale of exclusion and scale of provision, 2023 to 2024



Source: Pakistan Institute of Education (2025a), Pakistan Education Statistics 2023 to 2024; Pakistan Institute of Education and JICA (2025), nonformal Education Report 2023 to 2024; UNICEF Pakistan (2024), reported 2023 reach. The sources use different definitions and years, so the comparison shows order of magnitude only.

5. Gender and geographic inequity remained central

Gender disparities narrowed over the period but remain pronounced in particular contexts. The national gap is the aggregate of very different local realities: girls in urban and wealthier households can perform as well as or better than boys on participation indicators, while poor rural girls in conservative or remote settings face compound disadvantage.

UNICEF's 2016 reporting highlighted the stark contrast between expected years of schooling among poor rural girls and wealthy urban girls, underscoring that gender interacts with poverty and geography rather than operating as an isolated variable (UNICEF Pakistan 2017).

This intersectional pattern affects programme design. Girls' access may require female teachers, safe transport, nearby post primary provision, separate sanitation facilities, community acceptance and flexible schedules. ALPs can reduce distance and age related barriers, but they may also risk becoming a second tier system if quality, accreditation and transition are weak. UNICEF's contribution is strongest where gender targeting is combined with recognized curriculum, progression routes and government ownership rather than where access is measured solely by enrolment in temporary centres.

Education inequality in Pakistan is multidimensional. Wealth determines whether households can absorb indirect schooling costs and forego child labour. Rural residence affects distance and school availability. Disability can interact with inaccessible infrastructure, teacher preparedness and social stigma. Language and displacement can reduce access to suitable instruction. Provincial averages therefore understate the concentration of disadvantage among children facing multiple deprivations.

UNICEF has consistently framed education through an equity lens, but stronger accountability requires more systematic outcome reporting for the most disadvantaged groups. Programme monitoring should show not only the share of girls but also disability status, poverty or deprivation proxies, rural/urban location, displacement status and prior schooling history where feasible. This would allow the organization and government partners to test whether ALP, ECE and learning programmes narrow gaps or simply raise averages.

> Interpretive point The national gender gap masks intersectional disadvantage. Poor rural girls in remote districts face a different education system from urban, wealthier girls; equity analysis therefore requires geography, poverty and gender to be read together.

6. ECE gained policy prominence, but quality evidence remains limited

ECE became substantially more visible in provincial policy and UNICEF programming during the latter half of the period. This reflects growing evidence that school readiness and early stimulation affect later participation and learning, especially for disadvantaged children. World Bank analysis shows large provincial differences in early child development before school entry (World Bank 2023). These differences indicate that early disadvantage is already established before formal primary schooling begins.

UNICEF has supported ECE policies, standards, classroom models, teacher development and expanded provision. In 2023, UNICEF reported 99,433 children benefiting from improved ECE services (UNICEF Pakistan 2024). The contribution case is therefore substantial at the model and system level. Population level impact is harder to establish because comparable longitudinal measures of ECE quality and school readiness remain limited and because provincial scale varies. Future evaluation should track whether ECE participation improves on time Grade 1 entry, attendance, retention and foundational learning rather than relying on ECE enrolment alone.

7. Foundational learning became the defining system challenge

Pakistan's central education challenge increasingly concerns learning rather than access alone. The World Bank estimated that around 75 percent of children could not read and understand a simple age appropriate paragraph by age ten, and estimated that the figure had risen to 79 percent after COVID-19 and the 2022 floods (World Bank 2023).

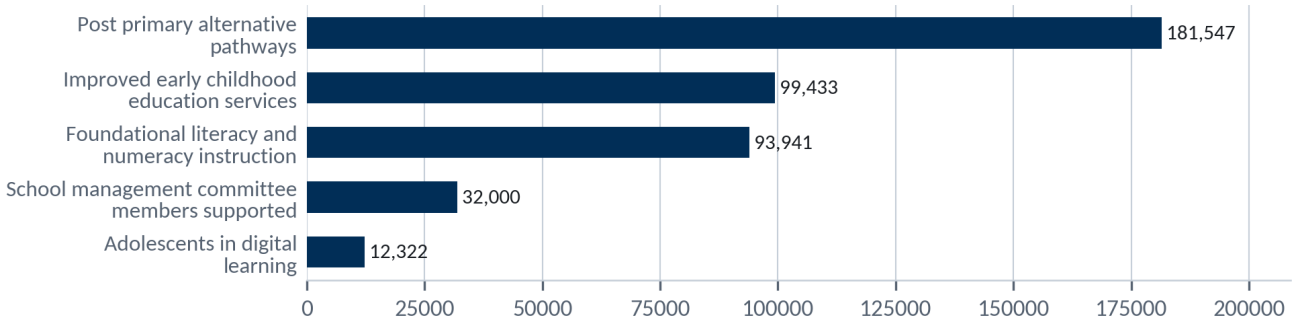
NAT, ASER and provincial assessment data similarly indicate weak literacy and numeracy and large socioeconomic disparities. These findings imply that expanding years of schooling without improving instructional quality will yield limited human capital gains.

UNICEF's recent emphasis on FLN is therefore strategically aligned with the problem. In 2023, targeted FLN instruction reached 93,941 children according to UNICEF reporting (UNICEF Pakistan 2024). However, evidence of reach is not equivalent to evidence of learning effect. The stronger future contribution claim would require pre/post learning measurement, comparison with business as usual instruction, teacher practice observation and sustained tracking. UNICEF is well positioned to help provinces strengthen this evaluability because it already supports assessment systems and data use.

Pakistan's National Achievement Test provides an important institutional asset for monitoring learning. PIE lists NAT rounds for 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2016 and 2023, although changes in frameworks and instruments constrain simple trend lines (Pakistan Institute of Education 2024). NAT 2023 renewed national attention to Grade 4 and Grade 8 performance across languages, mathematics and science. The existence of repeated national assessment itself represents progress in system capability: education authorities have greater capacity to discuss learning outcomes using evidence rather than enrolment proxies.

UNICEF's contribution to assessment is best understood as a systems role. Its current education strategy explicitly includes support to data and assessment systems and evidence based policy dialogue. Contribution is plausible to substantial where UNICEF can document technical inputs, tool development, capacity support or integration of assessment findings into planning. Attribution to national learning levels is not justified; assessment systems measure the problem but do not themselves improve instruction unless findings shape curriculum, teacher support and remediation.

Figure 2 Selected UNICEF supported education outputs reported for 2023



Source: UNICEF Pakistan (2024a), Annual Report 2023. These are programme outputs, not unique children and not population impact estimates.

Part III: What Did UNICEF Contribute?

IN THIS PART

8. Alternative Learning Pathways: the strongest catalytic case

9. Girls' education and adolescent pathways

10. Early childhood education

11. Foundational learning and assessment

12. Education data, planning and system use

13. Community governance and local accountability

14. COVID-19 continuity and digital learning

15. Humanitarian education and system resilience

8. Alternative Learning Pathways: the strongest catalytic case

Alternative learning is the clearest case in which UNICEF's role can be traced from evidence generation to programme design and system development. The 2014 to 2015 national review found a fragmented field with multiple providers, inconsistent definitions and uneven geographic alignment with OOSC need. UNICEF and the federal ministry used the review to identify gaps in provision and issues of curriculum, quality and transition (UNICEF and Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training 2015). Subsequent UNICEF support helped provinces develop or expand accelerated curricula, facilitator training, learning materials, assessments and accreditation arrangements.

UNICEF's 2025 reporting records 71,000 out of school adolescents enrolled in accelerated learning pathways during the year (UNICEF Pakistan 2026). Yet nonformal education still serves only a small fraction of Pakistan's OOSC: the national nonformal education report for 2023 to 2024 records 35,427 centres serving over 1.29 million learners across all providers, against about 25.15 million children out of school (Pakistan Institute of Education and JICA 2025; Pakistan Institute of Education 2025a). The appropriate contribution grade is therefore A/B for model development and system institutionalization, but C for population level reduction of OOSC because scale remains insufficient relative to need.

> Contribution judgement, A/B Strong evidence supports UNICEF contribution to ALP evidence generation, model development and system standardization. The claim should not be extended to national OOSC reduction without stronger exposure and counterfactual evidence.

9. Girls' education and adolescent pathways

UNICEF's education portfolio has maintained a long standing focus on girls, evolving from primary enrolment acceleration toward broader pathways for adolescent participation. In areas where middle schools are distant or social norms limit mobility, ALP centres, afternoon schools and community based models can create a politically and socially feasible route back into education. The 2023 country office results stand out in this respect: 61 percent of the 181,547 children and adolescents reached through post primary alternative pathways and related opportunities were girls (UNICEF Pakistan 2024).

This is substantial programme evidence but still leaves two evaluative questions. First, do girls complete the accelerated pathway and transition into recognized education, skills or employment routes? Second, do interventions alter structural barriers or merely create temporary exceptions? Contribution is strongest where government institutionalizes the model, recruits or recognizes facilitators, finances continuation and ensures certification. Programme monitoring should therefore move from enrolment counts toward completion, transition and subsequent participation.

10. Early childhood education

UNICEF has contributed to ECE through policy dialogue, standards, curriculum support, classroom development and teacher capacity. The pathway from technical support to provincial adoption is consistent with UNICEF's system strengthening mandate. ECE is also strategically important for equity because benefits are potentially largest for children whose home environments offer fewer learning resources. The contribution claim is strongest where UNICEF supported standards are incorporated into provincial planning and teacher systems rather than implemented only in project classrooms.

The evidence base nevertheless needs strengthening. Existing reports document reach and institutional activities but provide limited independent evidence of sustained child development or Grade 1 learning effects at scale. A future longitudinal design could link ECE exposure to school entry age, early grade attendance and foundational learning, using provincial EMIS or sample based assessments. This would move the evidence from plausible system contribution toward stronger impact evidence.

> Contribution judgement, B/C Evidence supports UNICEF activity and plausible system contribution in ECE, but provincial adoption, implementation quality and longitudinal school readiness outcomes need stronger independent corroboration.

11. Foundational learning and assessment

UNICEF's FLN contribution is relatively recent but potentially high value because foundational learning has become a binding constraint on the returns to schooling. UNICEF supports targeted instruction, learning materials, teacher capacity and assessment. The 2023 reach of nearly 94,000 children demonstrates a meaningful programme footprint, but the main value of FLN programming should be measured through learning gains per child and the extent to which approaches are incorporated into routine teaching.

The strongest contribution pathway would be catalytic: test an evidence based instructional model; measure learning; adapt it to provincial curricula; develop teacher support tools; embed assessment in routine systems; and support government scale up. Public evidence currently supports Grade B/C, substantial alignment and documented activity, but limited independent population level corroboration of learning effects.

12. Education data, planning and system use

Data system strengthening is one of UNICEF's most durable potential contributions because it can change how government allocates resources and identifies excluded children. UNICEF's education strategy explicitly includes equity focused provincial sector planning, budgeting, data and assessment systems. Over the period, Pakistan's education evidence infrastructure became markedly stronger: historical administrative reports were consolidated, EMIS matured, NAT was institutionalized, nonformal education statistics became more visible and school GIS/data standardization initiatives expanded.

Attribution for this system evolution is shared among government and multiple development partners. UNICEF's contribution is strongest when specific technical products, standards or planning tools can be traced to its support. The sustainability test is whether systems remain operational, are financed domestically and influence decisions. A data platform that is updated but not used for targeting is an output; a system that identifies dropout risk or OOSC concentrations and triggers resource allocation represents a meaningful institutional outcome.

Across the evidence, UNICEF's strongest education role is not that of a parallel service provider. It is most credible as a broker between evidence, models and public systems. This pattern appears in ALP reviews and accelerated learning frameworks, in support to ECE standards, in learning continuity planning, and in the use of equity and deprivation evidence to shape targeting. The system contribution is strongest when an intervention leaves behind recognized curricula, standards, accreditation, planning tools, trained government or local cadres, or financing arrangements that continue after project funding.

However, system adoption should not be treated as synonymous with implementation quality. A framework can be approved while centres remain underfinanced, facilitators poorly supported, assessments inconsistently used or transition pathways weak. For future accountability, UNICEF should report not only policy or model adoption but also implementation fidelity, domestic budget execution, workforce continuity, learning outcomes and transition rates.

13. Community governance and local accountability

School Management Committees, Parent Teacher Councils and related community structures have been recurring mechanisms in UNICEF supported education. Their intended functions include increasing enrolment, monitoring attendance, supporting safe school practices, improving accountability and strengthening community ownership. During emergencies, these structures can also disseminate information and support reopening. UNICEF's 2023 reporting noted capacity support to more than 32,000 School Management Committee members, 44 percent of them women (UNICEF Pakistan 2024).

The evidence on committee effectiveness is mixed globally and in Pakistan. Formal existence does not guarantee influence over teachers, budgets or school quality. The contribution claim should therefore focus on strengthened participation mechanisms rather than assumed learning effects. Sustainability depends on clear mandates, recurring government support, transparent school information and meaningful decision rights rather than one off training.

14. COVID-19 continuity and digital learning

COVID-19 created the largest simultaneous education disruption of the review period. UNICEF supported national and provincial education authorities to design continuity approaches using television, smartphones, WhatsApp, take home packages and catch up learning. The national TeleSchool platform reached millions of households according to government reporting, while UNICEF directly supported alternate learning opportunities for a much smaller number. In KP, learning packages distributed through more than 33,000 schools potentially reached an estimated 4.5 million students; in Balochistan, home based and WhatsApp supported arrangements extended learning into households (UNESCO and UNICEF 2021).

The key evaluative lesson is that reach varied sharply by technology, wealth, location and household support. The UNESCO and UNICEF case study found significant access inequalities, reinforcing the need for high tech, low tech and no tech modalities (UNESCO and UNICEF 2021). Contribution is substantial for national planning, safe reopening and diversified continuity architecture. Evidence is insufficient to claim that these mechanisms prevented learning loss at population scale. Future shock response evaluation should measure engagement and learning, not merely distribution of content.

Digital education expanded during and after COVID-19. UNICEF supported digitized curricula, provincial learning applications, remote specialized subjects and Learning Passport related approaches. In 2023, 12,322 adolescents in Balochistan, KP and Sindh reportedly benefited from digital learning, including remote access to specialized subjects where teachers were unavailable (UNICEF Pakistan 2024). The potential is significant for remote communities and for system resilience.

Digital learning also carries equity risks. Device access, connectivity, language, electricity and digital literacy are uneven, and technology can deepen exclusion if it substitutes for rather than complements accessible teaching. The strongest UNICEF contribution would therefore be in blended and offline compatible models, open standards, teacher capacity and rigorous evidence of learning. At present the contribution grade is C: promising and strategically relevant, but not yet supported by sufficiently strong outcome evidence at national scale.

15. Humanitarian education and system resilience

UNICEF's education in emergencies role has been recurrent rather than episodic. The 2005 earthquake required rapid reopening and temporary learning spaces. The 2010 floods displaced children and damaged schools across a wide geographic area. Conflict related displacement in KP and former FATA created additional interruptions. The 2022 floods again damaged schools and displaced communities, while subsequent climate events reinforced the need for resilient infrastructure and continuity protocols. Humanitarian reach is documented in UNICEF Pakistan (2025).

UNICEF's strongest humanitarian contribution is dual: direct education services and coordination/system continuity. Temporary learning spaces, materials and teacher support can prevent prolonged exclusion, while sector leadership helps government and partners organize needs assessments, standards and geographic coverage. Long term impact should be assessed through return to school, retention, recovery of learning and whether reconstructed systems are more resilient to future shocks. Humanitarian reach figures alone are therefore graded as direct outputs; durable institutional preparedness is a higher level system outcome.

Part IV: Attribution, Sustainability and Learning

IN THIS PART

16. Government and partner contribution

17. Structural constraints and shocks

18. Mixed results and accountability

19. What scaled and what was sustained

20. What UNICEF could do differently

21. Priorities for 2026 to 2030

16. Government and partner contribution

Government is the primary duty bearer and the dominant causal actor in Pakistan's education system. Article 25A, provincial education laws, teacher recruitment, school construction, curriculum reform, examinations, public financing and administrative management shape population outcomes at a scale far beyond any individual development partner. Provincial governments also vary substantially in implementation capacity and reform priorities. UNICEF contribution must therefore be situated inside government led systems, not represented as a parallel delivery architecture.

This distinction is particularly important for models that UNICEF helps design but government subsequently scales. In such cases, the most credible UNICEF claim is catalytic contribution: UNICEF supplied evidence, technical assistance, demonstration, capacity or initial financing that helped government adopt an approach. The population outcome then reflects government implementation plus broader contextual factors.

The World Bank, Asian Development Bank, Global Partnership for Education, bilateral agencies including the European Union, FCDO, JICA and others have financed or technically supported education reforms across provinces. Civil society and private schools have also expanded significantly. These actors affect school availability, teacher systems, learning interventions, girls' education, infrastructure, testing and nonformal education. In several provinces UNICEF operates within the same reform ecosystem, making organization specific attribution difficult.

Private schooling is a particularly important alternative explanation for changes in enrolment and household education choices. Its growth can increase access where government provision is weak but may also reinforce inequality when fees or location exclude poorer households. National access trends therefore cannot be interpreted as evidence of public sector or UNICEF effectiveness without considering changes in private supply.

Pakistan's child population grew substantially during the period, meaning the education system had to expand rapidly simply to prevent access rates from deteriorating. Poverty influences direct and opportunity costs, especially for adolescents. Child labour, domestic responsibilities and seasonal work can reduce attendance even when schools are nominally available. Urbanization can improve proximity to schools but also create large underserved informal settlements. These structural drivers explain why programmes that successfully enrol thousands of children can coexist with a national OOSC burden in the tens of millions.

Education financing has remained a structural constraint. PIE's recent work on public financing and UNICEF's education analysis both emphasize that recurrent costs absorb the overwhelming majority of expenditure, leaving limited fiscal space for infrastructure, teacher development, learning materials, innovation and system strengthening. UNICEF supports budget dialogue, equity focused planning and evidence based advocacy, but direct attribution from advocacy to total government spending is difficult because fiscal outcomes reflect macroeconomic conditions, provincial revenue, political choices and competing sectors. Provisional estimates suggest education spending fell to 0.8 percent of GDP between July 2024 and March 2025, and in real terms provincial allocations stagnated or declined across 2019 to 2020 and 2023 to 2024 in most provinces (Pakistan Institute of Education 2025b).

The more defensible contribution claim concerns allocative quality: helping provincial plans identify marginalized populations, cost alternative pathways and connect budgets to sector priorities. Future evidence should trace whether UNICEF supported planning recommendations alter budget composition, execution or per child allocations in disadvantaged districts. Without this link, public finance advocacy remains plausible rather than demonstrated contribution.

17. Structural constraints and shocks

Conflict and insecurity shaped education access in KP, former FATA and parts of Balochistan during multiple periods. School destruction, displacement, restrictions on mobility and threats to education personnel affected both supply and household willingness to send children, especially girls, to school. These factors create strong confounding in geographic comparisons. A district with intensive UNICEF support may have worse outcomes than an apparently comparable district because it was selected precisely due to greater insecurity or displacement.

The 2005 earthquake, 2010 floods, repeated localized disasters and 2022 floods disrupted education trajectories and infrastructure. Climate shocks can increase dropout through displacement, income loss and damage to schools even after facilities reopen. They also alter government budgets and donor flows. Contribution assessment must therefore separate emergency restoration from long run education improvement and treat exposure to major shocks as an explicit contextual variable in district or provincial comparisons.

18. Mixed results and accountability

The coexistence of extensive programming and persistent exclusion reflects several scale and system constraints. First, the population requiring support is enormous. Second, formal school expansion is expensive and recurrent costs already dominate budgets. Third, many barriers occur outside the classroom, including poverty, norms and child work. Fourth, weak foundational learning reduces perceived returns and increases dropout. Fifth, education responsibilities are decentralized across systems with uneven capacity. Finally, shocks repeatedly destroy infrastructure and interrupt attendance.

These constraints do not negate programme contribution, but they change how success should be judged. A technically effective ALP model may produce strong learning and transition for participants while remaining too small to shift the national OOSC rate. Conversely, national improvements may occur where UNICEF has little direct presence because government or other actors drive change. The report therefore separates programme effectiveness, catalytic scale and population effect.

Several findings require caution. OOSC remains extremely high despite decades of access programming. Foundational learning is weak despite curriculum and teacher reforms. Digital learning expanded but excluded many children without connectivity or devices. nonformal education has grown but remains underresourced relative to the size of the target population. Provincial disparities remain severe, particularly in Balochistan and parts of Sindh. These are not peripheral caveats; they are central findings about the limits of existing strategies.

The implication is that UNICEF should avoid framing reach as equivalent to resolution of the problem. Institutional reporting should pair output numbers with denominators and trajectories: number reached versus number in need; completion and transition rates; learning gain; persistence after programme support ends; and whether government financing increased. This would strengthen accountability and make successes more meaningful.

For external accountability, the education volume should make three distinctions explicit. First, UNICEF can credibly claim contribution to specific models, evidence products, institutional mechanisms and humanitarian responses where its role is documented. Second, UNICEF should claim national access, learning or gender improvements cautiously because the sector is dominated by government financing, private provision, development partner overlap and demographic forces. Third, where outcomes remain poor, such as OOSC and foundational learning, the correct conclusion is not that programming had no value, but that scale, fidelity, financing and structural constraints prevented programme activity from translating into sufficient population level change.

A stronger results architecture would therefore connect each major UNICEF supported intervention to a denominator, an exposure registry, a defined outcome, a comparison or expected counterfactual where feasible, and a sustainability indicator. This would allow future country programme reviews to distinguish whether a promising model worked, whether it reached enough children, whether government adopted it, and whether adoption produced measurable system or child level improvement.

19. What scaled and what was sustained

The strongest lessons concern approaches that combine targeted access with system integration. ALPs are more credible when they use recognized curricula, trained facilitators, assessment and transition routes. ECE is stronger when standards, teacher support and monitoring are embedded in provincial systems. Humanitarian education works best when temporary access is linked to reopening and recovery rather than treated as a standalone service. Data investments have greatest value when they change targeting and budget decisions. Across these cases, UNICEF's comparative advantage lies in connecting field level demonstration with policy and system change.

Scale occurred most plausibly where government adopted or operationalized a UNICEF supported model. Alternative learning moved from scattered projects toward more standardized provincial approaches. ECE gained policy status and expanded within sector plans. COVID era continuity frameworks influenced system preparedness beyond individual UNICEF beneficiaries. Assessment and planning tools reached system scale by definition. Yet true national scale remains constrained by financing, administrative capacity and the magnitude of need.

System functions such as data collection, sector planning and assessment appear more sustainable than project based service delivery. Provincial ALP and ECE frameworks also show institutional persistence, although implementation quality and financing are uneven. Temporary humanitarian centres and externally funded learning sites are less sustainable unless they transition into government provision or connect learners to recognized pathways. Sustainability therefore depends less on the duration of UNICEF funding than on whether responsibilities, budgets, workforce and monitoring become part of government routines.

20. What UNICEF could do differently

The long term evidence suggests four areas where UNICEF could have generated stronger results or stronger evidence. First, programme exposure data should have been retained more systematically at school, community and district levels, including start and end dates, intensity and comparison locations. Second, learning outcomes should have been measured more consistently across access programmes, particularly ALPs and ECE. Third, transition and completion should have received greater emphasis relative to enrolment. Fourth, public finance work could have been linked more explicitly to tracking whether equity priorities translated into executed domestic budgets.

A fifth issue is scale strategy. UNICEF has often supported strong models in a context where need is orders of magnitude larger than programme reach. From the outset, pilots should therefore specify the institutional and fiscal conditions for government scale up, including unit costs, workforce requirements and the intended transition from external to domestic financing. Without such design, successful projects risk remaining islands of quality.

21. Priorities for 2026 to 2030

1. Build a national/provincial OOSC precision targeting architecture that links census, household, EMIS, NFE and local administrative data while protecting privacy.

2. Prioritize foundational learning recovery as a measurable outcome, with common diagnostic tools, teacher support and transparent learning gain reporting.
3. Scale government owned ALP/NFE with explicit completion, accreditation, mainstreaming and post programme transition indicators.
4. Link ECE investment to school readiness and early grade outcomes rather than participation alone.
5. Design shock resilient education systems around offline capable blended learning, resilient facilities, teacher preparedness and preagreed continuity protocols.
6. Strengthen education public finance analytics at provincial and district level, including equity weighted per child spending and budget execution.
7. Require exposure registries for major UNICEF supported education interventions so future evaluations can conduct credible geographic and dose response analysis.
8. Use programme monitoring to report denominators, not only reach: children served as a share of children in need, alongside completion and learning outcomes.
9. Integrate disability, displacement, poverty and rurality more systematically into equity monitoring.
10. Institutionalize evaluation partnerships with PIE, provincial assessment bodies and universities to create independent evidence on learning and transition.

Action matrix by time horizon

The matrix groups the ten priorities into eight actions. Grades are those of the underlying pathway in the Executive Contribution Ledger.

Table 4 **Action matrix by time horizon**

Priority	Lead actors	Immediate (next 12 months)	Medium term (1 to 3 years)	Longer term (3 to 5 years)	Evidence grade
1. Precision targeting of OOSC	PIE; provincial education departments; UNICEF	Link census, EMIS, NFE and administrative data under privacy rules	Identify who is out of school, why, and which pathway is feasible	Use the register to allocate resources	B (supported pathways)
2. Foundational learning recovery	Provincial assessment bodies; UNICEF	Adopt common diagnostics and baseline measures	Report learning gains with fidelity measures	Embed in routine teaching support	C/B
3. Government financed ALP and NFE	Provincial education departments; UNICEF	Cost accredited curricula, completion and transition tracking	Move centres toward predictable domestic financing	Mainstream accreditation and transition routes	A/B (model)
4. ECE quality and readiness	Provincial ECE units; UNICEF	Define quality and school readiness measures	Track on time Grade 1 entry and early grade learning	Link ECE exposure to learning outcomes	B/C
5. Shock resilient education	Provincial authorities; UNICEF	Preagree continuity protocols	Build offline capable blended learning	Test resilience across repeated shocks	B
6. Education public finance analytics	Finance departments; PIE; UNICEF	Compute equity weighted per child spending	Track budget execution by district	Test whether planning advice changed allocations	C
7. Exposure, denominators and equity monitoring	UNICEF; provincial education departments	Record exposure, start dates and intensity; report served share of children in need	Add disability, displacement, poverty and rurality	Enable dose response evaluation	Design decision
8. Evaluation partnerships	PIE; universities; assessment bodies	Agree learning and transition evaluation questions	Run independent studies	Publish findings	Not applicable

Source: Author synthesis of the evidence reviewed in this report

Conclusion

Over twenty-five years, Pakistan built a larger and more policy aware education system, yet universal access and foundational learning remained unresolved. The evidence supports the strongest UNICEF contribution claims where the organization helped connect evidence, models and technical support to government systems, most clearly through alternative learning, targeted access pathways and crisis response mechanisms. Evidence is weaker for national outcomes such as OOSC reduction, gender parity and learning gains because the sector is shaped by government financing, private provision, multiple development partners and deep socioeconomic constraints.

For future planning, the key lesson is to judge education programmes by whether they change durable pathways: who enters, who progresses, who learns, who transitions, whether government finances the model, and whether results persist after external support recedes. A more evaluable country programme would therefore place exposure, outcomes, equity and sustainability at the centre of design rather than relying primarily on reach.

Annex A: Contribution grading summary

Table 5 Annex A: Contribution grading summary

Grade	Meaning	Interpretation
A	Strong contribution evidence	UNICEF role and mechanism are well documented and independently or formally corroborated.
B	Substantial contribution evidence	UNICEF contribution is well supported but shared with government/partners or affected by important alternative explanations.
C	Plausible contribution	UNICEF activity and a credible mechanism are documented, but outcome linkage or scale is insufficient for a stronger judgement.
D	Activity documented; outcome contribution uncertain	Programme activity is known but evidence linking it to outcome change is weak.
E	Mixed or contrary evidence	Outcome trends, implementation evidence or sustainability raise material doubt about the intended contribution pathway.

Source: Author synthesis of the evidence reviewed in this report

Status of the verification gate. Of the nine Tier 1 education claims in the cross series ledger, two have cleared the external use gate with calibrated wording (alternative learning and humanitarian education), four are conditional on pinning exact source locations (access and participation, girls' education, COVID continuity and system resilience), and three are on hold (early childhood education, education data and planning, and school community governance). The volume already grades the held claims at B/C or below.

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About the Team and Collaborators

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Ahmad Nadeem is a development professional with 25 years' experience in programme implementation, communication, resource mobilization, research and AI integration. He has led donor funded projects, helped organizations secure funding and advised on implementation. His work has involved the World Bank, European Commission, ILO, UNICEF, UNDP, UN Women, OHCHR, USIP, GCF, KfW, Government of Italy and the Canadian High Commission. At the Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund and the Pakistan Centre for Philanthropy, he engaged, advised and supervised a wide range of development sector organizations, including charities, microfinance institutions, private universities, NGOs and INGOs, and worked with government bodies such as the Federal Board of Revenue, NACTA and social welfare departments. He has also worked on projects involving parliamentarians, law enforcement agencies, the National Police Bureau, police training colleges and churches. He is visiting faculty at Quaid-e-Azam University and SZABIST, holds an MPhil (Gold Medal, Iqra University) and a certificate (LUMS, McGill), and leads CSADS and Manāra.

Centre for Social Analytics and Development Support (CSADS)

The Centre for Social Analytics and Development Support (CSADS), established in 2023, is a research and advisory centre that uses artificial intelligence to generate evidence for informed policy, programme and strategic decisions. It serves public institutions, private sector organizations, UN agencies, INGOs and other development stakeholders, and makes research accessible to the media, students, parents and communities. It also helps organizations adopt AI responsibly, combining credible sources, transparent methods, human expertise and ethical safeguards. Within the Series, CSADS leads research design, source verification and final quality assurance. www.csads.org

Manāra Policy and Practice

Manāra is a strategic design and advisory practice that bridges evidence and action across critical development and institutional challenges. It works globally at the intersection of government, development organizations and the private sector, where efforts converge to generate social impact, mobilize capital and advance equity. Through policy analysis, systems thinking, strategic design, development finance advisory and public communication, it delivers solutions grounded in rigorous research, contextual realities and international best practices. www.manarapolicy.com

CivicFrames

CivicFrames is a creative knowledge communication initiative founded by Danyal Nadeem, a student of media sciences and an aspiring storyteller. It translates credible research into accessible creative forms, bridging the gap between data and public understanding. It explores how evidence can reach people through music, poetry and stories. Danyal intends to learn how creative formats can help evidence travel. Within the Series, it helps make findings easier to understand and share. www.civicframes.org