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Education for Development in Northern Pakistan: Opportunities and Constraints for Rural Households

By Andreas Benz. Karachi, Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 2014. xxxii + 434 pp. PKR 1850.00, £ 27.99, US$ 45.00. ISBN 978-0-19-906917-0.

Gilgit-Baltistan represents something of an enigma in the area of development policy and practice for not only Pakistan, but also South and Central Asia. Despite its isolation and impoverishments, its regional literacy and primary, secondary, and even university education completion rates rival and often surpass those found in the wealthiest and most developed areas of Pakistan and are comparable to the highest rates in Asia. As a consequence of intensive development investments in the region since the 1970s by the government and the Ismaili Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) and its many subsidiaries, including the Aga Khan Education Services (AKES), the global development literature characterizes Gilgit-Baltistan as being symbolic of the successes of development, an exemplar of progress and modernity. However, such depictions are not without their challenges or debates, as the complex realities of educational development in the region confirm. By seeking out the factors that underpin, shape, and sometimes confound educational advancements, Benz's monograph provides a timely empirical evaluation and much-needed critique of education as an experienced and enacted vehicle for development.

Benz employed diverse data collection strategies in his fieldwork to generate 3 empirical village case studies that reflected the realities of education in the region's Ismaili, Shia, and Sunni Muslim communities. Using questionnaire survey and qualitative interview techniques, and by drawing on hitherto underexplored regional archival, scholarly, and reporting materials, his work was guided by 2 primary questions: what new opportunities are afforded by education and produce improved living conditions; and what are the risks and constraints that threaten the successful realization of education strategies and outcomes?

In answering, Benz investigated how household members in each village responded to educational opportunities and disentangled the complex reasons behind the educational disparities within households and according to gender, socioeconomic status, and sectarian affiliation. Through his comparative approach, he was well positioned to evaluate the distinctive ways in which each sectarian community subscribes to education as a means of modernization, capable of producing economic uplift for individuals, households, and communities alike. He found his participants drawn to education for ideological, pragmatic, and aspirational reasons and that education was positively associated with improved social status and advancement, increased employment, and more income opportunities. He also confirms how educational initiatives, such as those developed by AKES and preferred by Ismaili communities, have enhanced sectarian bonds of affiliation and collective well-being.

The Introduction summarizes the monograph's overall objectives and establishes the broader history and context of Pakistan's educational sector development, policy, and programming. In the earliest days of the nation, education—particularly scientific and technical studies—was conceived as a means to energize Pakistan's development and thereby fulfill its growing socioeconomic, industrial, and technical needs. Yet despite Pakistan's growing economic power, its national educational developments and indicators have lagged behind those of almost every other Asian country. Benz confirms that the past and ongoing crisis of public education expenditures have hinged on the government's lack of political commitment, and its prioritization of other sectors—the military in particular. State disinvestments have led to rural educational indicators and literacy rates falling far behind urban rates, and male students continue to outnumber female students. For this reason, Gilgit-Baltistan and its educational achievements, especially in terms of high regional rates of female school enrollments, attendance, and literacy, stand as a paradoxical exception to the inconsistencies and failings found elsewhere in the country.

Chapter 1 provides a cogent summary of the roles played by modernization and dependency theories in shaping educational initiatives and discusses the economic propositions, human capital approaches, and education "optimistic" and "sceptic" theories that Benz applied to predict for, as well as assess, successful or "failed" educational outcomes. He then discusses the sociology of education and its use of functionalist and social reproduction theories, and reviews how these diverse theoretical perspectives shaped his research and necessitated a dialectical approach. Chapters 2 and 3 summarize the key concepts, frameworks, and methodologies that guided the study design and structured the fieldwork and data analysis. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 provide a detailed introduction to the village field sites in Ghizer, Hunza-Nagar, and Skardu Districts, discuss the evolution and changing nature of national and regional educational systems, and evaluate the state of local education according to regional and historical perspectives. Chapter 5 provides a diligent evaluation of disparities in educational enrolment and levels, and tracks the reasons behind the region's rapid educational transition from "illiteracy to Master Degrees."

Chapters 6 and 7 shift from a macrolevel discussion of regional

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education systems to explore the interrelationships between livelihood strategies and household educational decision-making, and are among the strongest chapters. Benz illuminates the complex range of gendered, cultural, and economic considerations and concerns that inform how household members strategically select educational systems and use education as a tool by which they can adapt to processes of socioeconomic change. In so doing, Benz elucidates the field of possibilities associated with education and that drive decision making and the selection of particular schools, fields, and types of study, whether in Gilgit-Baltistan or elsewhere in Pakistan. He also foregrounds how householders calculate and determine which members should continue their studies.

The Conclusion reiterates the significance of the findings and reminds us of the importance of research that addresses the ways that striking educational successes can occur even in contexts marked by inequality and scarcity. Benz advocates for additional research, policy, and planning to identify and reduce the disparities that stubbornly remain despite development or that are produced by development itself. By revealing how educational strategies and investments contribute to larger patterns of student acceptance, educational attainments, and posteducational outcomes, Benz provides key insights into the reasons for educational disparities among and between households, rural and urban areas, districts, and sectarian communities. He cautions that, unless educational disparities are resolved by the judiciously equitable allocation of educational services, they are likely to further exacerbate the region's already deepening educational and socioeconomic divide and fuel the continuation of resource-based competitions and conflicts.

Few previous studies had delineated the complex historical and structural forces associated with education across the region or assessed the traditional constraints placed on education at the household level. Such studies had also sidestepped analysis of the deeply complex and sometimes contentious social, economic, and political conditions in which education, as a form of development, becomes socially acceptable not only among progressive Ismailis, but also among more conservative Shia and Sunni households. Benz made the invaluable decision to evaluate the structuring impacts of socioeconomic status, labor, livelihood strategies, and gender on educational uptake and to explore the degree to which Ismaili, Shia, and Sunni households share or differ in their views on education, adopt education-seeking strategies, or partake in the beneficial outcomes of education as a type of development. Given the rise of regional Shia-Sunni conflicts over the last decade, this reviewer wishes that he had also analyzed the ways that sectarian dissonances and enmities, which are socially and politically enacted, determine the social acceptability, distribution, and accessibility of sectarian and intersectarian educational institutions and services throughout Gilgit-Baltistan.

This monograph provides a richly detailed, coherent, and compelling evaluation of educational systems and the complex motives driving householders' educational aspirations and decision making. Its clear exposition ensures that it will be of use to regional, national, and international scholars and practitioners, as well as undergraduate and graduate students, in the areas of education, policy and planning, development studies, and the anthropologies and sociologies of education and of Pakistan. Notwithstanding widespread poverty, resource deficiencies, and the state's uneven governance of the region, Gilgit-Baltistan's remarkable educational achievements confirm the readiness and aptitude of Pakistan's most disenfranchised and logistically unsupported communities, and reaffirms the unique nature of its experience of development.

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