Pakistan has been facing a plethora of challenges which have impacted the education sector massively. Among these challenges, out of school children, learning losses due to unprecedented circumstances such as COVID-19, the monster floods, displacements etc. and the overall learning poverty in the education sector, especially foundational learning have resulted in many setbacks.

For this reason, a cross sectoral coalition has emerged in Pakistan which aims to work on combatting learning losses and learning poverty in terms of foundational learning. The goals, targets as well as strategy and plan of action is discussed here in detail. Under the South-South Fellowship ‘All Children Learning’, is the main goal and agenda for the coalition.

One of the core features under this agenda are the geographically designated clusters within one or more provinces. These clusters are identified through a systematic evidence-based approach by the South-South Fellows/institutions covering, demographics, learning poverty in foundational learning, socio-economic profiles and education institutions present in areas. The clusters chosen from Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are Muzaffargarh and Swabi respectively.

This tale begins from two villages from these clusters which are to become a part of the history of education and reforms in Pakistan; Sadri Jadid in Swabi and Ali Pur Shumali in Murdabad, Muzaffargarh. These two schools may be considered small towns located in two of the bigger provinces and even districts but the villages present some great challenges concerning foundational learning and education. This makes these villages unique because they are more or less like two cogs in the larger systemic wheel.

Furthermore, it is also very thought-provoking to observe that while both villages are distinct due to the geographies, socio-cultural dispositions and even to some extent political facets, both of them have some sharp similarities relating to socio-economic, development and educational structures.

Taking a broader look at the two villages, one gets a clearer picture of what makes them similar and what makes them distinct.

**Sadri Jadid:**

Hidden away in the core of Swabi after travelling alongside a green lake, is the village known as Sadri Jadid. It has a population of 7072 as per the Census conducted in 2017. The village is contained in an area of 1224 km² and presents a scenic landscape. The village is home to agriculture crops which contribute to its local industry. These crops are wheat, corn, sugarcane and tobacco as well as peas. The total irrigated land is around 87% which produces 1500kg per acre annually.
On 6\textsuperscript{th} December 2022, a brief visit to the Village Council, Sadri was conducted where organizations from the fellowship were represented by teams from Idara-e-Taleem-o-Agha, Tabadlab and FBISE.

The team was greeted by a village council which comprised of the Secretary of Sadri Jadid, three school teachers who taught boys primary school and were the focal persons of the council and other village elderly who were keen to give us their take on education in their village.

It has a total of 3 schools, two of them are Government Primary Schools for Boys while there is only one school which caters to girls at a primary level. There are two more schools which are community schools and cater to out of school children.

The story unfolded when the team was communicated about the pressing issues which their foundational education faces; from out of school children, lack of accessibility and mobility, lack of proper middle and high schools, to poverty, lack of awareness and interest for education by many parents, child labor for daily wages in peas and tobacco fields, lack of staff and adequate teacher training and skill building for teachers, language barriers from Pushto to Urdu and English for both students and teachers as well as parents.

These issues stood out the most and were repeated by teachers, village council members which had parents in it as well.

When the schools were visited, while the staff were open to engagement, the children had trouble understanding the questions when they were asked in Urdu. Most of the questions had to be translated by their teachers to Pushto. This of course has led to a learning poverty because it is very difficult for the students to contextualize and understand the curriculum which is being taught to them.

In terms of the presence of a school for children with disabilities, the story became more twisted; many parents refused to even acknowledge that the village hosts any such children while some of the teachers did say that such a school needs to be built because there are some children who need to have this facility.

In summary, the village is the perfect prototype lab which needs to be pulled out of this runnel within foundational learning so that the future of the village through its children can be safeguarded.
Ali Pur Shumali:

Traveling on the road towards Ali Pur Shumali amidst the chaotic traffic and the sandy road, some great challenges awaited the team which comprised of people from ITA and the School Education Department, South Punjab.

Though the village is surrounded by sand, there is a serene sight of greenery when one sees date trees and the multiple fish farms. These farms are the local industry of the village and perhaps the entire district as well. These are also the model fish farms which were perhaps the first of their kind in the country as these models were replicated everywhere else.

Ali Pur Shumali has only one government elementary school for boys and girls. It does not have any schools for children with disabilities or middle and high schools for neither gender.

On 13th December, 2022 the South-South Fellowship team visited Ali Pur Shumali, a village located in Union Council Muradabad, Muzaffargarh. The rationale behind this visit was to engage with the locals, stakeholders as well as the only school in the area in order to move forward with the plan of action for the cluster.
When the team arrived to the recently flood hit school, which now had been rehabilitated, teachers, stakeholders and students all seemed eager. There was perhaps something in that entire school which seemed eager for education.

The classes were visited and observed and students were interacted with. They were asked about education, how they see it through their eyes and asked them about their homework, if they have any siblings or relative children who do not go to school.

Following this, community leaders and parents, including fathers and mother sat down for a community dialogue with the team and spoke openly about the challenges and problems they have been facing in terms of education. The vibrance of the Katcheri was unique because one saw parents; mothers and fathers, grandparents, elderly wise men of the village and youngsters as well. They were all represented there and spoke about the common cause of education and how it has been going through difficulties for them.

The problems they face were around themes like a large number of out of school children out of which the majority were boys. Other issues which marred them were early childhood drop-outs of boys and girls, the former due to lack of schools; primary, middle and high school, as well as dropping out to work in nearby fish farms for daily wages. The latter drop out due to early marriages, lack of awareness and interest around girls’ education, lack of high schools and the fact that the schools have been merged for both genders and most parents are reluctant to let their daughters get education with boys.
It was also observed how the village council were so dismissive of having any children with disabilities even though the household survey showed almost every other house having at least one child with disabilities.

This makes the village a great lab for reforms on a localized and smaller scale. Once that is done, it is a hope that the village soon meets education security standards and is able to become a beacon of light which spearheads foundational learning reforms in South Punjab.

**Challenges and Opportunities**

Both villages, as mentioned before, are poles apart in many cultural, political and geographical dimensions but there are too many contrasts which make these villages stand out. Both of them present multiple opportunities in the face of the grave challenges of the out of school children, cultural and social reasoning for lack of girls education, child marriages for girls, child labor for daily wages as a root cause for boys dropping out as they have to tackle extreme poverty and work side by side with their parents and accessibility as well as mobility issues for parents who are reluctant to send their children far from their homes to attain education as there are lack of schools in both villages.

While these challenges are mighty, the will power and engagement levels of the village council, teachers and the people in both areas was mightier. They were all eager to begin work on education and make sure that their children at least have better and brighter futures. Most importantly there was a willingness to participate with the team as well so their children can also stand at par with the educated people of the country.

This opens up a unique chance and opportunity for the South-South Fellowship coalition to come together, involve the relevant government institutions, non-state and private organizations who have their own unique skillsets and also get the involvement of political leadership to pave the way of this movement. It goes without saying that the success of this coalition will be achieved once there is alignment in the actors involved within it to take bolder steps in the prototype clusters like Ali Pur Shumali and Sadri Jadid. It is only through these nodes that other villages can catch the wave and replicate the same reforms within their schools. The fellowship is unique because it has the potential to evade the cycle of conformity and lackluster in the education system of Pakistan which seems to have been hit by a stagnation of sound action-based policies.

The tales of these two villages is not over, because the Fellowship team has now begun the survey process which will soon lead them to coming up with proper solutions together. This is the only way forward for the system of education in the country.