

## INSIGHTS INTO A CLUSTER SCHOOL TO OBSERVE DECENTRALIZATION

### BACKGROUND

For decades, the Government of Sindh made relentless efforts to decentralize the education system. The objective is to decentralize and shift their autonomy to selected cluster schools from the centralized education structure. This includes transferring authority, decision-making and resources from a central governing body (provincial/district level) to main campus cluster schools. This shift aims to empower local stakeholders, including principals, cluster headteachers, class teachers, other staff members and students. This would enable them to have control over budget allocation and other aspects of schooling. This led to the revision of the School Clustering Policy in 2021. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has been providing a much-needed technical support to strengthen the educational reforms taken by the Government of Sindh. With funding from the European Union (EU), UNICEF is working under the Sindh Technical Assistance for Developing through Enhanced Education Programme (STA DEEP). Under this initiative, UNICEF engaged government stakeholders, including the Reform Support Unit (RSU), the School Education and Literacy Department (SE&LD), the Provincial Institute for Teacher Education (PITE), the Department for Curriculum and Research (DCAR) and the Sindh Teachers Education Development Authority (STEDA) as well as district officials. One of the major initiatives of the intervention is to update and implement the School Clustering Policy. Under the new school clustering policy, 20 clusters have been selected as pilot schools to implement the policy across 14 districts of Sindh. In some selected cluster head schools, cluster head teachers are practicing autonomy in cluster cell and feeder schools in terms of programme planning, budget allocation and implementation.

This study examines the interview narrative from a focal person of cluster head teacher. He explains how autonomy is being exercised at the micro-level. Using the decentralized framework, the complexities in revised school clustering policy are highlighted in this study. The extent of decentralization in selected cluster schools depend on various factor such as autonomy, accountability and the capacity of local stakeholders to manage their newfound responsibilities effectively. The findings reveal there is resistance from government officials in letting go of their authority despite notifications being circulated that limits their role after the revised policy. Decentralization will remain a daunting challenge till the authorities release funds to cluster school head teachers to implement the policy effectively.

Interview with cluster school's focal person formed a major part of quality data collection. This case study gives a glimpse of how decentralization is at an initial stage from a micro lens in Khairpur, Sindh. Shakeel Malik has been working at Government High Secondary School (GHSS) located in Ahmed Pur, Khairpur district. He rendered his services at the school for more than two decades. He is currently working as a Guide Teacher, Master Trainer and also appointed as a focal person by cluster head teacher of GHSS.

A cluster school is a grouping of multiple schools formed together to share resources and other practices. The overarching idea of school clustering is to promote communication, resource sharing and synergy among schools within a cluster. A cluster school is the larger school that is also known as the main campus. It is associated with cluster hub schools and feeder schools. Cluster hub school is a unit within a cluster of schools and feeder school is primary level for

students till they are promoted to a higher institute. GHSS is cluster school that is associated with cluster hub schools and approximately 30 feeder schools.

### EMPOWERED LOCAL DECISION-MAKING

The policy provided schools within the cluster with decision-making powers regarding curriculum design, resource allocation and administrative process. It involved schoolteachers, guide teachers, master trainers and other stakeholders to voice their opinion in shaping policies and practices that suit their needs. Previously, without the approval of District Education Officers (DEO), such issues were left on hold for weeks and sometimes months. The workload of hundreds of schools on a single person was a failed strategy. It hampered the performance and efficiency of schools as well.

With technical assistance of STA-DEEP in clustering policy, decision-making and other responsibilities have been shifted to Cluster Head Teachers who supervise and overlook cluster cell hub schools as well feeder schools associated with it than DEOs. "They are easily accessible for approvals for example giving permission for annual leave to teachers or to address any other school-related issue compared to DEOs," stated Shakeel. He further added that when it came to Continuous Professional Development (CPD) workshops, teachers were summoned to district headquarters located 30 kilometers away. With the help of the new policy, they are now required to attend workshops in cluster hub schools located approximately 3 to 4 kilometers away.

### ESTABLISHED CLEAR STRUCTURES

The roles and responsibilities of stakeholders and each school within the cluster has been outlined. The guideline entails how decisions are to be made collectively and the extent of autonomy each cluster school possesses over cluster hub and feeder schools that are associated with them.

After an in-depth interview, it was revealed that some of the cluster head teachers have been working within the implementational spaces to achieve their goals. They are working in the context of bureaucratic constraints yet trying to reach the zenith of their potential by taking initiatives to ensure their associated schools run efficiently. They have been exercising their autonomy by initiating bi-monthly meetings with the cell hub cluster schools and feeder schools associated with their cluster school (main campus). They visit other schools, their assemblies and also monitor the attendance of teachers and students diligently. The clustering policy has been reported to be more convenient. For instance, there are a few single-teacher feeder (small) schools. If that teacher needs to take leave due to any emergency, the cluster head teacher has been authorized the liberty to supplant that teacher for the time being from their cluster hub school. Previously such issues were taken to Taluka Officer instead.

### CAPACITY BUILDING AND SUPPORT

Professional development and support to school staff helps them manage responsibilities resulting from decentralization. UNICEF has been providing training to partner schools. Guide teachers and master trainers have been trained to periodically train other teachers in the long run. The cluster school has been involved in arranging workshops on management, leadership and financial planning.

The performance of class teachers was monitored and observed perhaps once or twice a year and most times, not at all. Under the supervision of cluster head teacher and their focal person, they are now observed two to three times in a quarter. If the teacher struggles in delivering any advanced teaching technique, those issues are addressed by Guide Teachers. This improves their performance which positively impacts student learning.

Administratively, the policy has been able to reduce bottlenecks in school management and increase efficiency of local stakeholders and its responsiveness to local needs. It has enhanced the accountability with robust monitoring system and improved service delivery of schools. However, the shift towards transferring autonomy to schools at the grassroot levels still has a long way to go for other schools.

## FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

Shakeel shared with dismay “We have been implementing the new clustering policy but at our own expense.” He explained that they arrange meetings, supplies and workshops at their own expense. Teachers attend these workshops without any compensation for mobility allowance despite the surge in petrol prices. UNICEF provided training to their staff, which has been instrumental in adopting advanced teaching methods. However, not receiving funds for mobility and other costs can be demotivating for the school. Malik stated “No funds have been released to Government High Secondary School (GHSS). Mobility allowance has been pending for nearly one and a half years.” It has been stipulated that the work is decentralized administratively but not financially. The Education District Officers still possess the financial hold and disburse all the salaries themselves to teachers. “Our main campus cluster school was affected by Sindh flood. It caused severe damages to the building, and it has one of the largest student enrollments in our area.” shared Shakeel. SE&LD team with the help of UNICEF monitored the damage and allocated the budget for repairs however, those funds have also not been released yet.

## RECOMMENDATION

According to Malik, implementing the revised school clustering policy itself would help Sindh education department reach the desirable results. The crux of the matter is transferring financial responsibilities to cluster school heads, as per the policy. They are better suited to allocate budgets of each school and to monitor them accordingly for a more effective decentralized system.