



Community Engagement and Enrollment Outcomes in the Schools of Punjab Education Foundation (PEF): Awareness and Communication Strategies

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the significance of community involvement and communication approaches to influencing enrolment experiences in Punjab Education Foundation (PEF) supported schools. Although there is a policy push to increase access to education through public-private partnerships, there remains a disparity in access, especially in rural and low-income areas. The study is a Qualitative study design with the use of Focus group discussions among the community members living around the PEF schools. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the patterns of awareness, communication channels and decision-making processes for enrolment. The study indicates that there is high awareness of free education and PEF affiliation, but little awareness of formal enrollment campaigns. Much information on enrollment is spread via formal social networks and the use of structured communication methods, like public announcements, print materials and door-to-door visits, is not consistent. A lack of systematic outreach makes it difficult to achieve the effectiveness of formal enrolment campaigns, and relies more on personal relationships to share information. The study findings suggest that although PEF initiatives have been effective in enhancing access in the form of free schooling, weak mechanisms of community engagement impede the effectiveness of enrollment communication. Strengthening structured outreach and adopting integrated communication strategies are recommended to enhance equitable enrollment outcomes in underserved communities.

Introduction

Education has been well known as a basic human right and a key source of social and economic development. At the school level, the International commitments such as Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4): Ensure inclusive and equitable access to and quality of education, emphasize school access but also participation in school, in a meaningful way (United Nations, 2015). In Pakistan, this commitment is strengthened under the Constitution under Article 25-A, which has guaranteed all children between the ages of 5 and 16 years free and compulsory education. Still under these policy frameworks, there are still significant disparities, especially in rural and low-income communities where structural barriers such as poverty, gender inequality, and lack of access to information restrict school participation (UNICEF, 2023; ASER Pakistan, 2021).

The Punjab Education Foundation (PEF) has rolled out a number of initiatives as a public-private partnership (PPP) to increased access to affordable education in response to such challenges (Hasan, et al., 2026). The interventions based on PPP are known to be effective in increasing the enrollment and service delivery through the combination of public sector control and the use of the efficiency of the private sector (Patrinos, Barrera-Osorio, & Guacqueta, 2009). PEF programs in Punjab have led to increased enrollment and increased schooling opportunities. Nevertheless, the current evidence indicates that increasing access does not always guarantee equitable involvement of all segments of society (Shahid, Waqar, & Raza, 2023).

Community engagement and, specifically, the contribution of awareness and communication is one of the critical factors influencing the enrollment outcomes. In the situation when literacy rates are low and the ability to access formal communication channels is scarce, the success of enrollment programs is highly dependent on the degree of information reaching the community (UNESCO, 2023; Ahmad, Sewani, & Fatima, 2025). Though enrollment campaigns are aimed at educating parents about admission procedures, timelines, and incentives, including free education, research shows that formal communication strategies do not necessarily work to reach target populations (Alam, et al., 2026). Rather, communities have a tendency to turn to informal systems like personal relationships and word-of-mouth communication (UNICEF, 2023; ASER Pakistan, 2021).

It is well known that education is a basic human right and a major source of social as well as economic growth (Yeasmin, et al., 2026). Commitments to inclusive and equitable quality education are given by global commitments, including Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) (United Nations, 2015). Even after these commitments, most developing countries, such as Pakistan, have remained to experience persistent challenges on how to achieve universal enrollment and equitable access to school. In Pakistan, free and compulsory education of children aged 5 to 16 years is guaranteed by Article 25-A of the Constitution; however, national data indicate that a significant proportion of the child population has not attended school, especially in rural and low-income groups where structural inequalities and lack of access to information restrict their participation (ASER Pakistan, 2021; UNICEF, 2023).

Pakistan has witnessed high levels of inequality in access to education whereby rural areas and marginalized groups have lower rates of participation as compared to urban areas. According to ASER Pakistan (2021), learning and enrollment results are still unequal, and as reported by UNICEF (2023), poverty, gender inequality, and ignorance are the key factors that contribute to the high number of out-of-school children. These findings indicate that the barriers to education are not only economic and infrastructural but also informational as most parents do not have access to clear and structured communication about the processes of enrolling their children to schools

which, in turn, affects their decision-making process regarding the subject of educating their children (Azhar, et al., 2025; Shafiq, et al., 2025; Azhar, et al., 2025).

To address these issues, a new strategy of providing better access to education and delivery of services in developing countries has been adopted using public-private partnerships (PPP). The idea behind PPPs is to have the efficiency and innovative capabilities of the private sector combined with the regulatory capacity of the public sector (Patrinos, Barrera-Osorio, and Guáqueta, 2009). As systematic review studies evidence, many PPP interventions are commonly considered in terms of their effects on access, enrollment, and learning outcomes, especially in low- and middle-income countries (Ali et al., 2024; Pirzada, Tabassum & Ahmad, 2024). Although such models have shown promise in broadening access, the global education monitoring reports point to the fact that such models can only be effective under certain contextual circumstances, the quality of their implementation, and equity considerations (UNESCO, 2020).

In Pakistan, the Punjab Education Foundation (PEF) is one of the largest PPP-based initiatives of expanding access to education by collaborating with low-cost private schools. Programmes like Foundation Assisted Schools (FAS), Education Voucher Scheme (EVS), and New School Program (NSP) have helped in increasing the schooling opportunities, especially to the disadvantaged groups. There are indications that PPP-based models, such as PEF, can be used to enhance access by alleviating financial obstacles and expanding school accessibility (Patrinos et al., 2009; Ahmad, Sewani & Khoso, 2024). Nevertheless, more extensive studies suggest that an increase in access does not necessarily lead to equitable outcomes, as differences in implementation and quality may affect the degree to which benefits are received by all layers of society (Ali et al., 2024).

The participation of the community is vital in influencing the participation of the community in education, especially in rural and low-income communities. It entails the active participation of parents, local stakeholders and communities in decision-making processes and educational awareness (Azhar & Imran, 2024). According to UNESCO (2020), the involvement of the community is essential in inclusive education systems to make sure that the marginalized groups have not been left out. Families in most developing situations have been using informal communication networks such as relatives, neighbors and community members to access information regarding schooling opportunities. UNICEF (2023) also mentions the lack of awareness as a major obstacle to enrollment and the significance of effective communication in facilitating educational participation.

Awareness and communication are thus key to effective enrollment processes. Enrollment strategies usually comprise of door-to-door visits, public announcements, print and visual materials as well as community outreach efforts in general. Nevertheless, it has been shown that the efficiency of these strategies differs in various situations. In low-literacy and rural contexts, formal communication strategies do not always work well when reaching the target audience (ASER Pakistan, 2021). Rather, awareness is often created via informal channels, which could restrict the coherence and extent of enrollment information (UNICEF, 2023). UNESCO (2020) also makes the point that communication strategies should be context-sensitive and inclusive to make sure that all the members of the community are informed accordingly (Ali et al., 2023).

Empirical data indicate that PPP initiatives have the potential to positively affect enrollment outcomes when they are backed by an effective implementation and governance framework. According to the research conducted by World Bank, it is possible to enhance participation in schools through such models, which helps to reduce cost barriers and increase access to schooling infrastructure (Patrinos et al., 2009). Nevertheless, the results of systematic reviews suggest that the outcome differs based on the factors mentioned above (Ali et al., 2024). This implies that the

results of enrollment are not only reliant on the presence of the schools but also on the effectiveness with which the information is conveyed and communities are involved into the enrollment process.

Although there is the body of research which was present, there are still a number of gaps. Limited qualitative research has been conducted that explores community level awareness and communication processes, and most of the studies have been more interested in enrollment statistics than the underlying factors that affect the process of enrollment. Also, the lack of attention to the implementation of communication strategies on the grassroots level and how the families receive and interpret the information related to enrollment are also lacking. These gaps indicate the necessity of a profound study that will explore the dynamics of community engagement and communication specifically in the context of enrollment campaigns and communication awareness of underserved contexts.

This is a huge challenge when there is a variation between what has been planned in communication strategies and how the same has been carried out in practice (Ali et al., 2023). Even with the increased opportunity to receive education, awareness is not evenly distributed, especially among the marginalized populations with low mobility, weak literacy levels, or poor social ties (Kolachi et al., 2024). The results of this study further indicate that formal enrollment campaigns tend to be invisible, formal announcements are inconsistently used, printed and visual materials have limited reach and direct outreach methods like door-to-door visits are largely not visible or practiced informally. Consequently, even awareness in itself is an obstacle to participation, and it may well be the case that higher enrollment rates actually indicate fair access.

Considering these issues, there is a necessity to investigate not only the presence of educational opportunities but also the success of communication strategies that make communities aware of the opportunities (Dilshad, Shah, & Ahmad, 2023). This research fills this gap with a qualitative, community-based investigation of awareness and communication in schools supported by the PEF. The study provides clues to the connection that exists between communication practices and enrollment outcomes.

The importance of this study is that it helps to know the importance of community engagement in the process of designing education participation. Although the previous research on the expansion of access via PPP models focused on the involvement of all individuals in the change process, limited attention has been paid to how the communication strategies work in the grassroots level (Patrinos et al., 2009; Shahid et al., 2023; Haider, Ahmad, & Ali, 2024). This study helps to fill the gap between the policy intentions and the ground realities by focusing on highlighting the lived experiences of members of the community. It highlights that access can only be effective with proper communication and with outreach mechanisms that are inclusive.

Research Objectives

1. To assess the level of awareness among community members regarding free education and PEF-supported schools.
2. To explore the effectiveness of formal enrollment communication strategies, including enrollment campaigns, public announcements, and print materials.
3. To examine the role of informal communication channels, such as family, neighbors, and social networks, in spreading enrollment-related information.

- To identify the regularity of door-to-door visits and direct community outreach in promoting school enrollment.

Research Questions

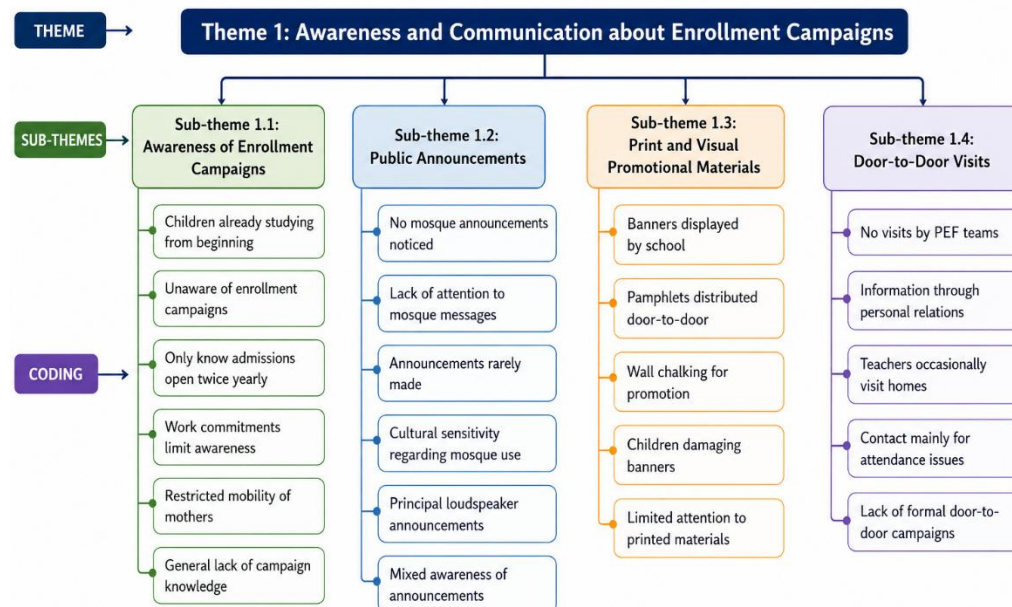
- What is the level of community awareness regarding free education and PEF-supported schools?
- How effective are formal communication strategies (enrollment campaigns, public announcements, and print materials) in promoting school enrollment?
- How do informal communication channels (family, neighbors, and social networks) contribute to enrollment-related awareness and decisions?
- To what extent are door-to-door visits and direct outreach activities used in promoting school enrollment?

Research Design: The research type for this study was qualitative phenomenological research methodology that aimed to explore the outcomes of community engagement and school enrollment in PEF-supported schools. It was based on learning about community members' lived experience related to awareness and communication strategies.

Sampling Technique and Sample Size: The communities were purposefully sampled near the PEF schools, and participants in FGDs were randomly sampled within these communities. Until data saturation was achieved, parents and community members were included.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data through coding, themes building and patterns interpretation regarding awareness, communication strategies and the patterns of enrolment practices.



Theme 1: Awareness and Communication about Enrollment Campaigns

This theme focuses on the awareness and effectiveness of the communication approaches adopted to encourage school enrolment in the community. The enrolment information is disseminated in rural and low-income areas using both formal campaigns and informal social networks, as access to formal information sources is limited. The theme is on the communication of information about admission, the level of community awareness and the efficacy of outreach campaigns including public announcements, literature and visits to the door. It emphasizes the importance of information reaching parents and an effective school community connection to be successful at enrolling.

Sub-theme 1.1: Awareness of Enrollment Campaigns

This sub-theme is understanding of Enrollment Campaigns. This sub-theme focuses on campaign awareness among members of the community and its presence in the community. Enrollment campaigns are designed to let parents know about the purpose of enrollment, the process, and the benefits of enrolling. The results, however, show a lack of knowledge about formal campaigns; the majority of people in the main study groups used informal sources, long association and personal experience to find out about a formal campaign rather than formal communication. The following is the community members' responses:

CM 1,4 stated: I don't know, our children have been going to this school from the beginning.

CM 2 stated: I have no idea about any campaign, I just know that admissions open twice a year.

CM 7 stated: I don't know, I work all day and I'm not at home.

CM 8 stated: I don't go outside the house, that's why I don't know.

Responses about awareness regarding Free of cost Education

CM 1-10 stated: Yes, I know there is no fee and the books are also free.

Responses regarding sources from which they came to know about PEF

CM 1 stated: The principal is our relative, he told us.

CM 2 stated: The principal is our neighbour, he told us.

CM 3 stated: We live in this village, that's why we know.

CM 4, 6, 8, 9 stated: We have been living in this area from the beginning and our kids go to this school.

CM 5 stated: My husband had been told by a friend that this is a wonderful school with no tuition and free books when we were planning to relocate here.

C8 stated: I found out about this school from the teachers.

Responses about awareness regarding PEF Affiliation

CM1-10 stated: Yes, I know that this school is affiliated with PEF.

Generally, awareness about formal enrolment campaigns is low and most of the respondents are not aware about structured activities. Rather, attitudes are developed through informal channels like personal relationships, long association and word of mouth. While there is awareness of the free education and PEF affiliation, this can be unrelated to formal campaigns, meaning that there are limited effects of structured campaigns for enrollment.

Sub-theme 1.2: Public Announcements

This sub theme investigates how school admissions are communicated in the community through public announcements. The results show that the use of traditional medicines was inconsistent despite its effectiveness and its use is decreasing in urban areas, which is contrary to the norm in rural areas. Cultural sensitivities, shifting practices and so on constrain their use, leading to under-use and limited effectiveness on awareness of enrollments.

About announcement in Mosques the responses of community members are

CM 1 stated: We are not educated, which is why we never focused about it.

CM 2 stated: I never focused on what announcements are being made in the mosque.

CM 3, 4 stated: Such an announcement has never been made in the mosque.

CM 5 stated: There has never been any announcement in the mosque, it is only the principal who is heard making announcements over the loudspeaker but not in mosques.

CM 9, 10 stated: Yes, announcements are made in the mosque when admissions open.

Principals added further perspective:

P1 said: Mosque announcements are not in trend now.

P2 said: Yes, we make announcements in mosques when the admissions are open.

P3 said: Mosques are sacred places meant for azan, and making announcements there could cause rivalry among schools.

About loudspeaker the responses of community members are

CM 1-5 stated: No, we never heard any announcement on loud speaker

CM 7 stated: Yes, the principal makes announcements on the loudspeaker when admissions open.

CM 9 stated: Yes, I heard the principal sir making an announcement on the loudspeaker.

Traditionally public announcements have been found to be effective in rural areas, but their usage and effectiveness of public announcements are inconsistent in the studied context. There is little use of mosque announcements and less awareness of their use; there is also less use of loudspeakers and less awareness of their use which makes the coverage and effectiveness uncertain and a limited use in promoting awareness of enrollment.

Sub-theme 1.3: Print and Visual Promotional Materials

This sub-theme focuses on discussing the use of print and visual media including banners, handouts and wall chalking as a means of school admissions communication. School principals use these economical tools, and they are organized in a variety of ways; however, they do not all work well. Some community members are aware of them, others are not – for various reasons, including lack of attention, mobility. Their potential is not being realised because there are many issues, including damage, and poor maintenance. These are the answers of the members of the community regarding Brochures, banners and pamphlets.

CM1 stated: Yes, there are banners put up by the principal but the kids are very naughty, they rip them.

CM 2, 3, 7, 10 stated: Yes, the principal puts up banners

CM4 stated: children go door to door to hand out pamphlets.

CM5 stated: Banners are also displayed and wall chalking is also carried out.

CM6, 8 stated: I don't know, I didn't pay attention when I'm outside.

The use of print and visual materials, including banners, pamphlets and wall chalking is common, although results are mixed. Some did not observe these materials because they were unable to pay attention or move. They are not seen and not effective in communicating enrollment information because of various other factors like damage, inconsistent distribution and indirect delivery through children.

Sub-theme 1.4: Door-to-Door Visits

This sub-theme focuses on door-to-door visits and personal interaction as an important aspect of the message of enrollment awareness. The results indicate that this kind of engagement is needed in rural communities to establish trust and to enable decisions to be made, but that it does not appear to be structured outreach. The majority of respondents indicated that there were no regular visits from PEF staff or school staff to their households, and interactions mostly happened informally through their personal relationship. This translates to low level of systematic interaction with communities about enrolment.

About door to door visits these are the comments of the community members.

CM1 stated: Principal is our relative, he tells us about opening of admissions and we tell others. But in any case, our kids have been at this school since the start.

CM2 stated: No one else has ever come except the Principal who is our neighbor and visits our house.

CM4 stated: If children take off from school, principal call them from home, if not, no one ever calls for children's admission.

CM5 stated: The teachers come to tell us about admission, but we know.

CM8, 9 stated:To be clear, teacher come and inform us when the admission is open, so that our children can be admitted to the school.

Much less door-to-door visits and community engagement is done directly. The majority of respondents said that the representatives of the PEF and the school staff had not conducted any systematic visits in the household, only on a personal level. There are limited, inconsistent, and incomplete efforts to encourage enrollment through teacher outreach.

Findings

The general level of awareness of parents and community members about free education and schools supported by PEF is very high. This recognition is mainly cultivated by informal social networks, such as family, neighbors, and long-term living in the locality. Knowledge of enrolment requires close relationship with school principals or teachers. There is little publicity through mosques and loudspeakers, and this is intermittently done, since it is often avoided because of cultural sensitivity, or competing with other schools. Most commonly used formal communication tools are printed materials in the form of banners, pamphlets and wall chalking, which are highly effective in creating awareness.

Outreach to enrollments is extremely high in terms of door-to-door, enrolling most often based on personal relationships with personnel at the schools instead of organized campaigns. The PEF team is mostly not directly involved in the community, since no respondent noted any visits by the team to their homes to enroll them. There are highly official clarifications about the advantages of PEF-supported schools, such as free education and free books. The majority of parents obtain this information in an informal way and not in an organized mode of communication.

Discussion

The high levels of awareness of free education and provision of learning materials in PEF-supported schools reflects the immense impact of the cost-removal on school attendance in low-income environments. The current observation is in line with the extensive body of evidence that shows that the policy of free education can drastically boost enrolment by reducing direct financial barriers to households (UNICEF, 2022; World Bank, 2018). However, the fact that the awareness of free schooling is apparent but it does not necessarily mean that the awareness is as great as the awareness of the enrollment processes or the overall institutional communication that would imply that the awareness can be confined to the key motivators, but not to the full knowledge of the program (Oad et al., 2024). The same tendencies can be observed in the South-Asian context whereby the households will be more receptive to the tangible gains such as fee elimination as compared to the structured enrollment messaging (Tooley, 2013; Ahmad, Noorani, & Channa, 2025).

Another sign of structural limitations of formal communication systems is reflected in the prevalence of informal social networks as the primary source of the information related to enrollment. The role of interpersonal contact, contact and familiarity of social contacts in the long term are very dependent in communities. This observation is consistent with that of Banerjee et al. (2010) who posit that the process of information diffusion within the context of developing situations is more of a social than an institutionally driven process. Andrabi, Das, and Khwaja (2013) also demonstrate that the neighborhood effects and word-of-mouth communication are important factors that influence the school choice and enrollment decisions in rural Pakistan (Ahmad & Rizvi, 2026). Despite the fact that such networks enhance the trust and immediate accessibility of information, they also in turn enhance unequal accessibility of information as the households with lower social connectivity are less informed.

The fact that there is no formal enrollment promotion activity awareness indicates that there is no real-life connection between policy formulation and what is occurring on the ground. There are organized communication strategies, but their low profile means that there are no outreach penetrations and message disseminations. Similarly, according to UNESCO (2020), most of the time enrollment campaigns in marginalized contexts fail to reach a wide audience, as they lack proper localization and an efficient implementation capacity. The fact that enrollment campaigns are often not evenly implemented and as a consequence are differences in awareness between socio-economic groups further lends credence to the idea that enrollment campaigns are often not evenly implemented (Faheem, Gulab, & Ahmad, 2025). This implies that the formal communication mechanisms, though they are being used in the design, may not be appropriately operationalized in the community level.

Findings that are related to the application of conventional means of communication, that is, the use of mosques and loudspeakers to convey important messages to people are indicative of underutilization of the traditional means of communication, but above all, has reflected a more generalized shift in the communication practices in the rural areas. The inconsistent use of these channels, suggests that they have been relying on the haphazard and non-standardized approaches

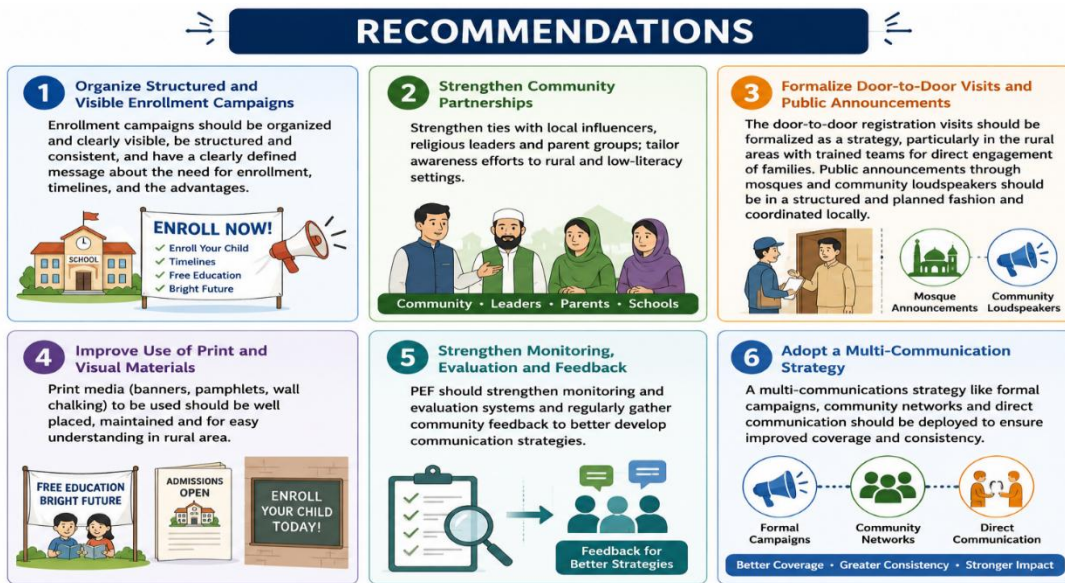
towards reaching out to people rather than systematic outreach. Like Khan et al. (2019), they stress that the formal communication means in the rural territories of Pakistan are highly subjective and rely on the local actors, which makes them rather unreliable as the formal means of communication. UNICEF (2022) also points out that incomplete communication plans are also playing a role in uneven dissemination of information, more so among households that are geographically or socially isolated.

The comparative ineffectiveness of print and visual media such as banners, pamphlets and wall chalking, is a classic limitation of low-resource communication strategies. These tools although valuable in terms of visibility, do not seem to have a great impact on the understanding and behavior change unless they are reinforced by interpersonal interaction (Ahmad, Sewani, & Channa, 2025). This is the same conclusion as Duflo, Dupas, and Kremer (2015) who claim that information interventions are most likely to be effective in case of active engagement as opposed to passive dissemination. Similarly, World Bank (2018) notes that although print materials are useful in enhancing institutional visibility, it is not enough to create a profound understanding of the community without complementary outreach mechanisms (Thomas, Khan & Ahmad, 2022). This implies that visual communication is an additive to a revolutionary method in enrollment promotion.

The absence of the systematic door-to-door outreach is indicative of a considerable shortage of direct methods of engagement with the community (Shah, Ali & Ahmad, 2024). Although there is informal interpersonal communication, it is not possible to reach marginalized or socially disconnected families because there is no structured intervention at the household-level. Banerjee et al. (2011) evidence indicates that personalized outreach has a significant positive impact on enrollment outcome by reducing informational barriers and establishing trust between institutions and households. Direct parental engagement is also listed by UNICEF (2022) as one among the factors that define the enrolment in a rural education system. The present results therefore suggest a mismatch between the evidence-based best practices and actual implementation especially in reference to proactive community engagement.

Conclusion

The study assessed PEF programs in terms of community participation and PEF enrolment results. The results indicate high levels of awareness in the communities of free education and the schools supported by PEF but a lack of formal communication and structured enrollment campaigns which is inconsistently applied. Awareness of enrollment is primarily created through informal social networks and personal relationships, with formal efforts like public announcements, print materials and outreach efforts occurring sporadically and with limited impact. Minimal door to door visits and engagement using some structured approach, information about enrollment exists primarily through informal channels. Overall, although PEF has enabled free schooling, there is a need to strengthen community participation and formal channels of communication for improved and equitable school enrollment outcomes.



Recommendations

1. Enrollment campaigns should be organized and clearly visible, be structured and consistent, and have a clearly defined message about the need for enrollment, timelines, and the advantages.
2. Strengthen ties with local influencers, religious leaders and parent groups; tailor awareness efforts to rural and low-literacy settings.
3. The door-to-door registration visits should be formalized as a strategy, particularly in the rural areas with trained teams for direct engagement of families. Public announcements through mosques and community loudspeakers should be in a structured and planned fashion and coordinated locally.
4. Print media (banners, pamphlets, wall chalking) to be used should be well placed, maintained and for easy understanding in rural area.
5. PEF should strengthen monitoring and evaluation systems and regularly gather community feedback to better develop communication strategies.
6. A multi-communications strategy like formal campaigns, community networks and direct communication should be deployed to ensure improved coverage and consistency.

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