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FEASIBILITY OF OPENING NON-FORMAL SCHOOLS IN AFGHANISTAN: AN IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF STAKEHOLDERS' PERSPECTIVE

Corresponding & Author 1:	HAZRAT USMAN MASHWANI, PhD Scholar, Hazara University, KPK, Pakistan, Email: 50133-2011@hu.edu.pk , ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5468-5015
Co-Author 2:	PROF. DR. SYED MANZOOR HUSSAIN SHAH, Professor, Hazara University, KPK, Pakistan, Email: drmhshaah@hu.edu.pk

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Abstract

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The conventional Formal School (FS) system in Afghanistan is facing challenges in the comprehensive enrolment of school-age children, especially in the disadvantaged areas of the country. Currently, around 4 million school-age children are out of school in the country (UNICEF, 2021). This study aimed to explore the feasibility of opening Non-Formal Schools (NFSs) as an alternative approach to enrolling out-of-school children in Kunar province, Afghanistan. Employing a case study qualitative design, 62 key stakeholders such as directors of education, directors of Hajj and Islamic Affairs, headmasters, teachers, mosque imams, and parents were purposively selected as the participants of the study. Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection and the collected data was thematically analysed. The findings revealed that opening NFSs in Kunar province is feasible. This assertion is grounded in the discerned educational accessibility gap and the favorable attitudes toward the opening of NFSs in the locale. Additionally, the study posits practical venues for instituting non-formal schools such as mosques, guesthouses, and Formal Schools (FSs) in the evening shift as Evening Schools (ESs) in Kunar Province, Afghanistan. The study recommends the Ministry of Education (MoE), Afghanistan, establish a cost-effective NFS system using community places like mosques and guesthouses to address primary school inadequacies promote enrolment of out-of-school children, and ensure Education for All (EFA) in Kunar province, Afghanistan.

Keywords: Education for All, Non-formal Education, NFSs, Stakeholders, Kunar Province, Afghanistan

Introduction

Access to education is considered a fundamental right for every individual, and this principle has been emphasized by both the Afghan government and international agencies. Despite concerted efforts to promote education, particularly among children, and eradicate illiteracy in Afghanistan, the country's literacy rate remains disappointingly low, hovering around 40% (UNICEF, 2021; UIL, 2020; CSRS, 2019). Compounding this issue is the alarming statistic that approximately 4 million school-age children are currently not enrolled in schools in Afghanistan (UNICEF, 2021; Rescue.org, 2021; Beteille et al., 2020; World Bank Report, 2020; REUTERS, 2018). Several factors contribute to the high rate of out-of-school children in Afghanistan, as identified by various studies. Some of the main causes identified by various studies are decades of civil wars, political instability, poverty, the low economy of the country, shortage of schools, shortage of school infrastructure, cultural norms, illiteracy of parents, and lack of security in the country (Kerawala, 2021; Menteş & Talas, 2021; Daud, 2020; Mashwani, 2017; Noori, 2017; Khwajamir, 2016; EFA, 2015).

In such conditions where besides other numerous hurdles, poverty, the low economy of the country, and shortage of Formal Schools (FSs) are the main obstacles in the way of child education; Non-Formal Schools (NFSs) in the form of Mosque Schools (MSs), existing FSs buildings as Evening Schools (ESs) and guesthouses in the community could be the solution. NFSs are cost-effective and have been proven effective in supporting FSs in the provision of basic education. They are effective for their diversity and flexibility in conditions where children cannot make it to FSs due to various obstacles (Gul & Sarwar, 2020). If the government's low economy does not allow for establishing a sufficient number of FSs, it could support opening NFSs i.e., MSs

and schools in the guesthouses of the community to educate the educationally marginalized children. Furthermore, the existing FSs at the evening shift as ESs may be opened for those children who work in the labour market in the daytime to financially support their families.

The focus of the study is to investigate the feasibility of opening NFSs (MSs, ESs, and schools in the guesthouses of the community) to ensure EFA in Afghanistan. While the issues and challenges are prevalent across most provinces, the study narrows its scope to Kunar Province to conduct a detailed investigation into the educational accessibility gap, assess the necessity for NFSs, and explore viable strategies for their implementation in the region.

Research Objectives:

- i) To investigate the educational accessibility gap in Kunar Province
- ii) To assess the need for non-formal schools in Kunar Province
- iii) To explore potential strategies for opening non-formal schools in Kunar Province

Literature Review

NFSs also referred to as second-chance schools, represent educational institutions characterized by flexibility in their educational delivery methods, primarily directed towards providing education to socially marginalized segments of society. Serving as alternative institutions, NFSs play a complementary role to Formal Schools (FSs) by facilitating basic education for individuals who are vulnerable and difficult to access. Although NFSs share similarities with FSs in delivering basic education, distinctions arise in their organizational structure, funding mechanisms, curriculum offerings, operational environment, staffing conditions, and target demographic (Nyaga, 2016; Kaugi, 2015; Ruto, 2004). In essence, NFSs serve as second-chance or alternative schools for individuals marginalized and not accommodated by

mainstream or first-chance schools, namely the formal school system.

The Feasibility of Non-Formal Schools

Feasibility, in the context of educational initiatives, pertains to the practicality and viability of a proposed project. Feasibility studies aim to see whether a project is practical or not. They aim to see the practicality and viability of an idea (Wright, 2020; Southwood, 2018; Bowen et al., 2009). Studies have revealed positive results on the feasibility of NFSs for the alleviation of illiteracy and ensuring EFA in developing countries (Gull, 2018; Hamid, 2016). Similarly, several studies in Bangladesh have proven the feasibility and effectiveness of NFSs in educating millions of children who were deprived from education in FSs (Ibrahim, 2002; Hossain, 1999; Alamgir, 1999). Likewise, community learning centres (TBM) were effectively established in Indonesia that have helped to improve the literacy rate in the community and that was an effective initiative for illiteracy eradication in the country (Afriani, 2019). In summary, NFSs are feasible and have yielded positive results in the alleviation of illiteracy in developing countries.

Out-of-School Children in Kunar Province

The exact number of out-of-school children in Kunar province is unavailable; however, Sharma and Afzali (2018) estimate that around 88000 of the total school-age children are still out of school in the province. Furthermore, the Kunar Directorate of Education (KDoE) (2022) states that around 63000 (26%) of school-age children are still out of school in Kunar province.

Formal Schools in Kunar Province

Due to the weak economy of the country; the government of Afghanistan is not in the position to provide the required number of FSs in every part of the country. The country's education sector is heavily dependent on the assistance of international organizations to support FSs in providing educational opportunities in hard-to-access areas of the

country (UNICEF, 2019). Currently, around 500 FSs operate in Kunar province, as reported by Sharma and Afzali (2018). This is verified by KDoE (2022), which states that there are a total of 461 schools in Kunar Province, comprising 241 public and 20 private schools. Among these, 241 are primary schools, 98 are middle schools, and 122 are high schools.

The Use of Mosques as Non-Formal Schools

The historical role of mosques in education is significant, with early learning and teaching predominantly occurring in mosques. The first mosque to function as an elementary school dates back to 653 AD in Medina, according to Yin et al., (2015). Haider (2021) emphasizes the collaboration between schools and mosques to enhance the quality of education, particularly in Islamic studies. Children attending mosques for religious education have demonstrated improved literacy test performance, contributing to their academic success (Burde et al., 2015). In a country like Afghanistan, where 75% of the population resides in rural communities and Formal Education (FE) faces challenges in providing basic education in these areas, MSs are deemed essential. Saeed et al. (2016) argue that MSs represent the optimal alternative for providing basic education in developing countries.

Evening Schools (ESs)

Formal Schools (FSs) can be adapted to operate in the evening shift as Evening Schools (ESs), targeting the provision of primary education for children engaged in daytime labour. ESs are designed to accommodate individuals with free time in the evening and are recognized as second-chance schools, catering to those who work during the day to meet their daily expenses (Jain, 2018; Luka et al., 2015). According to UNICEF (2018), around 2.5 million children (ages 6-14) in Afghanistan are working in the labour market. So, to cater to the issue and provide those 2.5 million children with the opportunity of education, FSs as ESs could be the solution.

The Role of the Community in Establishing Non-Formal Schools

The role of the community cannot be ignored in the success of any community program, especially a program that is in search of possible cost-effective solutions to the issue of illiteracy and ensuring EFA. This is what is stated by [Kedrayate \(2001\)](#) who says that the active role of the community helps in running a program effectively and helps in the reduction of the cost of the program. Most of the NFSs are run in the form of Community Schools (CSs) which are run in the community for the community and by the community ([Rahma et al., 2019](#)). This indicates the importance of the role of the community in establishing and supporting NFSs.

Methodology

This section delineates the methodology employed in the current study. Key components addressed within this section encompass the research setting, research design, study population, sample selection, research instruments, and data collection procedures.

Research Setting

The study took place in the Kunar province of Afghanistan. The province has 15 districts, with Asadabad being its provincial capital ([Sharma & Afzali, 2018](#)). Situated in the northeastern part of Afghanistan, Kunar province spans an area of approximately 4,339 square kilometres, 96% of which is mountainous or semi-mountainous. As of 2022, the province is home to around 0.5 million people. Notably, Kunar is the birthplace of the renowned Afghan scholar, Allama Sayed Jamaluddin Afghani, and the main public university of the province is named after him. The province houses one provincial education directorate and 15 district education directorates, overseeing 461 formal public and private schools (comprising 241 primary schools, 98 middle schools, and 122 high schools). Currently, 4,000 teachers educate 184,256 male and female students ([KDoE,](#)

[2022](#)). Additionally, Kunar province has 2,175 mosques, each accompanied by an imam ([KDoHIA, 2022](#)).

Research Design

To gather detailed and comprehensive data, a qualitative case study research design was employed. Qualitative research aims for an in-depth understanding of social phenomena and behaviour in a naturalistic and contextualized manner. Advocates of qualitative methods contend that this approach provides researchers with a thorough and nuanced comprehension of the research problem ([Fraenkel et al., 2016](#)). Given the study's focus on investigating the feasibility of opening Non-Formal Schools (NFSs) to combat illiteracy in Kunar Province, a case study approach was chosen. The case study approach enables the researcher with an in-depth exploration of an issue through observation, interviews, documents, and reports ([Creswell, 2013](#)).

Population of the Study

While the qualitative research goal is not generalization, insights regarding the population can be derived from the findings based on the sample. The population of the study included officials from the education department, Hajj and Islamic Affairs department, headmasters, teachers, mosque imams, and parents in Kunar province.

Sample of the Study

The sample of the study included the provincial Director of Education (DoE), the provincial Director of Hajj and Islamic Affairs (DoHIA), the district DoE, the district DoHIA, a mosque imam, a headmaster, a teacher, and a parent at 10 districts of Kunar province. So, overall, 62 participants were purposively selected as the sample of the study. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which the researcher decides the sample of the study based on some criteria such as experience or ability ([Thomas, 2022](#)). The participants of the study were purposively selected based on their experience and

suitability to collect pertinent data.

Research Instrument

To get in-depth data, semi-structured interviews as a data collection instrument were used. Semi-structured interviews are considered more formalized and flexible interviews. The advantage of semi-structured interviews is that they are neither too rigid nor too open and allow the researcher to add additional important questions during the interview session (Abd Gani et al., 2020). Based on the various aspects of the current study, the interview items were developed in line with the research objectives/questions to collect pertinent data that could fully answer the research objectives/questions.

Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews with probes and prompts were used to explore the insights of the participants on the subject. For the convenience of the participants, the interview items were translated into their native language i.e., Pashto language. The data collection procedure was initiated by collecting the data from the provincial DoE and provincial DoHIA. Next, the researcher collected data at the district level from 10 DoE, 10 DoHIA, 10 mosque imams, 10 headmasters, 10 teachers, and 10 parents. Once the data was collected in the Pashto language from all the participants through a voice recorder in a smartphone, and then transcribed and translated into English language.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse and interpret the data collected through semi-structured interviews. Following the six steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) – familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, naming themes, and producing the report – the analysis aimed at extracting meaningful insights. Participant identities were anonymized through

pseudonyms, with designations such as PD1 and PD2 for the Provincial Director of Education and Provincial Director of Hajj and Islamic Affairs, respectively. Similarly, district-level officials, headmasters, teachers, mosque imams, and parents were represented as DDE1, DDHIA1, HM1, T1, MI1, and P1, respectively.

Data Analysis Related to Objective No. 1: Educational Accessibility Gap

Based on the first objective of the study i.e., to investigate the educational accessibility gap in Kunar province, the following main and sub-themes emerged from the analysis of the data as summarised in Figure 1.

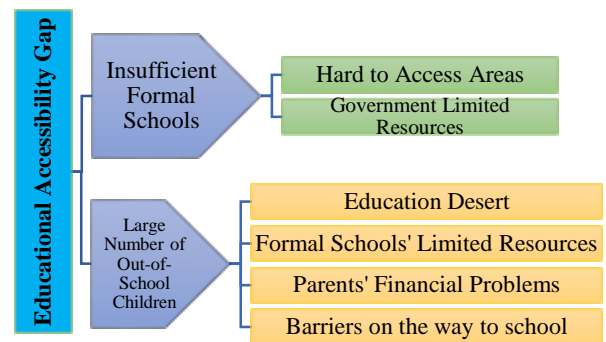


Figure 1: Themes and Sub-Themes Based on Objective No. 1

Theme No. 1: Insufficient Number of Formal Schools

This theme represents the deficiency of FSs in Kunar province and affirms the feasibility of NFSs in Kunar province. Almost all the participants reported that the current number of FSs is not sufficient for the existing number of school-age children in Kunar province. They have presented various arguments in support of their standpoint. This is elaborated as follows:

PD1 reported as: *"The schools established so far in Kunar province could not fulfill the needs. They are not sufficient. We have many areas where there is no school..."*

DDE7 commented as: *"No, the existing formal primary schools in the district are not sufficient. They have not covered all the school-age-children in the district".*

T2 said: *"Well, the current number of formal primary schools is not enough for the school-age-children in the locality. Because there are some areas in the district where there are no formal schools at all".*

Moreover, two sub-themes i.e., *Hard to Access Areas* and *Government Limited Resources* emerged in the views of the participants as they pointed out various reasons for the insufficiency of primary schools in the area. These sub-themes are elaborated in the views of participants next.

HM6 stated as: *"The current number of formal primary schools is not adequate because there are many hard-to-access areas where there are no schools..."*

DDE5 argued as: *"I think one of the main reasons that the children are deprived of schools in the district is the limited resources of the government..."*

Theme No. 2: Large Number of Out-of-School Children

This theme indicates that a large portion of the school-age children are out-of-schools in the province. This necessitates the establishment of NFSs and confirms the feasibility of NFSs in the province. The majority of the participants stated that a large number of children are out of school in the province. The following stances of the participants elaborate on the theme.

PD1 declared as: *"We surveyed about one and a half or two years ago, and we have found that around 30,000 to 35,000 of our children are still out of school. They do not have access to schools, and they are out of school".*

HM3 reported as: *"I do not have the exact information about the number of out-of-school children in the district, but I can say that around 50% of school-age children are still out-of-school in the district".*

Moreover, several subthemes i.e., *Education Desert*, *Formal Schools' Limited Resources*, *Parents' Financial Problems*, and *Barriers on the Way to Schools* were identified by the participants as the main reasons that

cause the children to be out of school. These reasons are further elaborated in the standpoints of the participants as follows.

DDE1 expressed as: *"The main reason that causes children out-of-schools in the district is the absence of nearby schools. The schools are distantly located from one another".*

M16 shared his point of view as: *"One of the reasons that the children are out-of-schools in the area is that the existing formal schools here in the district do not have sufficient resources..."*

P2 elaborated as: *"The schools are far away, and we could not afford to arrange transport for them to carry them to the schools".*

T1 reported as: *"Well, the district has very wide canyons. The children of the district could not access the existing formal schools in the district due to numerous obstacles on the way to school such as busy roads, watercourses, and mountains..."*

Data Analysis Related to Objective No. 2: Need for Opening Non-Formal Schools

Based on the second objective of the study i.e., to assess the need for opening Non-Formal Schools in Kunar province, the following main and sub-themes emerged from the analysis of the data as depicted in Figure 2.

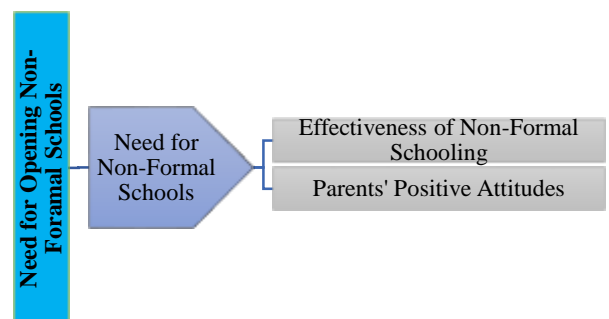


Figure 2: Themes and Sub-Themes Based on Objective No. 2

Theme No. 1: Need for the Establishment of Non-Formal Schools

This theme reveals that there is a great need for the establishment of NFSs in the province. This approves the feasibility of NFSs in the province. Most of the participants expressed that the current number of FSs in

the province could not fulfill the requirements and there is a need to establish NFSs in the proximity of every village to provide out-of-school children with the opportunity to come into schools. Some of the comments regarding this theme are as follows:

PD1 affirmed as: *"Yes, there is a great need to build non-formal schools in Kunar province. Our children do not have access to formal schools..."*

MI7 shared: *"Truly speaking, there is a need for non-formal schools in our locality. Because there are some children who do not have access to formal schools..."*

Moreover, two sub-themes i.e., *the Effectiveness of Non-Formal Schooling* and *Parents' Positive Attitudes* emerged in the views of the participants. These sub-themes are elaborated in the comments of the participants as follows.

DDHIA8 elaborated: *"As far I have noticed, the non-formal schools are very effective. The reason is that they are cost-effective and could be established at every village..."*

P2 expressed: *"We will allow our children to non-formal schools if they could be established in near distance..."*

Data Analysis Related to Objective No. 3: Potential Strategies for Opening Non-Formal Schools

Based on the third objective of the study i.e., to explore the potential strategies of opening Non-Formal Schools in Kunar province, the following main and sub-themes emerged from the analysis of the data as shown in Figure 3.

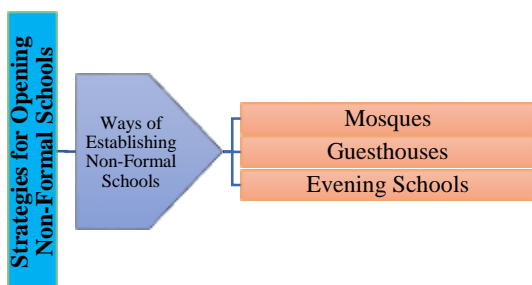


Figure 3: Themes and Sub-Themes Based on Objective No. 3
Theme No. 1: Ways of Establishing Non-Formal

Schools

This theme indicates that there are several ways of establishing NFSs in the province and makes a positive statement about the feasibility of the NFSs in the province. The participant suggested various suitable strategies for establishing the NFSs. They asserted that *Mosques, Guesthouses,* and *FSs* in the evening shift as *Evening Schools* are the potential strategies that may be used for establishing the NFSs in Kunar Province. The following are some of their quotes that elaborate the main and sub-themes.

DDHIA10 suggested, *"Well, in the past mosques have been used as non-formal schools because there were no formal schools.... Why not, mosque can be used as non-formal schools"*.

DDE8 elaborated: *"The guesthouses are suitable places for establishing non-formal schools as they have the essential facilities required for these schools. The people are also very cooperative, and I am sure they will happily cooperate in this regard..."*

HM9 stated: *"Due to poverty, around sixty percent of the children go to mountains for woods or do other work instead of going to schools... So, if the formal schools could be opened in the evening shift for such children, this will be a great move to bring in the out-of-school children into schools"*.

Findings

The study's findings show the feasibility of implementing Non-Formal Schools (NFSs) in Kunar province, Afghanistan, as a response to the prevalent educational accessibility gap. The inadequacy of Formal Schools (FSs) in the province, coupled with a significant number of out-of-school children, has been attributed to challenging factors such as hard-to-access areas and the limited resources of the government. Hard-to-access areas and limited resources of the government have resulted insufficient number of FSs in the province. Similarly, the absence of FSs in the near distance, limited resources of the FSs, parents'

financial issues, and obstacles in the way of children to schools were some of the main causes that resulted in the children being out of school in Kunar province.

Moreover, the findings of the study indicated that there is a great need for opening NFSs in the province. The current number of FSs in the province may not fulfill the requirements and there is a need to establish NFS in the proximity of every village. The findings elaborated that establishing NFSs in the province is essential because they are cost-effective compared to the FSs. Similarly, the findings indicated that the parents had positive attitudes towards opening the NFSs in the province. They regarded these NFSs as the need of the day and they promised that they would cooperate and allow their children to attend these NFSs.

Additionally, the findings of the study revealed that mosques, guesthouses, and FSs in the evening shift as ESs may be used as NFSs in the province. Mosques and guesthouses can be used as NFSs in the locality. People of the area are very generous, and cooperative, and have a special love for education so they can even dedicate their own houses to these NFSs. Likewise, the findings elaborated that FSs may be opened in the evening shift as NFSs for those children who work in the labour market during the daytime.

Discussion

The literacy rate in Afghanistan is not satisfactory. It is below the halfway around (UNICEF, 2021; UIL, 2020; CSRS, 2019). Moreover, the threatening news is that a great portion of the school-age children i.e., 4 million school-age children are out-of-school in the country (UNICEF, 2021; Rescue.org, 2021; Beteille et al., 2020; World Bank Report, 2020; REUTERS, 2018). Several causes such as wars in the country, poverty, shortage of school infrastructure, cultural norms, and illiteracy of parents have contributed to the low literacy rate in the country (Kerawala, 2021; Menteş & Talas, 2021; Daud, 2020;

Noori, 2017; Khwajamir, 2016; EFA, 2015). To cater to the low literacy rate in the country, NFSs are essential. NFSs for their flexibility and cost-effectiveness have been proven effective in the provision of basic education and alleviating illiteracy in areas where children do not have access to FSs due to various obstacles (Gul & Sarwar, 2020; Mbilu, 2019; Yasunaga, 2014). So, the current study investigated the feasibility of opening NFSs in the Kunar province of Afghanistan. The study specifically investigated the educational accessibility gap, the need for opening NFSs, and the possible strategies for opening NFSs in Kunar province, Afghanistan. The study indicated that opening NFSs is feasible as an alternative approach to enrolling out-of-school children in the Kunar province of Afghanistan. This assertion is based on the findings that there is an educational accessibility gap, favourable attitudes towards opening NFSs, and the availability of practical venues such as mosques and guesthouses of the community for instituting non-formal schools in Kunar Province, Afghanistan.

The study indicated that NFSs are feasible in Kunar province of Afghanistan as there is an educational accessibility gap in the province i.e., the current number of FSs is not enough and a great number of school-age children are out-of-school in the province. Hard-to-access areas, government limited resources, absence of nearby schools, limited resources of the existing FSs, parents' economic issues, and obstacles in the way of children to schools are some of the main reasons that have resulted educational accessibility gap in the province. This was confirmed by KDoE (2022) and Afzali (2018) who state that around 88000 school-age children are still out of school in the Kunar province of Afghanistan.

Similarly, the study revealed a great need for opening NFSs in the province. Additionally, the idea of establishing NFS in the province was warmly welcomed in the province. Non-formal schooling was indicated as the best

alternative approach to enroll out-of-school children in the province for their flexibility and cost-effectiveness. This is in line with what was suggested by [Gul and Sarwar \(2020\)](#) who state that NFSs have been proven effective in the provision of basic education because of their diversity and flexibility in conditions where children could not make it to FSs due to different obstacles. Furthermore, [Mbilu \(2019\)](#) states that many developing countries such as Bangladesh, Ghana, and Uganda have established NFSs to achieve the goal of EFA and have particularly yielded significant results.

Moreover, several strategies for establishing NFSs in the province were identified that ensure the feasibility of opening NFSs in the province. Mosques, guesthouses, and FSs in the evening shift were identified as some of the possible venues to open NFSs in the community. This is aligned with what was stated by [Saeed et al., \(2016\)](#) who assert that MSs for the provision of basic education is the best alternative option and the need of the day. Similarly, the study indicated that FSs in the evening shift as ESs may be opened to enroll those children who work in the labour market in the daytime. This is supported by [Luka et al., \(2015\)](#) who state that ESs are effective for their flexibility as they provide opportunities for those who are busy in the daytime. Furthermore, [UNICEF \(2018\)](#) declares that around 2.5 million school-age children (ages 6-14) are working in the labour market in Afghanistan. So, the role of NFSs is pivotal in enrolling working children in the stream of education.

Conclusions

The study concluded that opening NFSs is feasible in Kunar province, Afghanistan because there is an educational accessibility gap in the province i.e., the current number of FSs is insufficient as a large number of school-age children are out-of-school in the province. Hard-to-access areas, government limited resources, absence of nearby schools, limited

resources of the existing FSs, parents' economic issues, and obstacles in the way of children to schools are some of the main reasons that have resulted educational accessibility gap in the province. Moreover, the study concluded that NFSs are feasible in Kunar province of Afghanistan because there is a great need for opening NFSs in the province as they are cost-effective, and the people of the province have positive attitudes towards opening NFSs in Kunar province. Furthermore, the study concluded that the NFSs are feasible in Kunar province of Afghanistan because mosques and guesthouses in the community and FSs in the evening shift as ESs for those who work in the daytime are the potential strategies to open NFSs in the province. The people of the province are generous, and cooperative, and have a special love for education. They promised to dedicate their own houses to the initiative. Likewise, officials in the DoE ensured that FSs may be opened in the evening shift as ESs to enroll those children who work in the labour market in the daytime. So, opening ESs will provide them with the opportunity to study in the evening. Overall, the in-depth exploration of the stakeholders' perspectives indicated that opening NFSs in the existing setup of mosques, guesthouses, and FSs in the evening shift is feasible to enroll out-of-school children and ensure EFA in Kunar province, Afghanistan.

Recommendations

The findings of the study indicated that a great number of school-age children are out of school in Kunar province. Due to the mountainous geography of Kunar province, it is difficult for the government to open sufficient FSs in the province; so, it is recommended to the Ministry of Education (MoE), Afghanistan to devise a comprehensive policy and take practical strides to open a cost-effective NFSs system in the existing setup of mosques, and guesthouses to enroll out-of-school children and ensure EFA in Kunar

province, Afghanistan. Furthermore, it is recommended to the MoE to open the FSs in the evening shift as ESs to provide the working children with the opportunity to study in the evening.

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