BACKGROUND

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan is a South Asian country that covers an area of 796,096 square kilometers. The country is bordered by Afghanistan and Iran in the west, India in the east, China in the north, and the Arabian Sea and Gulf of Oman in the south. This federal parliamentary republic is the sixth most populous country in the world, with an estimated population of 176 million inhabitants (UNICEF, 2009). Pakistan is an ethnically and linguistically diverse country. An overwhelming majority of the population (above 95%) is Muslim. They reside with religious minorities that include Christians, Hindus, and Sikhs. Multiple languages are spoken along with the official language, English, and the national language, Urdu.

The geography of Pakistan is similarly varied. It blends landscapes that range from plains and deserts, to forests, hills, and plateaus that extend from the coastal areas of the Arabian Sea in the south to the mountains of the Karakoram Range in the north. The number of people living in urban areas has risen substantially; however, a majority (65%) still lives in rural areas. Agriculture is the single largest sector of Pakistan’s economy. It contributes about 24% of the gross national product, directly accounts for about 70% of the country’s export earnings, and employs more than 50% of its civilian labor force (Pakistan Water Partnership, 2001).

A general profile of Pakistan across the last five decades demonstrates substantial gains in health, education, and economic status, increased average life expectancy, a reduction in child death rates, improved nutrition programs, as well as better levels of immunization, disease prevention, and school attendance. These improvements have led to an overall reduction in the mortality rate of infants and children under five (Federal Bureau of Statistics, 2009; UNICEF, 2009; WHO, 2009). Since 1990, life expectancy in Pakistan has increased by five years, and the mortality rate for children five years of age and under has improved from 132 to 90 children per 1,000 live births (WHO, 2009).

As more children survive to school age, the number attending primary school has increased. Although the goal of universal access to basic education is still far from being achieved, net primary enrolment ratios have increased. The figures for
2008 suggest that the proportion of children in Pakistan who completed primary education has reached 70% overall (UNICEF, 2009). While the progress and achievements of the past 50 years have resulted in a reduced mortality rate overall, morbidity remains a concern. Babies who, in the past, would have died in infancy are surviving into childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, but typically experience multiple threats and impairments to their physical, mental, and social health (UNICEF, 2009; WHO, 2009).

Communicable diseases such as malaria, diarrhea, acute respiratory illness, and vaccine-preventable diseases (e.g., measles, hepatitis) still constitute major public health challenges. Pakistan is considered a low-prevalence but high-risk country for HIV/AIDS, especially among injecting drug users. Natural disasters such as the massive earthquake of 2005 and floods of 2010 along with the “war on terror” have put an additional burden on the country’s economy in general and health and education in particular. That said, Pakistan is committed to achieving the United Nations Development Programme’s Millennium Development Goals as the national agenda for development as well as reducing the burden of poverty and disease. The question that arises here is “How can the people of Pakistan continue to make progress in the face of the emerging problems that are influencing the health and education of children as well as youth?” Part of the answer lies in the role of education. This is because schools can provide a strategic point of entry for the delivery of comprehensive health education.

PRIMARY EDUCATION IN PAKISTAN: A LANDSCAPE

Schooling in Pakistan generally starts at Grade 1, although private schools provide Montessori and kindergarten schooling systems. Schooling continues through to secondary school matriculation or “O” levels and thus encompasses a period of 10 to 13 years. The country also has a parallel secondary school education system which operates through private schools and is based on the curriculum set by the University of Cambridge. The overall literacy rate for Pakistan’s population 15 years of age and above is 56%, with 69% literacy amongst males and 44% amongst females (Federal Bureau of Statistics, 2009; UNICEF, 2009).

At primary level, the educational landscape in Pakistan is characterized by the prevalence of government and private schools. There are 156,592 primary schools in Pakistan. The total enrolment at the primary stage is 17.3 million children, of whom 7.5 million (44%) are girls and 9.7 million (56%) are boys. The overall teacher–child ratio is around 1:40 (Ministry of Education, 2009; UNICEF, 2009). The main subjects taught in primary schools are science, mathematics, social studies, and language.

In urban areas, many children attend schools where each grade level has its own teacher. However, there are many multi-grade schools in rural areas in which one teacher instructs more than one grade. Most of the multi-grade schools are one-room schools, where one teacher teaches all grades. A number of non-governmental organizations throughout Pakistan have initiated multi-grade