

Irreparable Loss:

Sanctions and the Disruption
of Children's Education in Baluchistan, Iran

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Abstract

This report investigates the effects of economic sanctions on children's education in the region of Baluchistan, part of the Iranian province of Sistan and Baluchistan, the poorest in the country. The primary aim of this report is to shift the focus of the study of economic sanctions from the core—the middle-class residents living in Iran's capital, Tehran—to the periphery. Furthermore, this report makes sense of the data often cited to measure the economic and social consequences of the devastating sanctions imposed on Iran. To do so, 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted with local educators, administrators, and activists, and their testimonies were analysed alongside data on the operation of the education sector in Baluchistan. This research shows that the economic pressure of sanctions has negatively affected all inputs to the education system in the region. Negative outcomes can be observed in the financial welfare of families, school construction projects, operating budgets, overall governance, and the number and quality of teachers. By chronicling the unseen effects of sanctions on the overlooked communities in Baluchistan, this paper aims to provide policymakers in Iran, as well as in countries that have imposed sanctions against Iran, with the necessary information to recognise the harms caused by sanctions and to take steps towards remediation for ordinary people.

Preface

This report is one outcome of my friendship with a warm and generous people. As a second-year university student, I first visited Baluchistan as a volunteer teacher, and I was truly shocked by the level of deprivation, poverty, and inequality that I observed. I had no family, ethnic or religious ties to the people of the region. However, I cannot forget my joyful interactions with the children to whom I taught mechanical physics and calculus. In the following years, along with pursuing my bachelor's degree, I continued volunteering in different capacities in the education sector, including teaching, organising remedial educational camps, and fundraising for school construction projects. In 2020, I received a grant from the Bourse & Bazaar Foundation while conducting research for my master's thesis on the effects of sanctions on Iran. Reflecting on my prior experiences, I struggled to understand how the people of Baluchistan could endure the ever-increasing poverty and economic hardship imposed upon them. Therefore, my research came to focus on the question of how sanctions affected the education of children in the region. I am aware that sanctions are not the sole cause of hardship in Baluchistan, as vulnerabilities have accumulated through decades of government negligence. However, my research makes clear that sanctions exacerbate the region's extant struggles, pushing families into crisis. While highlighting the unaccounted and unjust effects of sanctions, I look forward to the day when no child will be forced to leave school because of oppressive policies that overwhelm and undermine their community's collective power.

Acknowledgements

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About the author

Niloofer Adnani is a first-year doctoral student in international studies at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). Her research broadly explores how the politics of transnational economic institutions impact the livelihoods of local populations, particularly in the Global South. Before joining SAIS, she completed her master's degree in global affairs with a minor in international peace studies at the Keough School of Global Affairs at the University of Notre Dame. Niloofer was born and raised in Tehran, and her research is influenced by her work experience in various Iranian non-governmental organisations.



1. Introduction

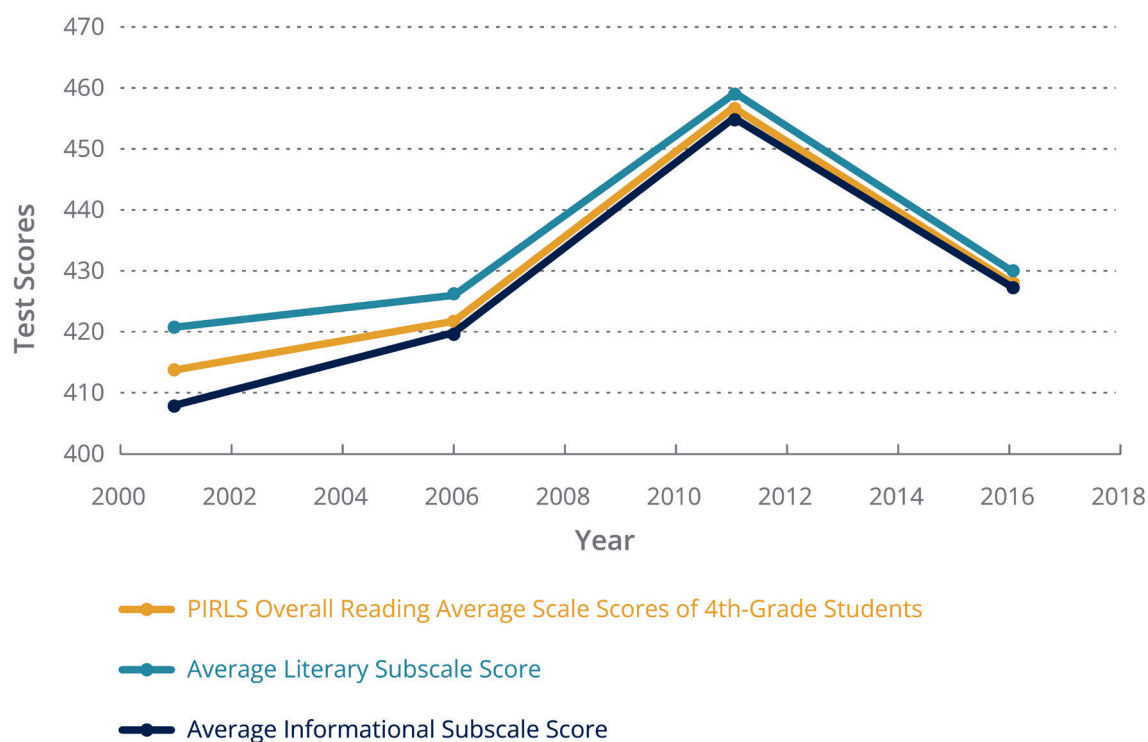
Article 30 of the Iranian constitution asserts that the government is responsible for providing free education for all children under 18 years old; the first nine years of education starting at age 6 are compulsory. The Iranian school system consists of two years of pre-primary, six years of primary, three years of lower secondary and three years of upper secondary. The country's education policy is complex. Numerous variables influence education outcomes and, in turn, the economic and social impact of education. Factors including the number of years of schooling, quality of teachers, pedagogy in use, characteristics and preparedness of the students, quality of facilities and financial means affect education outcomes¹. Given the number of variables that influence education outcomes and the complexity of measuring the impact of sanctions, this paper does not seek to test the hypothesis that sanctions can affect education outcomes quantitatively. However, the idea that sanctions might lead to worse education outcomes is supported by some datasets. For instance, data from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) shows that after 10 years of continuous educational improvement, Iranian students experienced a sharp decrease in their reading literacy scores—the ability to understand written language forms—between 2011 and 2016—the period during which Iran came under biting multilateral sanctions (Figure 1). In fact, the 2016's PIRLS report saw Iran experience the sharpest decrease in test scores amongst the 50 countries surveyed.

Where quantitative methods are not possible, qualitative research can help us understand how economic pressure brought on by sanctions have changed several key factors in education outcomes in Baluchistan. Located in the country's southeast, Sistan and Baluchistan is the second largest province in Iran by geographic area, and it neighbours Afghanistan and Pakistan. Based on the 1395 (March 2016–17) census, 3.47 percent of Iran's population lives in Sistan and Baluchistan. In 2018, the population growth rate was 1.83 percent, higher than the rate of 1.24 percent countrywide. Thus, the region needs an increase in children's education capacity. Zahedan is the capital of the province. In 1397 (March 2018–19), Sistan and Baluchistan had the lowest Human Development Index (HDI) ranking in the country. It also had the lowest life expectancy, at 65.7 years for men and 69.2 years for women; both are 8.5 years lower than Tehran's average life expectancy. Moreover, in Sistan and Baluchistan, per capita income increased from 342,000 tomans in 1379 (March 2000–01) to 633,000 tomans in 1390 (March 2011–12), before decreasing to 529,000 tomans in 1395 (March 2016–17). To put it differently, from 1379 to 1395, residents of Tehran enjoyed three to six times higher per capita income than people living in Sistan and Baluchistan. In terms of education, Sistan and Baluchistan is the lowest ranked Iranian province in years of schooling, with 11.1 expected

1. Technically, educational achievements such as learned knowledge and acquired skills are dependent on a number of factors, including the number of years of schooling (S), quality of teachers (Q), pedagogy (Q), school characteristics (Q), children's characteristics (C), preparedness level (C), abilities (C), household characteristics (H), the family's effects on the children (H) and available resources at school (I). For example, taking an economist's lens, families try to maximise their satisfaction based on the restrictions of each of these factors, such as budget, savings and credit constraints. The production function can be depicted as $A = a(S, Q, C, H, I)$. See P. Glewwe and K. Muralidharan, "Improving Education Outcomes in Developing Countries: Evidence, Knowledge Gaps, and Policy Implications," 2016, 91.

years of schooling (EYS), compared with Tehran's 16.76 EYS and the national average of 14.4 EYS. Notably, there is a considerable gap between Sistan and Baluchistan and Kurdistan, the second-lowest ranked province with 12.7 EYS. Strikingly, about 25 percent of Iran's out-of-school children age 6-11 live in Sistan and Baluchistan. In the year 1397 (March 2018-19), 141,945 children age 6-11 were out of school in the province. Of those, 25 percent live in Zahedan, 15 percent in Chabahar and 12 percent in Sarbāz. In 1395 (March 2016-17), Sistan and Baluchistan had the lowest literacy rate in the country, at 68.2 percent for people over 6 years old².

Figure 1: Change in average scores of 4th grade students in Iran from 2001 to 2016³



2. "Nīm-nigāhī bi shākhiṣ-hā-yi tusī'i-yi ustān-i Sīstān va Balūchistān (Second Edition)," Ministry of Cooperatives, Labour, and Social Welfare: Deputy of Economic Affairs and Development, June 2020, <https://rb.gy/rgtjbp>.
3. "The PIRLS framework focuses on two key content domains: purposes for reading and processes of comprehension. There are two key purposes for reading: reading for literary experience and reading to acquire and use information. Reading for literary experience involves reading for interest or pleasure using texts that emphasize characters, plot events, settings, and themes. Reading to acquire and use information includes reading to learn, typically using informational texts that tell students about themselves and the world around them. The assessment also integrates four comprehension processes within both of the purposes for reading. The four processes of comprehension consist of the ability to (1) focus on, and retrieve, explicitly stated information, (2) make straightforward inferences, (3) interpret and integrate ideas and information, and (4) evaluate, and critique, content and textual elements. These four comprehension processes are presented through two combined measures: retrieving and straightforward inferencing and interpreting, integrating, and evaluating." See Catharine Warner-Griffin, Huili Liu and Chrystine Tadler, "Reading Achievement of U.S. Fourth-Grade Students in an International Context," US Department of Education: National Center for Education Statistics, 2017, <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018017.pdf>.



2. Methodology

I conducted 10 in-depth interviews in Autumn 2020 with individuals intimately involved in the region's education sector. Among the interviewees were educators, including three high school principals and three teacher-activists; administrators, including the deputy directors of the Departments of Education in three counties in Baluchistan; and activists, including two managers from NGOs working on social justice issues in the region. Interviewees were based in the cities and towns of Sarāvān, Sīb va Sūrān, Bampusht, Dashtyārī, Īrānshahr, Sarbāz, Qaṣr-i Qand and Rāsk. All interviews were conducted in Farsi and translated into English. All names in this report have been changed to protect the interviewees' identities.

To evaluate the effects of sanctions on education, I asked local stakeholders in education to explain what changed after sanctions were imposed. I asked interviewees to recall conditions before the imposition of sanctions with a particular emphasis on economic phenomena, such as inflation. The main turning points included the years before the Obama administration's lifting of secondary sanctions in January 2016 and the years following the Trump administration's reimposition of sanctions in May 2018. Although the validity of memories about measurable parameters in the past might need further scrutiny, the testimonies of stakeholders in the education system of vulnerable communities carries undeniable weight. The interviews were credible and cohesive, with the interviewees identifying four main areas where sanctions affected key factors in educational attainment: household income, school budgets, investment in infrastructure and the quality of instruction.⁴

4. This paper does not discuss specific challenges faced by refugee and undocumented children.

3. Discussion



3.1 Households are forced to make trade-offs

A consistent theme in the interviews was the decreasing purchasing power of households, leading families to prioritise basic needs such as food and cut other costs, including education. As Salehi-Isfahani has shown, household purchasing power in smaller towns and rural areas exhibits greater vulnerability to external economic shocks, such as economic sanctions and the attendant high inflation. Between 2011 and 2019, Iran's rural poverty rate increased from 10.3 percent to 22.9 percent, the highest rate since 2000. However, considering that many of these families were already impoverished, their increasing economic hardship might not be captured by the fall below the poverty line.⁵ Mohammad, a high school principal in Sarāvān, said that while families in Baluchistan were used to making trade-offs, the impact of inflation—particularly rising food prices—was severe. “If we used to have bread and cheese for breakfast, we eliminate the cheese now,” Mohammad said. “All of these compromises will have short and long-term effects on our children. We observe this with our own eyes, and we ourselves must study these health effects. Our children are experiencing malnutrition and losing weight every day under economic pressure.” Hunger has changed decisions made by families around education. “Our children might get by without a warm coat or shoes, they might live without attending school and having books, but they will not survive without food. This is where our priorities have shifted,” he added.

Food prices have risen drastically in Baluchistan because of its distant location from Iran's economic heartland. As Yūsuf, a teacher and activist in Īrānshahr, said, “We used to buy a 20kg bag of rice for 60,000 toman at the beginning of 1398 (March 2019). Today (October 2020), I must buy it for 700,000 to 800,000 toman. Who do you think could afford that?”⁶ Much of the food bought by households in Baluchistan is imported from neighbouring countries, mainly Pakistan. People consume Pakistani products, and their main meals include Pakistani rice. Under sanctions, currency devaluation can see imported food prices rise to levels significantly above the annual inflation rate, which can be higher than 30 percent.

The economic crisis has also undermined long-running attempts to inform families of the benefits of education—an effort, in Mohammad's words, “to change the dominant culture.” Efforts by educators in Baluchistan to help parents see education as a pathway to better earning potential reflect well-established practices to increase school participation.⁷ Informational programmes about post-graduation benefits and the potential for increased income have been shown to result in a 20-35 percent increase in students' attendance in the next four years

5. Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, “Impact of Sanctions on Household Welfare and Employment,” in *Rethinking Iran at SAIS* (Iran Under Sanctions, School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), 2020), <https://www.rethinkingiran.com/iranundersanctions/salehiisfahani>.

6. A toman is equivalent to 10 rials. US Dollar/Iranian toman market exchange rate was about 25,000 in October 2020.

7. Trang Nguyen, “Information, Role Models and Perceived Returns to Education: Experimental Evidence from Madagascar,” *Job Market Paper*, January 2008, 51.

of school.⁸ Mohammad said he thought that economic pressure since 2018 had undermined their efforts, saying that many families are reluctant to spend money on education and do not recognise it as an “investment” anymore. He added that even middle-income families that see the value of education have been forced to make trade-offs since the reimposition of sanctions. They lack the financial means to pay for books, supplementary materials, transportation, and even food and snacks for their children. Mohammad said that typically when the level of poverty increases in the community, families prefer their children to be breadwinners. He also said student themselves felt pressure: “Some are more sensitive towards the burden of their education’s cost on their families. Even without their parents’ consent, they decide to sacrifice their future by leaving school and working to help their parents and siblings.”

The interviewees unanimously agreed that there are few well-paying and socially acceptable jobs available for young people, leading many to participate in cross-border smuggling. The smuggling takes many forms, including fuel carrier (*sūkht-barī*), back carrier (*kūli-barī*), money carrier (*pīli-varī*), and gasoline canister carrier (*qāllun-kishī*). When children leave school to seek additional income for their families, the jobs they find are often perilous. For instance, in February 2021 at least 10 Baluch fuel carriers were shot by security forces near the border with Pakistan.⁹ While news of this incident went viral, the clash was not the first instance of such violence targeting informal workers. Āyishi, a teacher and activist in Sarāvān, lamented that “some of our men have lost parts of their bodies, and some are killed.” Farhād, a high school principal in Rāsk, questioned authorities’ lack of action in the face of increased smuggling, which he thought could lead to growing insecurity in the region. “When students leave school, their primary option is to get involved in what the state calls “fuel smuggling,” Farhād said. “Don’t they think it is dangerous for regional security that more male youth will stay illiterate, poor and resort to smuggling?” For smugglers, the relative appreciation of Pakistan’s rupee during the sanctions years and the increasing demand for cheap Iranian goods and fuel meant that participation in the dangerous trade was more rational for many students than attending school.

Although men have more opportunities for formal and informal employment in the region and dropping out from school can have cost-benefit justifications, the education of female students is also compromised. “Families are not prioritising education for their daughters while their sons are in the job market,” Āyishi said. Girls are often expected to forgo costly education, stay at home, and engage in crafts such as embroidery, sewing, and dressmaking, either to reduce the need for the household to purchase clothing and textiles or to sell textiles and clothing at the market. This expectation is reinforced by the unique importance of women’s clothing in Baluch culture and ethnic traditions. According to Murād, a teacher and activist in Qaṣr-i Qand, the rising cost of yarn and fabric, which are imported from Pakistan, has had a direct impact on family decisions regarding the education of girls. “If I bought 1 meter of cloth for 2,000 tomans two years ago, I have to buy it for 10,000 tomans today,” he said. Consequently, girls often leave

8. Robert Jensen, “The (Perceived) Returns to Education and the Demand for Schooling,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 125, no. 2 (May 2010): 515–48, <https://doi.org/10.1162/qjec.2010.125.2.515>.

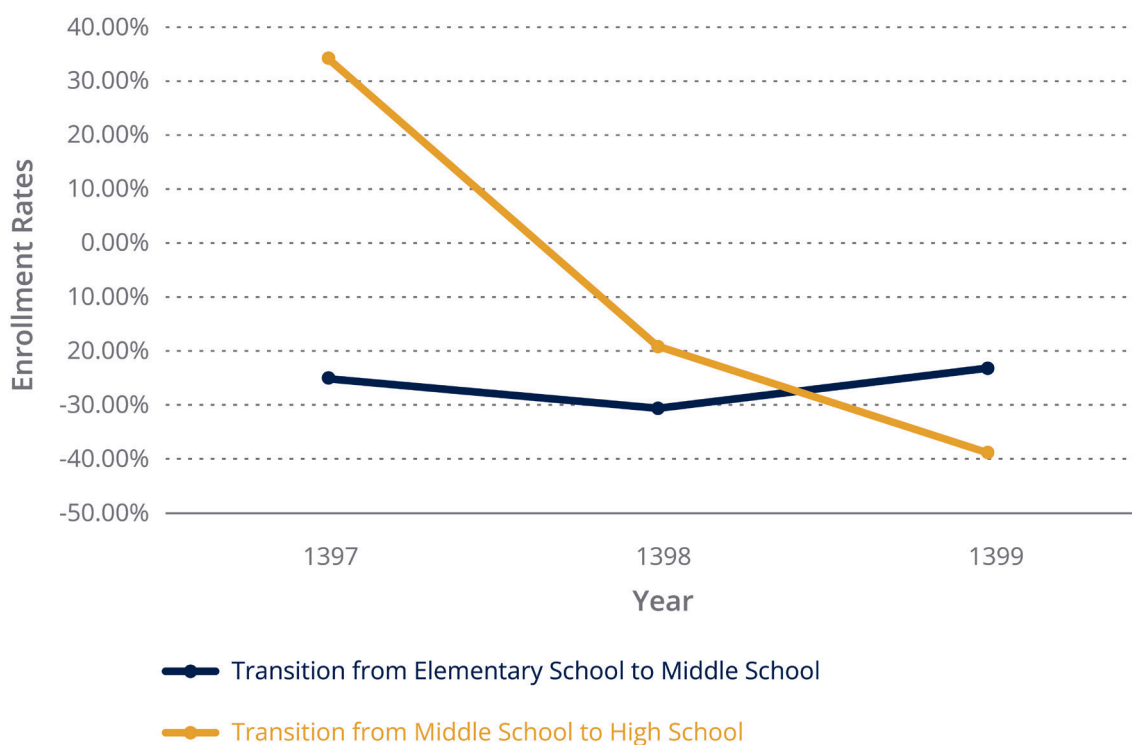
9. “Iran: Killings Near Pakistani Border,” *Human Rights Watch* (blog), February 25, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/25/iran-killings-near-pakistani-border>.

school, sometimes of their own volition, to help reduce household costs by producing handmade embroideries and clothing.

All the educators interviewed said school attendance rates have dropped drastically in the past two years. However, structural data that illustrates the effects of sanctions in this period is not easy to find. This might be for two reasons. First, the annual report of the Ministry of Education is released approximately two years after the end of the academic year, meaning that the Ministry of Education Statistical Yearbook for 1397–1398 (2018–2019) was not helpful in understanding the effects of the Trump administration’s “maximum pressure” campaign on Iran. Secondly, it is essential to note that publicly available data does not capture the gap between enrolment and attendance. My interviewees said that although many students are enrolled in school, they do not attend classes. Figure 2 demonstrates what educators believe about dropout rates. In the border district of Bampusht, enrolment rates have decreased by 10 percent from elementary school to middle school and 70 percent from middle school to high school. Older children are more prone to leave school, and Nāşir, head of the office of Education for Children with Disabilities in one county, said:

Our district had about 15,500 enrolled students with special needs in primary and secondary schools two years ago. Although the 5,000 children enrolled in primary school are less affected, we have fewer than 200 secondary school students this year. Can you believe it? In just the last two years, all of them left to work across the border. Perhaps if we had more boarding schools with sufficient budgets, they would have stayed. But if they had not left, they would have died of hunger. Our children had to give up their education and their dreams.

Figure 2: Student dropout rate, calculated by the author based on data from the Ministry of Education’s Statistical Yearbook and local authorities



The interviewees did not recall similar patterns of dropouts under the previous rounds of sanctions. Their comparisons of the effect of sanctions imposed in 2012 and 2018 were compatible with what the data suggests—the poor were hit harder under the Trump administration’s sanctions. The differences might be attributed at least partially to former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s social protection policies, such as universal cash transfers, known as *yārāni*, introduced in 2011. Şālīh, a former high school principal and current deputy director of the education department in a Baluchistan county, said that many of the region’s poorest people, such as nomadic tribes living in the mountains, have no regular income other than the *yārāni*. But Farhād said *yārāni* is no longer enough to help families get by: “With *yārāni*, some people could survive and provide for their basic needs, including education. But *yārāni* and their income has remained unchanged over the years, while inflation has been rising. In not prioritising children’s education costs, it is not people’s culture that has changed, rather, their purchasing power has decreased. As explained in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, no money is left in parents’ pockets to spend on education.”

Even middle-class families in Baluchistan are suffering. Mohammad said that middle-class families have lost their savings and pointed to his own experience. In the past, he used to allocate 30 percent of his income to household consumption and save the rest, but now he spends 80 percent of his income on food and groceries alone. “Comparatively, inflation was more controlled in 2012,” Mohammad said, adding that since the reimposition of sanctions in 2018, most families have spent the little savings they had left.

3.2 School budgets are diminished

Though not a comprehensive empirical investigation, the interviews presented in this report make clear the effects of sanctions on the ability of Baluch families to prioritise education for their children. In this section, the paper focuses on the importance of school resources to educational outcomes. Diminished budgets and austerity measures are among the factors that have led to worsened educational outcomes in the region. Since 2018, Iranian export revenue and access to financial assets have been significantly reduced, creating significant fiscal challenges that have seen budgets slashed at national and local levels. In 2018, Iran spent 3.96 percent of its GDP on education, accounting for 21.1 percent of total governmental expenditure. In 2021, the government’s education budget decreased to 13.7 percent of total expenditure.¹⁰ Even where budgets have remained the same, high inflation means that real value of budget allocations has diminished significantly. Conditions of austerity have affected the operation of schools in Baluchistan. Yūsuf referred to Article 24 of the Civil Service Management Law that requires school administrators to continuously reduce expenditures. He said that recently, schools’ administrators have been receiving

10. See: Tasnim News Agency, “Juz’iyāt būdji 112 hizār milyārd tumānī āmūzish va parvarish dar sāl 1400/ chirā būdji-i sanduq madāris ghiyr-dulatī 10 barābar shud?!” Akhbār farhangiyān va madāris—Akhbār ijtimā’ī tasnim., December 9, 2020, <https://tn.ai/2406707>.

The World Bank, “Government Expenditure on Education, Total (percent of GDP) - Iran, Islamic Rep. | Data,” <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.XPD.TOTL.GD.ZS?locations=IR>.

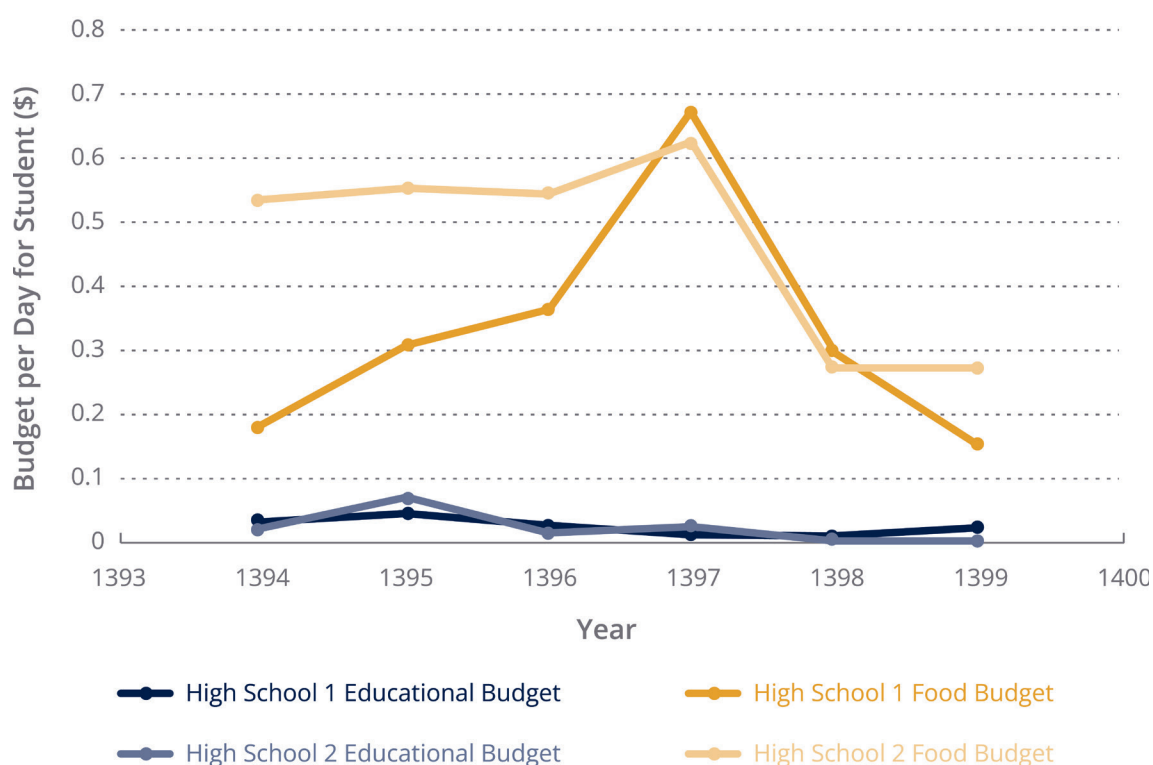
Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, “Qānūn Būdji Sāl 1400” (The Iran Data Portal, March 17, 2021), 300/105678, <https://irandataportal.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/LAW-1400.pdf>.

funding irregularly because of general financial instability. When the funding does show up, it is often less than the allocated budget, and school staff are required to manage resources more efficiently. Yūsuf criticised the austerity policies that are being applied in already impoverished areas, asking, “How can we be told to ‘manage’ with no available resources?”

Administrators of boarding schools in larger cities are also concerned about their funding. They said that the cost of food, sanitising products, and supplementary educational materials has dramatically increased, but budget allocations and tuition payments have not kept up. Farhād said, “We receive 3,500 tomans per student per day. It has gradually increased in the last couple of years. In the past, we could strategically adapt and manage with 1,200 tomans. For example, we had established different funds in our schools that teachers, school staff and parents, as well as donors, contributed to monthly, but the funds are depleting. When we see that both governmental and public financial support have fallen, we have no choice but to cancel many of our programmes and activities. Today, one piece of bread costs 1,500 tomans; you count the rest.” While the government provides utilities, such as electricity, for free to schools, educators said that budgets, which have effectively been capped, are not compatible with the regions’ needs.¹¹ Yūsuf said that one of their large top-ranked public high schools (*nimūni-dulatī*) serves about 200 incoming students from four or five nearby cities. The school received a budget allocation of 11 million tomans for four months, while in the same period, their electricity bill was 12 million tomans. This is in line with what Figure 3 depicts—the financial resources of even the best high schools have fallen dramatically. While per student spending on food has almost doubled in the last two years, when adjusted for inflation, real expenditure has decreased by as much as 78 percent. All interviewees said that over the last decade, NGOs and numerous charity groups had stepped in to help fund children’s education in Baluchistan. Not surprisingly, these sources of funding are diminishing as donations have decreased in the past three years. Mohammad said, “Middle-class Tehranis have lost their purchasing power and are dealing with keeping up their businesses. We cannot expect further support from them.” Donations made to such organisations by Iranians living abroad have also become more difficult because of challenges in transferring money to Iran due to sanctions.

11. The province has a variety of weather conditions. While most areas in the region have dry and hot weather, mountain areas such as the county of Taftan have cold climates.

Figure 3: Schools' financial resources over time, calculated by the author based on data from local authorities¹²



3.3 Infrastructure investments grind to a halt

The poor quality of school facilities has been a major cause of Baluchistan's poor educational outcomes for a long time. Yūsuf shared the results of research conducted by his NGO. He said that southern parts of Baluchistan, namely Dashtyārī, Qaṣr-i Qand and Rāsk, have the lowest average educational space per student in the country at 1.8 square metres per student, one-fifth of international standard of 8.5 square metres and one-third of the countrywide average of 5.3 square metres. Yūsuf said inflation had impeded construction efforts at the school: "We completed construction of a two-class primary school with a bathroom and yard in a village for 40-50 million tomans three years ago, costing 1 million per square metre. While our revenue remained constant, the cost has quadrupled since then. Two days ago, I said no to a donor because we could not build the same school in the neighbouring village, even with twice of their proposed budget." Murād, a teacher and prominent activist in Dashtyārī, said the year 1396 (March 2017-18) was a turning point in their construction efforts: "Suddenly, many NGOs started to work in our region. Among them, some donors paid a lot of attention to education. We had a 'construction revolution' with collaboration between NGOs, charities, and the Organisation for Renovation, Development and Equipping Schools (*Sāzmān-i Nusāzī, Tusi'-i, va Tajhīz-i Madāris-i Kishvar*). If the recent rising costs did not happen, we would have celebrated our school self-sufficiency (*khudkafāyī*) this year with no decrepit schools in

12. Differences among schools' budgets are partially related to principals' power, networks and negotiation capabilities.

our villages.”¹³ Shādī, deputy director of a well-known Tehran-based NGO working on school construction in Dashtyārī, said that because of daily price fluctuations, the organisation often gets into trouble with donors. She said that while the NGO has reduced its overhead and cut construction costs by as much as 30 percent, it still cannot keep up with the rising price of materials. Donors give generously, but they are disappointed by the results. “Often, donors do not understand the reality of the fast translation of economic pressure to prices in a region distant from the capital, and that is what we get, a half-built school,” Shādī said.

Even modest upgrades to facilities are out of reach. In February 2019, education administrators announced that about 150,000 classrooms throughout the country must be equipped with air-conditioning systems, an especially important upgrade in heat-stricken Baluchistan.¹⁴ Nāşir said, “With one of our donors’ support, we equipped all 23 rooms of one school using 50 million tomans three years ago—each air conditioning unit was 1.7 million tomans. Today, the same model costs us 12 to 15 million tomans. In addition to high costs, we struggle to find similar models in the market because of import barriers.”¹⁵

Transportation networks are an important part of school infrastructure, and the loss of economic mobility has restricted school system access for many children in Baluchistan. The government started implementing the centred-village (*rūstā markazī*) plan in Sistan and Baluchistan in 2010, a policy that aimed to provide free transportation to children who needed to commute to schools in distant areas. Yūsuf said that in some parts of the region, the average distance to school is 12 kilometers, meaning that some students must travel 24 kilometers every day. He said, “While the plan was operational, it helped provide education for 30,000 students a year and decreased the number of out-of-school children.” Interviewees cited the fuel price increase enacted in November 2018 as a key factor in hampering the ability of children to commute to school, contributing to the failure of free transportation policies. Faced with rising costs and reduced budgets, local departments of education were forced to request monthly payments from families. “First, it was 5,000 tomans per student per month. Then, it increased to 10,000 and later 20,000 tomans. The plan was ultimately terminated after four or five years,” said Yūsuf.

Distance learning is an attractive option when many students live far from school, but the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that Baluchistan lacks the necessary internet penetration. According to Ḥamīd-Rizā Rakhshānī, director of Sistan and Baluchistan’s education department, 35 percent of students in the province lack internet access. Approximately 300,000 students, out of a total of 800,000, are registered on the *Shaad* online learning management system.¹⁶ Even where the telecommunications network does provide 3G signal, many families lack the financial means to afford smartphones or internet-enabled electronic devices. Ṭahir, the

13. Iran’s government has used the term in referring to efforts to increase food security.

14. Young Journalists Club (YJC), “Madāris-i kudām ustān-hā kambūd-i tajhīzāt-i sarmāyishī va garmāyishī dārand? + Īnfugrāfi,” 12 February 2019, <https://www.yjc.news/00Sem6>.

15. In addition to sanctions barriers in importing goods, one of the government’s policies to resist the economic pressure and boost domestic production and consumption is to increase tariffs on foreign-made products.

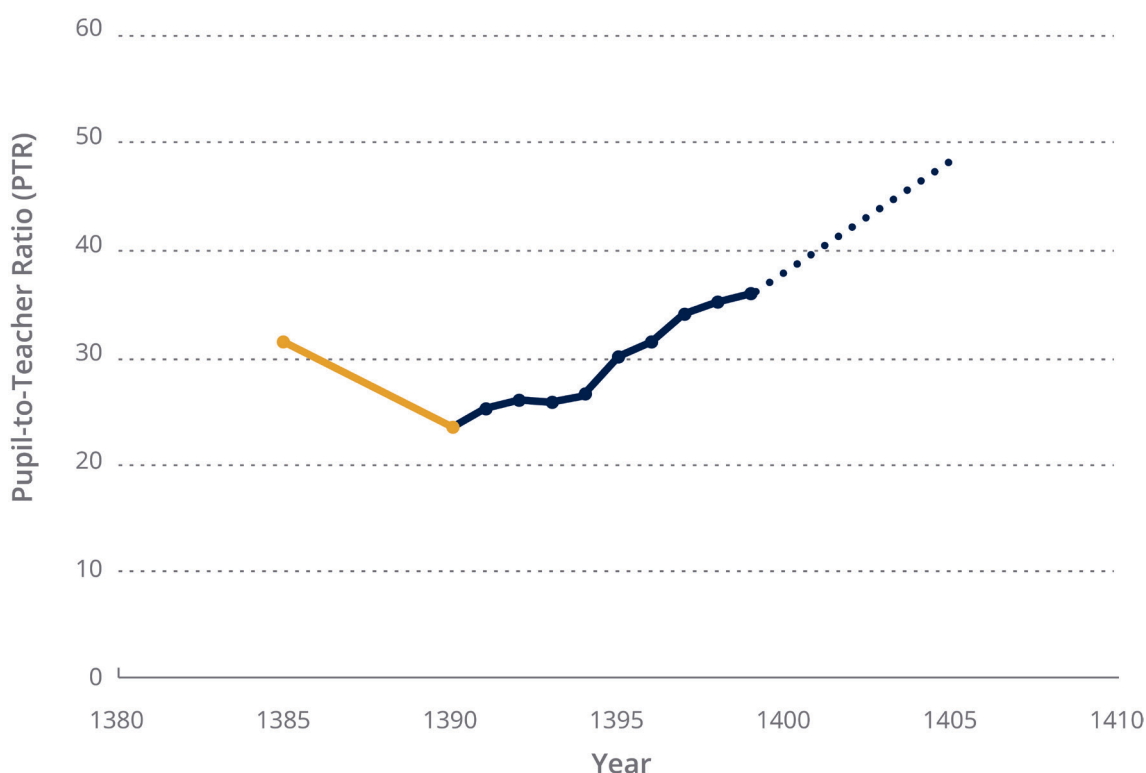
16. Iranian Labour News Agency (ILNA), “Sī (30) tā chihil (40) darşad-i dānish-āmūzān-i Sīstān va Balūchīstān bi internet dast-rīsī nadārand,” *Khabar-Guzārī-i ILNA*, 18 April 2020, <https://www.ilna.news/fa/tiny/news-899061>. Young Journalists Club (YJC), “Sāyi-yi maḥrūmīyat, chālīshī barāyi āmūzish-i majāzī-i dānish-āmūzān-i Sīstān va Balūchīstān,” 4 May 2020, <http://www.yjc.news/fa/news/7334929>.

Deputy Director of a local Department of Education, said, “I bought my cell phone for 1 million tomans two years ago. I cannot afford the same model with 7 million tomans now’.

3.4 Quality of instruction falters

Given high population growth in the region, Sistan and Baluchistan is dealing with a tremendous shortage of teachers, a problem that predates sanctions. Instead of employing more civil-service teachers, however, the government deployed about 5,000 contract teachers in the province between 2000 and 2011. As depicted in Figure 4, the 30 percent increase in teachers helped decrease the pupil-to-teacher ratio (PTR) from 31.3 in 1385 (2006) to 23.5 in 1390 (2011). The number of teachers remained almost constant until 1400 (2021), resulting in an increase of the PTR to 35.8, considerably higher than the nationwide average of 22. The increased reliance on contract teachers, which reduces the wage bill for the Ministry of Education, parallels the use of contractors in other sectors of Iran’s economy, including in the oil industry. Interviewees suggested that budget pressure, made worse by sanctions, impeded the efforts of administrations, teachers, and families to advocate for investment in civil-service teachers.

Figure 4: Pupil-to-Teacher Ratio (PTR) in Sistan and Baluchistan, calculated by the author based on data from the Ministry of Education’s Statistical Yearbook and interviews with local authorities



Yūsuf referred to the concept of “effective management,” which is used to justify the move towards contract teachers. In one typical situation, the local department of education tasked the management of a rural school with 70-80 students to two contract teachers

and one administrative contractor in an arrangement where one teacher is allocated for all humanities courses, and the other is responsible for all math and science courses. Yūsuf's concern about over-dependency on contract teachers and staff and the long-term negative impact of austerity is supported by research that savings achieved by employing low-cost teachers might be outweighed by future hidden costs related to poorer educational outcomes for students.¹⁷

Interviewees pointed out that contract teachers are not trained at Farhangian University, a national network of public teacher colleges, and that having a bachelor's degree, while a minimum requirement, did not guarantee a solid grasp of pedagogy. One teacher-activist said, "It is a recent phenomenon. My 7th grade student cannot write her name. She does not know how to read. Her primary school teacher had not received training and had a degree in theology." While most of the interviewees complained about the contractors' lack of qualifications, no systematic evidence exists to show the effect of higher levels of instructor education on children's learning.¹⁸ However, prior experience in teaching, which does appear to be correlated with better education outcomes, is not a prerequisite of employment for contract teachers. Contract teachers tend to be recruited from two groups: local youth who have university educations but are unemployed, or recently unemployed workers such as fishermen and mechanics (*apārātī-panchāgīrī*) who are not invested in teaching careers. Still, Ṣālīḥ countered concerns about qualifications by noting that administrators were satisfied with contract teachers because "they fill classrooms without teachers," adding that teachers would benefit from training during their employment, although no such programmes are in place.

All interviewees said turnover is high among contract teachers in Baluchistan. Providing a path for contract teachers to become full-time teachers after completing the necessary educational requirements and training qualifications has been an effective strategy to develop and professionalise the teaching force in many countries, including Nicaragua, Cambodia, and China.¹⁹ Such a policy was in place in Iran until 2013 when the Rouhani government changed the national law. In January 2021, Alī Alāhyār, the Ministry of Education's Deputy of Planning and Development, said in an interview, "Contract teachers are not full-time employees, and the government does not have any obligation to recruit them."²⁰ While in May 2020 Iran's parliament approved the integration of experienced contract teachers who joined the workforce before 2013, the policy does not include

17. For example, one study found that expansion of contract teachers in rural areas of India enhanced students' academic performance and increased their math and language test scores, although their results were only applicable to the current margin of the education system where untrained contract teachers were employed alongside regular teachers who might have provided support and mentoring for them. See Karthik Muralidharan and Venkatesh Sundararaman, "Teacher Performance Pay: Experimental Evidence from India," *Journal of Political Economy* 119, no. 1 (1 February 2011): 39–77, <https://doi.org/10.1086/659655>.

18. Teachers' experience, not degree level, has been shown to positively affect education outcomes for students. See Eric A. Hanushek and Steven G. Rivkin, "Chapter 18 Teacher Quality," in *Handbook of the Economics of Education*, ed. E. Hanushek and F. Welch, vol. 2 (Elsevier, 2006), 1051–78, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1574-0692\(06\)02018-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1574-0692(06)02018-6).

19. Yael Duthilleul, Unesco, and International Institute for Educational Planning, *Lessons Learnt in the Use of Contract Teachers: Synthesis Report*. (Paris: International Institute for Educational Planning, 2005).

20. Fars News Agency, "Juz'iyāt Istikhdām-Hā-Yi Jadīd Dar Āmūzish va Parvarish | Az Jazb 25 Hizār Khidmat-Guzār va Siraydār Tā Ta'īn Taklīf Muṭālibāt Mu'allimān.," Ta'līm va tarbiyat | madrisi, January 23, 2021, <http://fna.ir/f2eqys>. Malīḥi Maḥmūd-khāh, "Ta'ahud-i 'yik-tarafī' mu'allimān-i kharīd-khidmat bi nizām-i āmūzishī va 'adam-i istiqbāl-i dūlat az istikhdām-i ānān | dalīl-i āmūzish va parvarish chīst?," Islamic Azad University News Agency (ANA Press), 6 September 2019, www.ana.press/x5xvb.

contract teachers hired after that year, with no apparent justification other than reducing the government's financial burden.²¹

Interviewees for this report said that contract teachers are exploited and not well paid, nine-month contractors who earn 20 percent of the salary enjoyed by official teachers without benefits that come with governmental positions.²² Šālīh said, "How will teachers be motivated to attend classes and energetically teach while they do not earn enough to support their families? Not to mention they are often paid irregularly." No financial incentive is provided for improved performance. While it is controversial, some research shows that teachers who are rewarded financially perform better, leading to increases in students' test scores.²³ The first limitation of such a policy argument is that contract teachers are a response to budgetary restrictions, so upskilling them in the short run will likely be subject to financial constraints. Ṭahir said that the county's Department of Education does not have the budget to deploy more teachers and design accountability mechanisms: "How should we provide incentives to hold them accountable when we cannot keep up with their regular payments?"

Two teacher-activists said that because many contract teachers are not Baluch, they do not know the Baluch language and cannot teach primary school children. Āyishi said that while people demand their constitutional right to be taught in their mother tongue, "a call for teaching in local languages is often politicised." Historically, the Iranian government has promoted the Persian language and suppressed attempts by ethnic minorities to revive local languages. Yet, research shows that minority children who attended education programmes in their second language do not perform as well as their peers in academics and cognitive skills.²⁴ In one study from the Philippines, researchers identified a 40 percent increase in test scores, particularly in reading and math, when students were primarily taught in their mother-tongue for the first three grades.²⁵ Even if administrators embrace instruction in the Baluch language, budgets pose another hurdle. Yūsuf said, "From what I see, one key reason that our proposals on curricular Baluch language are not accepted is the lack of funds." He said that incorporation of the Baluch language into the curriculum would require more resources, including additional school hours, recruitment of expert teachers and supplementary materials. But whether the solution is investing in Baluch recruits or mandating Baluch language proficiency as part of training programmes for non-local teachers, budgets do not stretch that far.

21. Iran Metropolis News Agency (IMNA), "Taklīf-i istikhdām-i nūrū-hā-yi kharīd khadamāt-i āmūzishī va haq-al-tadrīsī mushakhaṣ shud," 4 May 2020, www.imna.ir/news/422056.

22. Fars News Agency, "Kish-makish miyān-i āmūzish va parvarish va mu'assisān-i kharīd khadamāt-i āmūzishī | mu'allimāni ki az āghāz-i sāl-i taḥṣīlī ḥuquq daryāft nakardi-and," 30 April 2020, <http://fna.ir/ex35n5>.

23. Muralidharan and Sundararaman, "Teacher Performance Pay".

24. Margaret Bruck, "Language Impaired Children's Performance in an Additive Bilingual Education Program," *Applied Psycholinguistics* 3, no. 1 (March 1982): 45–60, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S014271640000415X>.

25. Stephen L. Walter and Diane E. Dekker, "Mother Tongue Instruction in Lubuagan: A Case Study from the Philippines," *International Review of Education* 57, no. 5 (1 December 2011): 667–83, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-011-9246-4>.

4. Conclusion



The people of Baluchistan, living on the “edge” in Iran’s geographic and economic periphery, have struggled to provide education for their children in the face of new financial challenges. The imposition of sanctions on Iran has spurred high inflation, currency depreciation, and fiscal constraints. In turn, educational programmes for children at primary and secondary schools have been cancelled, upgrades to educational facilities have been postponed and transportation links have been cut. Teachers and administrators face job insecurity and have had to temper their demands for reform. Baluch families have been forced to adopt survival strategies and prioritise their essential needs. Education ceases to be a priority, resulting in an increased dropout rate and a higher number of out-of-school children. Taken together, the interviews presented in this report make clear the direct harms that sanctions have imposed on many of Iran’s most vulnerable households.

Concerningly, these harms will prove difficult to fix. When asked about their experience after the implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (commonly known as JCPOA or the Iran nuclear deal) and the sanctions relief that led to robust economic growth in 2016–17, the interviewed teachers, administrators, and activists said economic stability and predictable inflation helped them maintain their mental health and empowered them to envision a future for their schools and their students. Some interviewees said construction projects were funded relatively faster, and more donations were received for education-focused NGOs. Nevertheless, most interviewees agreed that the “JCPOA wave never reached Baluchistan.” Located on the periphery, vulnerable communities are hardest hit by sanctions pressure, and they see their fortunes improve least when sanctions are lifted in comparison to Tehran and other major provinces. Nevertheless, the removal of sanctions is a necessary step to enhance the situation in Baluchistan. Policymakers in Iran, and in the countries that have supported multilateral sanctions, must recognise the need to evaluate and remedy the harms inflicted on families like those in Baluchistan. As Mohammad said, “At the very least, those students who left school should be identified, compensated, and guaranteed their rights, including the return to the classroom.”



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