



1. Project Data

Project ID P159378	Project Name EQRA	
Country Afghanistan	Practice Area(Lead) Education	
L/C/TF Number(s) IDA-D3810,TF-A8449,TF-A9570,TF-B5406	Closing Date (Original) 31-Dec-2023	Total Project Cost (USD) 89,326,187.33
Bank Approval Date 28-Sep-2018	Closing Date (Actual) 31-Dec-2023	
	IBRD/IDA (USD)	Grants (USD)
Original Commitment	200,000,000.00	223,000,000.00
Revised Commitment	122,893,312.59	47,398,148.09
Actual	89,326,187.33	47,398,148.09

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2. Project Objectives and Components

a. Objectives

According to the Financing Agreement (p. 4) and the Project Appraisal Document (PAD, p. 8), the project's objectives were to increase equitable access to primary and secondary education, particularly for girls, in selected lagging provinces, and to improve learning conditions in Afghanistan. According to the PAD (p. 8), "lagging provinces" were defined as those with the highest proportion and highest number of out-of-school girls (more than 70 percent).



As "equitable access" referred primarily to access for girls, this Review will assess achievement of three objectives:

- Increase access to primary and secondary education (overall access, in selected provinces)
- Increase access to equitable primary and secondary education, particularly for girls (equitable access, in selected provinces)
- Improve learning conditions in Afghanistan (learning conditions, nation-wide)

A reverse split rating will be applied here, as agreed with OPCS, to reflect the operational changes after the Taliban takeover in August 2021.

b. Were the project objectives/key associated outcome targets revised during implementation?

Yes

Did the Board approve the revised objectives/key associated outcome targets?

Yes

Date of Board Approval

07-Oct-2020

c. Will a split evaluation be undertaken?

Yes

d. Components

The project was approved with four components:

1. Equitable access to basic education (appraisal: US\$190 million, of which US\$68 million was from the International Development Association [IDA]). Following a traditional investment project financing (IPF) approach, the intention was to: (a) improve school infrastructure in rural areas in 17 selected provinces, through the construction of new school buildings, the provision of missing essential elements for rehabilitation of existing buildings, and strengthening of the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development's (MRRD's) capacity, including with respect to school construction; (b) provide school grants to eligible schools, to finance school supplies, access to hygienic products for girls, transport facilities for female students and teachers, bridge courses, and operations and maintenance expenditures; and (c) support community-based education (CBE) through strengthening the Ministry of Education's (MOE) capacity to develop an implementation plan for CBE policy, and expanding CBE classes in selected provinces.

2. Improving learning conditions (appraisal: US\$35 million, of which US\$9.5 million was from IDA), following a results-based approach, which was to support: (a) subject knowledge training of teachers of selected grades and the development of standardized examinations for teacher training colleges; (b) a pilot program, including its evaluation, to strengthen coaching and training of teachers and classroom observation; and (c) the development of new curricula and relevant learning materials for schools, and the delivery of textbooks from provincial education directorates (PEDs) to schools. Disbursements were to be



made against an eligible expenditure program upon achievement of pre-specified results as measured by disbursement-linked indicators (DLIs).

3. Strengthening education sector planning capacity and transparency (appraisal: US\$39 million, of which US\$11 million was from IDA), following a results-based approach, the intention was to support: (a) improving the education management information system (EMIS), including refining data sets, integrating fragmented systems, and strengthening data verification processes through monitoring of data reported in the EMIS with respect to CBE, conducting monthly phone surveys for schools, conducting physical verification of data among a random sample of schools, and comparing data with citizen scorecards; (b) improving teacher recruitment and management, by establishing a personnel database and supporting MOE in clarifying and communicating relevant regulations, policies, guidelines, norms, and targets; and (c) improving budget planning and introducing results-based reporting by developing norms for the annual O&M budget allocation for provinces and introducing a basic performance management system for PEDs and district education directorates (DEDs). Disbursements were to be made against an eligible expenditure program upon the achievement of pre-specified results as measured by DLIs.

4. Technical assistance (appraisal: US\$34 million, of which US\$11.5 million from IDA), following a traditional IPF approach, was to support technical assistance intended to strengthen MOE's capacity, a pilot of early childhood education, and third-party verification of DLIs. At an October 2020 restructuring, this component was sorted into three sub-components: (i) project management, technical assistance, and monitoring and evaluation (M&E); (ii) an early childhood education pilot; and (iii) MOE's COVID-19 response, covering maintenance works to prepare schools for reopening and the provision of supplementary courses in math and science grades 10-12 to mitigate learning losses during school closures.

Because of the rapid fall of the government in August 2021 and the subsequent takeover by the Taliban, it has not been possible to get complete information on disbursements by component (this information would normally be provided by government counterparts).

e. Comments on Project Cost, Financing, Borrower Contribution, and Dates

Total costs at appraisal were US\$298 million, to be financed through a US\$100 million grant from IDA, US\$100 million from the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund, and US\$98 million from the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). Additional financing of US\$25 million was provided at a February 2021 restructuring, bringing total project costs to US\$323 million. US\$25 million was cancelled in June 2020 as part of a collective portfolio restructuring to support the country's COVID-19 response under a different project. US\$89.3 million was eventually disbursed. An additional US\$75 million was verified by the third-party monitoring agency on June 15, 2021, but had not yet been disbursed by August 2021.

No government contribution was planned or made. Under the second and third components, it was required that the government demonstrate that spending against the agreed eligible expenditure programs was at least equal to the DLI amounts.

The project was approved on September 28, 2018, and became effective on January 3, 2019. It was suspended (with the rest of the country portfolio) after the Taliban takeover of the government in August 2021, and it was formally closed on the original scheduled closing date of December 31, 2023.



There were three restructurings:

- October 7, 2020: The project restructured the fourth component, reallocated US\$16.3 million to COVID-19 response efforts under that component, and scaled back other activities and outcome indicators accordingly. A new Component 5 on contingency emergency response, with an allocation of US\$0, was added (this component was not triggered). Condensed procurement procedures were incorporated for activities related to COVID-19.
- November 27, 2020: Due dates for DLI disbursement conditions were adjusted to reflect delays related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and some DLIs were revised.
- February 24, 2021: Additional financing was allocated to scale up activities related to school construction, establishment of CBE classes, and the addition of two new activities: implementation of a gender-based violence action plan, and teacher training focused on early grade reading.

3. Relevance of Objectives

Rationale

The project's objectives were highly relevant to country context. Afghanistan faced tremendous challenges at the time of project appraisal. Its fragility, in terms of weak state institutions, poor governance, and dysfunctional societal relations leading to violent conflict between groups, impacted almost every aspect of development. Poverty had increased from 38.3 percent in 2012-2013 to 54.5 percent in 2016-2017. International security forces had begun to withdraw in 2011, contributing to high political uncertainties and an escalation of violence. With an extremely underdeveloped private sector, the economy relied almost entirely on foreign aid and public expenditure.

Afghanistan had made great strides in access to general education, but a large number of children, especially girls, were left behind. Although school enrollment had increased from 0.8 million in 2002 to over 8 million in 2017, there was still significant disparity among provinces. There were eight provinces where over 70 percent of school-age girls were not attending school. Nation-wide, boys were 1.5 times as likely as girls to attend middle school, and twice as likely to attend high school. The 2014 Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey pointed to three primary drivers of this gender disparity: security concerns, lack of family permission for girls to attend, and lack of an available school or a school within a reasonable distance. Construction of new schools and expansion of existing ones had contributed to some positive growth in the sector, but half of all schools still lacked buildings, and others did not have surrounding boundary walls (essential for security reasons). Half of the student population was being taught under tents or in the open air. CBE (educating students in private spaces) had emerged as an important practice, especially for girls in conflict-affected and sparsely populated areas.

Education quality remained "abysmally" low (PAD, p. 4), in large part due to low capabilities of teachers. Even the half of teachers who met minimum qualifications (a two-year post-secondary degree) were not delivering satisfactory learning outcomes among students. The distribution of teachers was uneven across regions, lacking correlation with number of students or school-age population. There was no thoroughly assessed and relevant curriculum or set of standard learning assessments. Centrally managed education



policies left little room for PEDs to innovate or adapt to the diverse range of local contexts. MOE staff—who constituted 68 percent of the total civil service—suffered from severe capacity constraints, cumbersome internal processes, poor interdepartmental coordination, inconsistent enforcement of regulations and guidelines, and widespread corruption. Continued reliance on externally funded technical assistance negatively impacted sustainability and the capacity of permanent civil servants and regular structures.

The project's objectives were consistent with government strategy. The government's strategic vision, as outlined in the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework (October 2016), focused on improving governance and state effectiveness, building social capital, creating jobs and economic growth, and reducing poverty. The Framework contained a Citizens' Charter program that outlined specific steps for improving the quality of health and education programs. Afghanistan's third National Education Plan (2017-2021), prepared under MOE leadership, was anchored in three priority areas—quality and relevance, equitable access, and efficient and transparent management—that were all reflected in project activities and outcomes.

Finally, the project's objectives were aligned with Bank strategy. The Country Partnership Framework (CPF) for FY2017-2020 (extended to FY2022 by the 2019 Performance and Learning Review) contained an objective on improved human development, with a specific focus on improved access to quality education. CPF indicators included improved primary school completion rates, a halt in the declining ratio of girls to boys attending primary schools, and improved quality of school graduates.

This project's objectives were appropriately pitched given the Bank's prior engagement with Afghanistan's education sector. The First and Second Education Quality Improvement Programs (EQUIP, US\$44 million, 2004-2010; and EQUIP II, US\$87 million, 2008-2017) were national programs focused on increasing access to basic education through school construction, quality enhancement grants for schools, teacher training, social mobilization, strengthening of the EMIS, and piloting learning assessment. This project learned lessons from its predecessors (see Section 8a) and took advantage of newly transparent and competitive procedures for recruiting procurement staff, a shift in responsibility for construction of rural schools from MOE to MRRD, and fresh recruitment of PED directors through the Bank-supported Capacity Building for Results facility (US\$71.8 million, 2011-2018). According to the PAD (p. 6), "these changes offered an opportunity for successful implementation of the EQRA [Arabic for "read"] project." In an exchange with IEG on April 11, 2024, the project team stressed that the project's focus shifted to targeting provinces but still intended to have national-level impact, as the targeted provinces—which constituted half of all provinces—were those with the worst access and gender equity performance. Under conditions of insufficient capacity to carry out civil works nationally, province-level targeting was appropriate. Further, given capacity constraints, the project focused on a small set of national-level activities to enhance education quality (policy changes, curricular revisions, distribution of learning materials) that were relatively simple to implement.

Rating

High

4. Achievement of Objectives (Efficacy)



OBJECTIVE 1

Objective

Increase access to primary and secondary education in selected lagging provinces

Rationale

The project's theory of change held that easing the constraints that limited school participation and regular school attendance, including deteriorating security, availability of schools, and distance to schools, would increase access to education. Specific interventions aimed at addressing these constraints—developing a school site selection policy, expanding construction of new schools, rehabilitating/upgrading existing schools in targeted provinces, providing resources in the form of school grants to address school-specific needs, and providing resources for expansion of CBE arrangements—would lead to an increase in the number of schools available to students, and that were schools families would choose for their children to attend. This, in turn, would increase access to primary and secondary education.

Outputs

722 schools were constructed or expanded with classrooms, boundary walls, water points, and gender-segregated latrines, not meeting the original target of 2,646 or the revised target of 2,398 schools. Construction was actively under way at another 371 school sites as of August 15, 2021, but had stalled at 406 other sites due to a shortage of funds, security issues, and social and land problems.

Preparatory work for the school grant program took place, but the program was not operational by August 15, 2021. No school grants were implemented, not reaching the target of 2,298 school grants. Similarly, a mapping of CBE needs and guidelines on a harmonized approach to CBE were completed, but the CBE program did not become operational.

Planned COVID-19-related activities were not implemented.

Outcomes

The number of students attending school regularly in selected provinces was 4.32 million in 2016 and 4.01 million in 2021, not meeting the original target of 5.02 million or the revised target of 4.99 million students.

The number of out-of-school children in selected provinces was 2.29 million in 2016 and 2.86 million in 2021, not reaching the original target of a reduction to 1.09 million or the revised target of a reduction to 1.10 million children.

The ICR (p. 15) rated achievement of this objective Substantial based on the argument that "it is likely that the PDO-level indicator targets were on track to be met by the original December 31, 2023, closing date." However, this ambitious claim is not supported by the relatively slow building program and minimal progress beyond preparatory work for the grants and the CBE support. There is insufficient evidence provided in the ICR to support the assertion that the project would get close to its intended targets. There was backsliding from the baselines on both outcome indicators, with a decrease in the number of children attending school regularly and an increase in the number of out-of-school children in selected provinces. While these figures were inevitably influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and fraught security situation, the fact that they occurred in a situation of additional classrooms being provided suggests that the intended theory of change did not align with the response to this development challenge. On April 11, 2024, the project team provided



additional information from the Afghanistan Welfare Monitoring Survey indicating that primary school attendance had improved by 18 percentage points for boys and 24 percentage points for girls between 2020 and 2023. However, that same survey showed stagnation in secondary school attendance for boys, and sharp drop-offs (large regression from baseline) in secondary school attendance for girls, over that same time frame. Thus, the achievement of this objective is rated Negligible.

Rating
Negligible

OBJECTIVE 1 REVISION 1

Revised Objective

The objective was not revised, but official operations ceased after the Taliban takeover on August 15, 2021.

Revised Rationale

Since the Taliban takeover on August 15, 2021, there has been no official relationship between the World Bank and the government. The ICR (p. 16) speculated that the construction was completed on 109 additional schools after that date, but this conclusion was based on a sample of construction sites visited by the third-party monitoring agency with no information provided on how that sample was selected. Only 14 schools were actually confirmed to have been completed. The ICR (p. 16) cited preliminary data from the ongoing UNICEF education survey indicating that, as of June 2022, school attendance had increased at the primary level but decreased at the secondary level. On April 11, 2024, the project team provided additional information from the Afghanistan Welfare Monitoring Survey indicating that primary school attendance had improved by 18 percentage points for boys and 24 percentage points for girls between 2020 and 2023. However, that same survey showed stagnation in secondary school attendance for boys, and sharp drop-offs (large regression from baseline) in secondary school attendance for girls, over that same time frame. Therefore, the rating following the Taliban takeover is Negligible.

Revised Rating
Negligible

OBJECTIVE 2

Objective

Increase equitable access to primary and secondary education, particularly for girls, in selected lagging provinces

Rationale

In addition to the logic governing the first objective, the theory of change for this objective held that gender-friendly school construction and rehabilitation, with a focus on features such as boundary walls and gender-segregated latrines, as well as the incorporation of gender-sensitive activities such as increasing access to female hygiene products and transport facilities for female students and teachers under the school grants program, and priority access under the first round of school grants to all-girl schools, would transform schools into spaces that are more acceptable to girls and their families. This, in turn, would increase equitable access



to primary and secondary education, particularly for girls, in the project-targeted provinces. However, as the ICR (p. 32) noted, this logic emphasized almost entirely supply-side issues. In this specific country environment, with deteriorating economic conditions and ideological factors suppressing school attendance for girls, interventions focused on the demand side—direct subsidies, specific incentives to keep girls in school, efforts to engage communities and religious leaders—may have also been required. In addition, presuming that these mechanisms applied equally across the different targeted regions also diminished the complexity of the given development challenge. On April 11, 2024, the project team noted that other parallel projects were addressing demand-side issues through an array of different interventions.

Outputs

The 772 schools that were constructed or expanded were placed in areas with lagging gender enrollment, without regard for political considerations (ICR, p. 15). Priority was given to provinces with the highest numbers and the highest percentages of out-of-school girls, and to the construction of girl-only and mixed schools.

The school grants program that was intended to incorporate gender-sensitive features and activities in project-supported schools was not implemented. This was an essential element of the design theory.

Following allegations of child sexual abuse in one province (ICR, p. 21), a dedicated inter-agency working group was established to address gender-based violence. This group began to establish protocols and uptake channels, including a draft code of conduct and grievance redress mechanism. It remains unclear whether this mitigated future risks for attendees.

Outcomes

The number of girls attending school regularly in selected provinces was 1.62 million in 2016 and 1.47 million in 2021, not meeting the original target of 1.92 million or the revised target of 1.91 million girls.

The number of out-of-school girls in selected provinces was 1.38 million in 2016 and 1.63 million in 2021, not reaching the original target of a reduction to 0.64 million or the revised target of a reduction to 0.65 million girls.

The ICR (p. 20) noted that "the project did not have a marked impact on reducing gender disparities." With key outputs not implemented and regression from the baseline on relevant outcome targets, there is little evidence to illustrate that the chosen approach had any impact on shifting the drivers for why girls were not attending school. Again, the increasingly fraught security situation and the impending pressures on the government were undoubtedly working against the intended program theory. However, the backward slide in the numbers also suggests that there were numerous additional constraints to progress above and beyond those incorporated in the project. Thus, the achievement of this objective is rated Negligible.

Rating
Negligible

OBJECTIVE 2 REVISION 1



Revised Objective

The objective was not revised, but official operations ceased after the Taliban takeover on August 15, 2021.

Revised Rationale

Since the Taliban takeover on August 15, 2021, there has been no official relationship between the World Bank and the government. There is no information about any project activities relevant to this objective after that date, and considerable evidence points to further backsliding in terms of girls' education in Afghanistan. Therefore, the objective here is rated Negligible.

Revised Rating

Negligible

OBJECTIVE 3

Objective

Improve learning conditions in Afghanistan

Rationale

The theory of change for this objective held that conducting of formal subject-based in-service training and early-grade reading training for teachers, as well as intensive coaching, mentoring, and observation for teachers and improved teacher recruitment practices, would lead to improvements in teacher allocation and teaching quality. Curriculum reform and the development/distribution of new textbooks, teacher guides, and instructional materials would lead to an enhancement of the offered curriculum in all grades. These interventions would, taken together, lead to improved learning conditions across the country. This objective also rested on assumptions that improvements in planning, data systems, and transparency—through the provision of equipment and technology to refine EMIS datasets and strengthen data verification processes, the establishment of a credible MOE personnel database, and the development of norms for annual budget allocations and a performance management system for PEDs and DEDs—would lead to improved procedures for quality assurance and teacher recruitment and management, ultimately improving overall learning conditions.

Outputs

12.2 million primary textbooks (grades 1-6) were distributed from PEDs to DEDs and schools, not reaching the target of 45 million textbooks. New textbooks for grades 1-6, along with teacher guides, were drafted, but the MOE had not yet endorsed the curriculum by August 2021.

A teacher policy for prioritization in the hiring and allocation of teachers based on need was drafted and endorsed by the MOE, the Civil Service Commission, and the Ministry of Finance, and were submitted for Bank approval. The ICR (p. 21) referred to this teacher policy as a "major achievement." However, development of the policy alone did not meet the target of development of the policy and hiring of at least 90 percent of newly hired permanent teachers and 75 percent of all temporary teachers based on the policy.

Baseline data collection on teaching quality and the identification of groups of teachers to be trained was implemented, and some training and implementation manuals for teacher training and coaching were developed. However, no grade 1-3 teachers and headmasters were trained in early grade reading, as



planned. A planned evaluation of subject teacher training was not conducted. Teaching quality was not rated based on classroom observations, as planned, and therefore the target of an increase in the teacher quality rating by 0.4 or more standard deviations among sampled teachers was not reached.

The Bank provided hands-on support to building institutional capacity among MOE teams, but the results were mixed. The ICR (p. 21) reported that it took time for new processes to be internalized. From a baseline of no annual results-based reporting between MOE, PEDs, and related DEDs, reports for approximately 90 percent of target PEDS were completed, and work on remaining PEDs and DEDs was in progress in 2021. This did not meet the target of 100 percent annual results reporting at all levels. As of 2021, the MOE made progress towards reporting on results of its 2018 annual operational plan based on actual on-budget allocations and projected off-budget allocations for 2020; this did not meet the target of progress reporting on results of the 2018, 2019, and 2020 annual operational plans. While the MOE made good progress towards the organizational mapping of all education staff, with all data (including biometric data for 223,000 teachers and staff) entered into the personnel database, there were issues with reliability. After cleaning the data, MOE and the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission found that some entries were incomplete. In addition, an interface between the personnel database and payroll was not completed as planned. Provincial workshops were not conducted as planned with DED, schools, and shura representatives to identify constraints to education. A call survey was completed toward the targeted goal of collecting data on CBE and entering and verifying those data in the EMIS, but the survey was deemed to be unscalable in its current form as of 2021. Many of these engagements are emblematic of the challenges of civil service reform.

The number of students benefiting from direct interventions to enhance learning increased from 6.45 million in 2016 to 7.53 million in 2021, exceeding the target of 7.25 million students. Of these, the number of girls increased from 2.46 million in 2016 to 2.98 million in 2021, exceeding the target of 2.83 million girls.

Outcomes

The percentage of teachers meeting subject-specific qualifications was 52 percent at baseline (2018), and the target was an increase to 72 percent, though no information is available on the level achievement for this cohort of teachers. While there is very limited outcome-level evidence against the expected transformation outlined in the theory of change, it is worth acknowledging the array of structural improvements that were under way prior to the takeover. Given this progress towards the intended outcome, this objective is rated Modest.

Rating
Modest

OBJECTIVE 3 REVISION 1

Revised Objective

The objective was not revised, but official operations ceased after the Taliban takeover on August 15, 2021.

Revised Rationale

Since the Taliban takeover on August 15, 2021, there has been no official relationship between the World Bank and the government. There is no information about any project activities relevant to this objective after



that date, and many of the reform agendas under way will have inevitably fallen over, hence a Negligible rating for this objective.

Revised Rating
Negligible

OVERALL EFFICACY

Rationale

Overall efficacy is rated Negligible for the period prior to August 15, 2021. The ICR noted that, with the project's focus on improvements in service delivery, transparency, and accountability, much of its planned activity in its initial years was explicitly intended to be preparatory work. The ICR therefore assigned an efficacy rating of Substantial for this period based primarily on progress in this preparatory work for school construction and some other activities. However, reported outcomes on student attendance represented consistent regression from baseline, and no data were available on other outcomes (teacher qualifications). While some progress was made on essential reforms to improve learning conditions, this was insufficient to instill confidence in their long-term sustainability.

Overall Efficacy Rating
Negligible

Primary Reason
Low achievement

OVERALL EFFICACY REVISION 1

Overall Efficacy Revision 1 Rationale

Overall efficacy is rated Negligible for the period after August 15, 2021. Following the Taliban takeover, limited data on outputs or outcomes have been available. The ICR (p. 18) rated progress during this period Modest "since school construction is being continued by communities," but there is insufficient evidence to support these claims.

Overall Efficacy Revision 1 Rating
Negligible

Primary Reason
External shock

5. Efficiency

The PAD's economic and financial analysis (pp. 30-32) proceeded from the assumption, informed by international literature, that higher rates of schooling—and by extension, increased skills—will generate higher economic growth. With project provinces starting from a relatively low point, returns were expected to be high. The analysis found a net present value of over US\$1 billion (using a 10 percent discount rate), considering only



future productivity gains from the flows of new students reached through project-financed interventions. The internal rate of return was estimated at 21.1 percent.

The ICR did not conduct a formal economic analysis, stating only that "there is no reason to believe that with continued support the project's investments would not yield positive returns" (p. 19). No data were provided to support this supposition, and given the circumstances surrounding the Taliban takeover, this is highly unlikely.

The PAD (p. 26) outlined donor collaboration strategies designed to encourage implementation efficiency, including a Local Education Group with representation from the government, development partners (DPs), international non-governmental organizations, and various civil society organizations with a long-standing history of engagement in the sector and with the government. In addition, a joint working group with representatives of DPs, MOE, and MRRD was to provide oversight of annual sector budget planning, review project implementation progress, and resolve bottlenecks as they arose. The ICR did not provide information on donor coordination during project implementation. The project team later confirmed that a project steering committee co-chaired by MOE and MRRD, with participation from DPs, met at least every two months to oversee implementation, identify bottlenecks, and agree on next steps. DPs were invited to all project implementation support missions, as planned, and were heavily engaged in the project from the early design stage through implementation.

School construction implementation started before project effectiveness with US\$8 million in bridge financing from the Ministry of Finance, and early progress was made on the design of school grants and the MOE personnel database. However, progress was stalled by significant implementation inefficiencies. Some of these inefficiencies were caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and some were a product of the country's deteriorating security situation, which affected both the supply and demand of education services. Many of the key inefficiencies, however, pre-dated the pandemic or were due to factors inherent in the project's design, institutional arrangements, and implementation, irrespective of the pandemic or the country's security environment. It was difficult for MOE to access financing from the Ministry of Finance to pre-finance project activities toward meeting the DLIs (ICR, p. 32). Improvements to the MOE EMIS slowed due to disagreements between MOE and the National Statistics and Information Authority on division of labor. Structural reform and changes in the senior leadership of MOE in November 2020 led to requests for revision of some planned activities and slowed overall implementation. The project required two different restructurings in consecutive months in 2020 because of the need to obtain official approval from the management committee of the GPE Secretariat and endorsement from development partners on modifications to DLIs. The ICR (pp. 19, 24) also noted implementation inefficiencies stemming from delays in contracting technical assistance required for implementation (resulting in extremely slow budget utilization), approval of school construction plans by multiple entities, recruitment of district engineers by MRRD, hiring of the third-party verification agency for DLIs, and finalization of project implementation manuals for most major project activities. The delays in contracting of technical assistants and consultants "affected staffing across the board, including project management, fiduciary areas, safeguard management, construction engineers, diverse activity coordinators, etc." (ICR, p. 24). The ICR noted that hiring of a firm to review the engineering designs for school construction and renovation helped reduce construction costs, but project records show that 208 school construction projects suffered cost escalations exceeding 25 percent due to increases in transportation costs and the need to incorporate disaster mitigation measures.

In light of the absence of an economic analysis at completion and evidence of significant implementation inefficiencies, project efficiency is rated Modest.



Efficiency Rating

Modest

a. If available, enter the Economic Rate of Return (ERR) and/or Financial Rate of Return (FRR) at appraisal and the re-estimated value at evaluation:

	Rate Available?	Point value (%)	*Coverage/Scope (%)
Appraisal	✓	21.10	100.00 <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable
ICR Estimate		0	0 <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable

* Refers to percent of total project cost for which ERR/FRR was calculated.

6. Outcome

Under the original project, relevance is rated High, efficacy is rated Negligible, and efficiency is rated Modest. Overall outcome is therefore rated Unsatisfactory.

The same ratings apply to the project following August 2021.

A split rating methodology was adapted specifically for the Afghanistan portfolio, given the abrupt fall of the government and takeover by the Taliban. However, in this project, with the same ratings assigned to project outcome both before and after August 2021, implementation of that methodology does not affect the ratings.

The project's overall Outcome is rated Unsatisfactory, reflecting major shortcomings in its preparation, implementation, and achievement.

a. Outcome Rating

Unsatisfactory

7. Risk to Development Outcome

With no evidence of achieved outcomes, any discussion of risk to development outcome is limited to project-supported outputs. Even before the Taliban takeover, there were significant risks related to continued reliance on externally funded technical assistance and weak capacity of civil servants, critical governance challenges, and the country's security situation. Since August 2021, there are additional overwhelming factors related to prohibitions on girls' secondary school attendance. Following the World Bank Board of Directors approval of Approach Paper 2.0 in March 2022, the Bank is partnering with other institutions to support the Afghan people through a programmatic approach that engages in four priority sectors, including



education. According to the ICR (p. 30), the support for education remains under development, with a focus on access to primary and secondary education and support for female students and teachers.

8. Assessment of Bank Performance

a. Quality-at-Entry

The project's objectives were well aligned with the country's development priorities and with Bank strategy. Its theory of change was logical, though it did not adequately incorporate demand-side factors related to education access, and it did not articulate the benefits intended to come from targeting specific regions on the one hand and working nationally on learning conditions; the project team explained on April 11, 2024 that the project targeted the most disadvantaged and vulnerable provinces with the expectation that improvements in those provinces would impact national-level outcomes, and that there was no capacity to management construction across the country, at the national level. The project's results framework was well designed. Project design drew from lessons learned during EQUIP I and II: the need to focus on professionalization of MOE staff; the danger of a siloed approach to provision of inputs under a standard IPF; the need for focus on governance challenges in the sector at decentralized levels; lack of MOE capacity to implement school construction; the importance of attention to the specific needs of individual schools; the challenges posed by mismatches between teacher training and the actual needs of students and schools; the need to strengthen the quality and reliability of MOE data; and the wide gap between actual school attendance and recorded enrollment, sometimes as high as 30-35 percent, with schools counting students (especially girls) as still enrolled even if they had not attended for as long as three years. Based on these lessons, the project incorporated results-based financing; focused on the 17 most lagging provinces in terms of girls' school attendance; directed the system toward tracking and rewarding student attendance, especially for girls, as opposed to enrollment; and aimed to strengthen governance of general education, including at the PED level, to improve service delivery with transparency and accountability. Project design was also informed by a two-day consultation in August 2017 with PEDs from 24 provinces that provided important insights on security, access, and education management.

Risk assessment at appraisal (PAD, pp. 27-30) was candid. Political & governance, fiduciary, and economic & social risks were rated high, and macroeconomic, technical design, institutional capacity, and other risks were rated substantial, culminating in an overall risk rating of substantial. Mitigation strategies included support for community empowerment, use of third-party monitoring, embedding of governance reforms throughout project design, support for professionalization and transparency in teacher recruitment, provision of a one-time advance of US\$18.5 million to initiate the project's DLI-based components, and recruitment of additional fiduciary staff. The risk of a wholesale change of government and consequent reversal of commitment to the project's objectives on ideological grounds was not contemplated (nor should it have been reasonably expected).

However, project design was highly ambitious and complex in relation to existing capacity and in an environment of fragility and insecurity. As the ICR (p. 23) noted, "it may well have been preferable to focus on fewer priority reforms to allow the government to build capacity for more challenging interventions." On April 11, 2024, the project team noted that activities were selected on the basis of being relatively easy to implement or because they were scalable, and that actions were sequenced to build capacity and momentum in the early implementation period. However, operating in rural areas



through PEDs and DEDs introduced complexity that made the timeline for school construction unrealistic, especially in view of the need to finalize preparation activities after approval. Furthermore, a disaster risk assessment carried out during implementation by the project team found that 127 school construction projects had not considered mitigation measures adequate to remedy anticipated natural hazards such as landslides, floods, site drainage, and slope stabilization (ICR, p. 28; see also Section 10a). There are also questions as to whether a DLI-based design was the best mechanism to drive reform and improvement in the program, given the many development issues confronting the MOE.

Quality-at-Entry Rating
Moderately Unsatisfactory

b. Quality of supervision

The Bank team expended considerable effort to support and compensate for an incompletely staffed counterpart team and for severe delays in contracting staff for key fiduciary, safeguard, project coordination, and other functions. A large part of the supervision structure relied on a third-party monitoring agency, whose monthly reports were regularly discussed and upon which remedial actions were based. Monthly meetings were held with DPs. The ICR (p. 30) noted that the Bank's safeguards team provided strong support to help MRRD develop a Safeguards Action Plan to help flag key issues and agree on timebound remedial strategies. The implementation support team also acted promptly in response to allegations of gender-based violence. However, there were moderate shortcomings. Safeguards compliance remained an issue throughout project implementation (ICR, p. 28; also see Section 10a). Additional financing was approved to expand the project's scope despite the deteriorating security situation in the country, major implementation issues (delays and safeguard compliance), and low disbursement rates for the initial financing; the ICR (p. 32) noted that additional financing was a questionable choice under these circumstances.

Quality of Supervision Rating
Moderately Satisfactory

Overall Bank Performance Rating
Moderately Unsatisfactory

9. M&E Design, Implementation, & Utilization

a. M&E Design

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) functions were to be carried out by MOE and its departments, supervised by the Department of General Education. The project was to provide specific technical assistance to refine EMIS datasets, introduce individual student identification numbers to track students and their learning cycles, and support the establishment of a personnel database integrated with payroll. Results indicators covered an appropriate set of outcomes and intermediate outcomes, with annual targets set to provide an ongoing picture of project performance. The PAD (pp. 37-68) contained detailed information on baselines



(derived from household surveys), targets, and data sources for each indicator. The seven DLIs were a subset of input/process, output, and outcome indicators from the project's results framework. Selection of the third-party verification agency for DLIs was to be completed within six months of project approval.

b. M&E Implementation

M&E data were collected and analyzed throughout implementation, with an important role played by a third-party monitoring agency. Monitoring through satellite imagery complemented other monitoring mechanisms. There were major issues with contracting the third-party verification agency and the firm to conduct a planned impact evaluation of the school grant program. Despite the third-party verification agency not being in place until September 2020, monitoring of DLIs was eventually carried out in accordance with established protocols. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the ability of MOE and MRRD to report on progress against DLIs and results indicators. An updating of outcome indicators based on proxies obtained from phone surveys revealed that baseline data had been overestimated, and targets were scaled back accordingly at the first 2020 restructuring. The ICR (p. 27) reported that the school grant evaluation was partially conducted, but no information from that evaluation was reported.

c. M&E Utilization

M&E data were used to verify disbursement conditions based on achievement of DLIs; however, issues with contracting the third-party verification agency delayed disbursement of funds. The verification agency's final report on compliance with 2019 DLIs, for example, was issued in January 2021. According to the ICR (p. 27), MOE met three out of five 2020 DLIs, but the verification agency was not contracted by August 15, 2021, to verify the status of these achievements. The ICR (p. 27) stated that M&E data helped to highlight areas of concern, particularly with regard to bringing construction projects into compliance with safeguard policies (see Section 10a). Monitoring through a range of means and triangulating data helped to provide the information needed to monitor implementation progress and identify emerging issues. While there were limitations on the project's M&E, the overall design and expectations of the system were substantial given the many capacity constraints.

M&E Quality Rating

Substantial

10. Other Issues

a. Safeguards

The project was classified as environmental assessment category "B" and triggered the Environmental Assessment (OP/BP 4.01) and Involuntary Resettlement (OP/BP 4.12) safeguard policies. Potential environmental impacts of school construction and rehabilitation activities were expected to be modest and localized. These impacts were related to site location and planning, building design and construction, and maintenance. The MRRD and MOE adopted an Environmental and Social Management Framework to



address potentially negative impacts, with guidelines for the preparation of site-specific Environmental and Social Management Plans and other relevant tools as required. Under the project's first component, land was to be acquired for provision of school infrastructure. Because not all construction sites could be identified in advance, a Resettlement Policy Framework was prepared and disclosed prior to appraisal.

The project's safeguards rating was downgraded to Moderately Unsatisfactory at the second Implementation Status and Results Report and was upgraded to Moderately Satisfactory only in August 2021, when the project was suspended. Initial issues were related to delays in hiring MOE safeguard staff, establishing a complaint redressal mechanism at MOE, and demonstrating that necessary documentation for land registration was in place for school construction. By mid-2020, "severe" safeguard issues had been identified at four school construction projects due to poor site selection that did not adequately take environmental hazards into account (ICR, p. 27), escalating to 112 projects with "safeguard issues" by early 2021 (ICR, p. 28). The Bank held meetings with MRRD in July 2021 to identify remedial actions and expedite mitigation measures for the remaining schools. By the time the project was suspended, resources had been allocated to additional mitigation measures, and MOE had agreed to ensure that site selection followed approved checklists. However, third-party monitoring reports indicated that there were continued gaps in preparation and implementation of safeguard-related documentation, though MRRD reports reported full document compliance at all sites.

The Bank's Grievance Redress Service and project-level grievance redress mechanisms were available to communities or individuals who believed that they were adversely affected by the project. The PAD (p. 36) provided information on how to submit complaints. By August of 2021, over 1500 grievance redress centers had been established, and 135 of 190 complaints regarding school construction had been resolved (ICR, p. 28).

b. Fiduciary Compliance

Financial management relied on country systems. Government budgeting processes applied, and the project's budget was part of the government's annual budget. Accounting records were maintained at the central level by the Ministry of Finance, and the MOE and MRRD maintained subsidiary records. A detailed financial management manual provided a comprehensive internal control framework. Although overall financial management risk was assessed as High at appraisal due to previous shortcomings in budget allocation, internal audit, and financial reporting, the financial management rating was mostly Moderately Satisfactory during implementation. Issues included delays in procurement of technical assistance for financial management, low budget utilization, lack of any internal audit during implementation, and significant delays in hiring key financial management and audit staff.

Procurement was carried out in accordance with Bank procurement regulations and was subject to the Bank's anti-corruption guidelines. Based on an initial procurement capacity assessment, the threshold of High Risk Implementing Agency applied for prior review of contracts under MOE, and Substantial Risk under MRRD. Procurement was rated Moderately Unsatisfactory from the first Implementation Status and Results Report through early 2021 due to challenges in updating the procurement plan and delays in advancing procurement of major packages and contracting of procurement staff. Although the procurement function improved as implementation progressed, it continued to be a constant source of delays.



c. Unintended impacts (Positive or Negative)

None reported.

d. Other

11. Ratings

Ratings	ICR	IEG	Reason for Disagreements/Comment
Outcome	Moderately Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Reported outcomes on student attendance represented consistent regression from baseline, and no data were available on other outcomes (teacher qualification). While some progress was made on essential reforms to improve learning conditions, this was insufficient to instill confidence in their long-term sustainability.
Bank Performance	Moderately Satisfactory	Moderately Unsatisfactory	Overly ambitious and complex project design in relation to country capacity, and continued issues with environmental safeguard compliance.
Quality of M&E	Substantial	Substantial	
Quality of ICR	---	Modest	

12. Lessons

The ICR (pp. 31-32) presented a series of insightful lessons, including:

In fragile and conflict environments, high needs and gaps in human development are generally accompanied by equally high implementation challenges. In this case, access to education, especially for girls, was a clear and urgent need, but the pathways toward meeting that need required work in underserved rural areas and coordination among multiple levels of government entities with low capacity.

In a low-capacity environment accompanied by conflict and violence, a deliberate focus on capacity and system building can help sustain momentum toward government ownership, but this approach may lead to delays in achieving results. In this case, scheduling tasks that are



usually completed during project preparation for the early implementation stage resulted in significant delays.

In a fragile and low-capacity environment, the mix of results-based instruments and pure investment financing should be carefully considered. In this case, it was an ongoing challenge to pre-finance activities with high price tags towards meeting DLIs that may not have been a necessary stimulus to drive the required reforms. Results-based financing, under these conditions, may be better suited for "soft" activities that are not costly but that are still difficult to achieve, such as policy reforms and improvement in inter-ministerial collaboration.

13. Assessment Recommended?

No

14. Comments on Quality of ICR

The ICR presented data of high quality and insightful lessons. It mostly followed established guidelines. However, there were significant shortcomings. The ICR was frequently repetitive. It provided little information on the project's additional financing, the contingency emergency response component, and the funds cancellation. It made assumptions about progress with school construction after August 15, 2021, based on a sample of construction sites visited by the third-party monitor, without assessing whether those samples were representative of all construction sites. In general, insufficient evidence was provided to justify the ICR's assigned efficacy and efficiency ratings. No economic analysis was attempted, nor was any effort made to benchmark infrastructure against previous norms; the ICR instead merely asserted that positive returns would have been likely if project support had continued. There were internal contradictions in the ICR's narrative; for example, the ICR asserted in its efficiency discussion (p. 19) that "most of the notable products and outputs were achieved shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic surfaced," even though other sections of the ICR described major shortfalls in reaching output targets and DLIs. The ICR's main text (p. 26) referred to an annex containing a summary of DLIs that were achieved, but no such annex was included. Overall, the ICR was insufficiently candid and analytically critical of project achievements. It struggled to make a reasonable case on what significant progress was made before the Taliban takeover and the likelihood of development results being sustained at any level in the future. Thus, the ICR is rated Modest.

a. Quality of ICR Rating

Modest

