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The disconnect between policymakers and researchers - time to build bridges to eradicate Polio from Pakistan

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According to the World Health Organization (WHO), Pakistan and Afghanistan are the last bastions of Poliomyelitis. The rest of the world has almost become polio-free. They achieved this freedom after becoming part of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) which was created in 1988 just after the World Health Assembly resolved to eradicate Polio Myelitis from the globe.¹ The woes of Pakistan do not end here. According to “Health Financing Progress Matrix Assessment Pakistan, 2023, WHO declared that the service coverage index of Pakistan, despite showing a consistent surge over the years, was still significantly lower with a score of 45 against an average of 58 amongst the low middle-income group countries in year 2021.² This calls for a need to revisit our strategic policy making in all spheres of life but especially in health and health education. Dr. Vaqar Ahmed, in Pakistan’s Agenda of Economic Reforms, identified that this country faces a serious and lingering lack of institutional arrangement within our framework for research-based policy formulation, and post-implementation feedback.³

A better understanding for the need of collaboration between policymakers and researchers, can be developed by -referring again to the Polio Eradication Initiative in Pakistan. The impetus to the initiative is provided through scheduling Polio Eradication Campaigns as augmentation of Routine Immunization based on the necessity and intensity of reported cases. Polio Eradication campaigns were launched in Pakistan in 1994 by the will of a political Government. Since then, they are continuing unabated, despite ongoing efforts, Pakistan has not yet achieved polio-free status, which raises serious concerns. The current approach to polio eradication appears ineffective, persisting over the past three decades without success. Policymakers would be unable to alter this

strategy without access to a comprehensive knowledge base, which researchers are responsible for providing. There is no system in place for sharing the research findings with the policymakers. Policymakers have failed to establish effective Research and Development Cells within their respective domains, while researchers have not devised an effective strategy to disseminate their findings to policymakers. This gap is the key factor in the failures of our policies leading to faring of Pakistan as a laggard on health indicators and indices of quality of life. Erismann et al.⁴ in their publication titled “How to bring research evidence into policy? Synthesizing strategies of five research projects in low-and middle-income countries” have identified following three strategies to bridge the disconnect between researchers and the policymakers;

1. Pro-active searching for latest findings on the part of well-informed policymakers.
2. Requiring researchers to take steps to ensure an active exchange of ideas and information with diverse stake holders when designing the research project and ensuring the latter’s involvement throughout.
3. Using a transdisciplinary and/or co-creation approach to establish equal partnerships and trust among all involved stakeholders.

Pakistan must address its policy failures by initiating evidence-based policy formulation as the primary step toward reversing its course and meeting the expectations of GPEI. The researchers need to reach out to the policymakers and policymakers need to benefit from the expertise of researchers. Without this vital link, the dream of a viable public sector, successful governance, and a stable economy will never be realized.

List of Abbreviations

GPEI Global Polio Eradication Initiative
WHO World Health Organization

Conflict of interest

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About the author

Dr. Asad Zaheer (MBBS) is a graduate of Allama Iqbal Medical College Lahore, Pakistan, and later earned his Master in Business Administration degree (Marketing) from Punjab University, Lahore, Pakistan, by achieving first position in his batch. He retired from working as Registrar, University of Health Sciences (UHS), Lahore, in December, 2022. Dr. Asad has been involved in overseeing the administration of Health Sciences educational institutions since 1997 and is affiliated with the University since 2002, thus he possesses extensive experience in the policies, procedures, and regulations related to public administration in Pakistan. Presently, he is employed as a Consultant in health policy-related assignments at UHS, Lahore.