"When you build technology of this sort, one of the things you've got to realize is that it's going to need money to spread it widely."

A Conversation with Haroon Yasin of [Taleemabad](#)
Katherine Noble
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Katherine Noble: Tell me about your work. What's distinctive about your approach, and why did you approach it the way you did?

Haroon Yasin: My name is Haroon Yasin. I'm a teacher by profession. I started teaching about 14 years ago. My teaching journey started in the slums of Islamabad. The school I set up 14 years ago was an evening school. It was predominantly for children who were working from the age of five to support their families. The school began in the afternoons and evenings because that's the only time the children were free. It was a challenge teaching them because they had been working throughout the day. Many of them did not have anything to eat. They were exhausted by the time they came into my classrooms. Just by virtue of necessity, I had to alter my teaching style to be very engaging, very fun.

Many people had written off these children and thought they could never be schooled, but eventually these students turned the corner. I still remain in touch with many of them. They've gone on to find jobs in banks, learn how to code, and pull their families out of poverty. That's where it all started. I cemented the belief that every child was born with some kind of deep potential, and it was the teacher's job to bring out that potential.

Over the last 10 years with my current organization, we've taught these kids and then created cartoons using the approach we used in the classroom. If we were teaching division, for example, the kids learned it better if I explained it through cricket, which is a very popular sport in Pakistan, similar to baseball. If they understood it well through that approach, I would have a team of animators make a cartoon video on it. Initially, we put these videos on YouTube, but when they started to get very popular with more than a million views each, we were approached by the National Public Broadcast Corporation of Pakistan who wanted to put this material on public broadcast television in prime time slots for children.

Over time, this grew into a *Sesame Street* kind of thing for children. The content was broadcast and the National Ratings Agency could see how many children were signing

up and watching the cartoons. It grew to an audience of about 8.5 million kids tuning in every week. That's when we knew we had something very interesting on our hands.

Pakistan was going through a digital transformation at that time. China was putting cheap smartphones into the Pakistani market, and smartphone ownership was rising. Internet was becoming very cheap. But broadcast is a one-way medium, and we wanted to interact with the kids as well. We started work on a mobile app and put it online. That mobile app not only had the videos we produced, but also games, assessments, and quizzes. That mobile app very soon shot to about 1.5 million downloads. It was the top-rated education app in Pakistan. We talked to these users. Many of them came from the most remote parts of Pakistan where quality education wasn't accessible.

Since then, the approach of the organization has become very streamlined. We now not only work with students and their parents at home, but also with teachers in schools. Now the predominant way the organization is scaling is by taking over entire districts of public schools in partnership with the government, and introducing technology that helps teachers teach better and helps administrators keep track better. Students get remedial content through their parents' phones at home. It's a layer of digital products that allows the school to achieve better learning outcomes. We're a team of about 250 people spread across three cities in Pakistan. This year we are expanding to a fourth province as well. It's a time of intense growth right now. That's the 10-year history. The original school began 14 years ago, so it's more like 14 years of history.

Katherine Noble: Can you elaborate on the methodology of how you work with students, their families and teachers?

Haroon Yasin: It's best to see this as a series of concentric circles, and at the center of it is the child. Immediately around the child are their parents. We work with parents to make sure the child has access to high-quality material at home, and then parents can use that material to teach their kids. Then we move one layer out, and we get to the school. Inside the school, we work with the teachers. We give them lesson plans, textbooks, and assessment support.

All these tools are designed to make sure when the teacher steps into the class to teach that she has the appropriate pedagogical material and the training to deliver a world-class instructional experience that kids can rapidly absorb. Then we move one layer wider, and we think about school administrators, principals, and superintendents. We give them data to make sure they can track how teachers and students are doing.

We move one more layer out, and now we are thinking about the whole district. In this layer we work with district superintendents, ministers, and district chiefs to make sure they know what's happening across hundreds of schools in their district, i.e. which schools are struggling and where they need to focus their attention. The company produces technology for all of these concentric circles in service of the child, ultimately, to make sure the child can learn better.

Katherine Noble: Does your funding come through the government or your partnership?

Haroon Yasin: Initially we were supported by grants, but more recently the bulk of our budget comes from government payments.

Katherine Noble: You're in three cities in Pakistan. What's your scaling goal? How large do you think you could get?

Haroon Yasin: Internally, we talk about the fact that we are seeing such intense momentum in Pakistan. Initially, the goal was just to do Pakistan. It's a huge country, 250 million people in total, 63 million kids who are at the age to go to primary school. If we can get all these children in Pakistan to learn better, that itself is an achievement. More recently, we've started to play around with a lot of generative AI. The modification of curriculum to different standards and different languages is becoming a whole lot easier.

Education as a whole in the broader region of South Asia has a lot of areas for improvement. Now we actively think about how this could go to other parts of the world as well. There's roughly about a billion kids in the world. Many of them don't learn how to read. They're not only in impoverished countries, in Sub-Saharan Africa and in low-income countries like Pakistan, but they're also in immigrant neighborhoods in Western Europe, and in African American neighborhoods in the United States. We now broadly think about how this technology can be applicable to kids in a wide variety of circumstances across the globe, especially when the modification of curriculum has become so easy.

Katherine Noble: What is one of the most surprising things to others working in this field about your approach?

Haroon Yasin: On the face of it, governments in developing countries are pretty chaotic. If you just look at Pakistan, we've had four different governments in the last three years. That is abnormal by most means. Every day there is a threat of bankruptcy. The government will run out of money. It seems like a very, very chaotic place if you look from the outside. Perhaps the most surprising bit for others would be that we realized very early on that the government was not a monolithic entity.

When people say we work with the government, we ask them which part of the government they are referring to? It's 1,000 different people with 1,000 different motivations, alliances, and allegiances, and they lean in different directions. One of the things that would surprise people the most is that right now, this organization is sustained predominantly by revenues coming from the government, and it's a very unstable government. But we find that is one of the most sustainable yet unstable avenues of scaling, because there is not enough philanthropic capital to support the learning of all of Pakistan's 63 million kids.

We realized early on that we had to be a 'peer at scale' the ability to effectively and efficiently leverage peer-to-peer interactions or systems to handle a large volume of

users or tasks, and ensure that the system remains functional and efficient as it grows and make sure we understood how that peer at scale operated. Most people walk away from working with the government because it is easy to get a large grant maker to support their efforts, but until the government pays for it themselves, they don't own it. That also means that when catastrophe strikes, like the USAID funding freeze, you're left in very difficult circumstances. We haven't had that roadblock in our journey. This would be the most surprising bit to others.

The other surprising bit in our approach is that many people tend to write off both students and teachers. At a very early stage, we as a society learn to say that some kids will struggle and they're not going to be able to make it. Or we find a teacher who has not been showing up in school, who's not active or present, and we learn to say that we should swap out this teacher and get a new one. Our approach has been to say that all these people have the potential to be extraordinary. There are some hidden forces at play that force them to act the way they do. That has been a very interesting approach. It requires a lot of patience. It means you have to stick with all these difficult users for a longer period of time. But that has paid off dividends because it's a very slippery slope to write somebody off, because there's no stopping. You'll find a bad teacher everywhere, and you'll want to either fire them or let them go. In a country like Pakistan, there aren't enough teachers to go around. We need to just make sure we can see them as humans, see their dysfunction as a temporary blip in their overall greatness as a human being, and then work with that. That approach has really paid off, but seems counterintuitive to a lot of people.

Katherine Noble: Give me an example of how that approach has succeeded.

Haroon Yasin: In Pakistan, teachers often don't show up. They get their wages, but because the pay rate of the state is very weak, the teachers will not show up in school. Oftentimes, they will pay somebody else a fraction of their salary to just show up on their behalf. Even if they do show up, they're going to be very violent. Sometimes they beat students to control them. We've encountered many of these teachers. You might want to pick a fight with them because they're corrupt and violent.

While those are still truths, nonetheless, we go to these teachers and we ask them how we can help them change and improve. Sometimes we find that they're not showing up in school because the system makes it very easy to do that. In fact, the system makes it the rational choice not to show up in school, because they live so far away. They're mostly women. When they do show up to school, they've traveled for two-plus hours. They have families incessantly bugging them to come back. They're very frustrated.

I went to Georgetown University, which has the motto "cura personalis," which means care for the whole person. When we encounter teachers of this sort, caring for the whole person means asking them what's happening in their family home, how is their husband, does their family allow them to go to school, and what do they do when they get home? How can we take some of these things off your plate? We ask them if we take some of these things off their plate, would they commit to doing better? We find that in most of these cases, these teachers take sometimes months, even years to turn around, but

they eventually do turn around. We've encountered this specific type of case hundreds of times in our work in Pakistan.

Same applies to children. One of the naughtiest students I've ever taught would always show up late to class. When he showed up, he would either pull someone's hair or he would spit on other kids. He used to live on the street. I could never find any method to engage him. Another kid had fallen into a cocaine addiction and he was in rehab multiple times. Every single time I tried to teach him, he would swear at me and he would make sure that I would leave him as soon as possible. Eventually, I noticed that he really liked movies, and so we started watching a lot of movies together. I used to teach him history, and we were studying the world wars. It was so surprising when the examinations came around, because this kid whom everyone had written off topped the entire class. His parents came to the school and asked how he could cheat so much. It was so hard for them to believe that he'd actually done this himself. It takes believing in the kid, knowing what type of method they'd like to be taught in, and being almost radical in how much you choose to believe in them.

Katherine Noble: How does your technology and approach help the teacher support the difficult student?

Haroon Yasin: Technology makes the teacher's work a whole lot easier, but the first thing is realizing that everyone who is acting out is burnt out, frustrated, and overburdened. Some of these teachers are teaching seven hours per day. Then they're going home and cooking for their families, cleaning after their kids, and tending to their husbands. It's a jam-packed day.

For example, one of the things we did was to create a tool that automatically makes all the lesson plans for the teacher to deliver the next day. When she's delivered the lesson plans, teachers spend hours making assessments for the kids. It has to be perfectly designed. It has to have the right questions. This tool automatically generates all of those assessments. When the kids are done with assessments, all the teacher has to do is take a picture, and the tool grades the exams and returns the scores to the teachers in minutes instead of hours. When we free up that space in the teacher's schedule, we also recognize that technology has done its part. We are an edtech company. We like to emphasize that tech is one component of it.

Every teacher has a coach assigned to them. Wherever we operate, there's always a coach looking out for the teacher. When the teacher's time starts to be freed up, the coach shows up at school and has conversations with them. The coach follows a very specific behavior change methodology to learn more about the teacher's problems and where they're struggling. Then they observe their classrooms, and give targeted feedback to the teacher. For example, they can tell a teacher that at 13 minutes into the class, the teacher turned to a certain student and said something that shut down the kid, and they never spoke in the class again, so maybe the teacher should reconsider that practice. Over time, it's a process of observing and giving feedback. The teacher starts to change their behavior, but the first step is that technology has to remove the roadblocks and make their work a whole lot easier for them to open up.

Katherine Noble: Does the technology allow the nurturing, mentoring, and patience to deal with difficult students because the mundane but fundamental and important part of teaching, namely the materials you're using, is taken care of?

Haroon Yasin: People talk about what AI is going to do to humanity when it becomes really good. What we will see in the next 5 or 10 years is going to make a lot of our mundane work easier. Nobody will have to transcribe anymore, and nobody will have to make lesson plans or check tests. That frees up time in this new era for more human connection, and for people and organizations to lean more into that. That is basically what our approach is doing.

Katherine Noble: Can you describe something that you tried that didn't work, and what you learned from it?

Haroon Yasin: For the longest time we wanted to be sustainable, but we sold our product to the wrong market. When you build technology of this sort, one of the things you've got to realize is that it's going to need money to spread it widely. We initially sold our tech to low-fee private schools, which are all across South Asia. Basically, it's a school run by an entrepreneur. It charges about $3 to $4 a month for about 100 to 200 kids each.

We asked these schools to adopt this product, but that was the wrong market, because even though these schools would benefit from the product, we were trying to swim to a market segment that didn't have any resources or bandwidth to run the program. For two years, we sold to about 300 schools. Eventually we realized this could only work when it was deployed in school systems. We were selling to each school independently, so one school, and then separately another school, and separately another school. We realized it could really have an impact if it was delivered to a whole district in one go for multiple years at a time.

These approaches take time to settle in. It's behavior change for teachers and students, and that takes time. Eventually we switched to working with the government. We kept changing and improving the product, but our first market was the wrong market to chase down. The government market allows us to cater to students who are more impoverished and need more assistance, but at the same time, we can deploy it at scale and benefit from the economies of scale.

Katherine Noble: Can you talk about the project support you received from Rippleworks, and how that made a difference in your work?

Haroon Yasin: For the Rippleworks project, we were paired with a product expert, Mia Lewin, who had built and scaled multiple products. She plugged in directly with our product team at a time when they were still figuring out what features to prioritize and who to sell it to. This partnership happened when we were still selling to private schools, but we were beginning to think about selling to the government. She remained with us for about five or six months till we signed our first government contract. Working with her

meant we could review our product roadmaps very often, and we were able to focus. We could prioritize a ton of different avenues, but Mia helped us narrow it down to a list that was high-impact.

Separately, we've also often tapped the Expert Office Hours at Rippleworks. It's a one-hour commitment for a problem we're stuck on. For example, we were working on AI-generated material for teachers, and we were struggling to generate it in Urdu. This is the language that teachers spoke, but LLMs large language models are really bad at it. We reached out to Rippleworks and told them this was a roadblock, and they found experts who could talk to us about the problem, and suggest strategies to solve it.

Katherine Noble: Do you still do Expert Office Hours?

Haroon Yasin: We did two or three when we were deep inside product development. Since then, we've just gotten too busy. There's at least a couple more issues that we could take back to Expert Office Hours. I liked the concept of the Expert Office Hours. It was quick and what we call just-in-time learning. If you run up against a problem, there's someone to help. We used it twice or thrice, but could definitely use it much more.

Katherine Noble: Did Rippleworks help you develop several products?

Haroon Yasin: We did have several products, yes, and that was where the challenge was. When you have so many different products, it's hard to prioritize which one to give your attention to. Mia helped by interfacing directly with the product team. We made a request early on that she not talk to me, but instead talk with the chief product officer and the product managers, and that's what she did. It was pretty responsive to our needs and our recommendations as well.

Katherine Noble: Were there any gaps in this capacity-building approach?

Haroon Yasin: We were checking in with Mia about once every month. One approach we've come to appreciate since then is that sometimes when you're doing product roadmaps, you have an insight and a realization, and then you want to try out that thing.

For example, we were working on making textbooks for public schools in an entire district. Making and designing textbooks is a very laborious time-taking task. This was when ChatGPT had just come out, and AI models were getting better. We wrote about our idea on LinkedIn, and an organization called Fab Inc, now AI-for-Education.org, reached out to express interest and offer to do an experiment around it. For that experiment, not only did they make the expertise available, but they also made some money available. Normally, we never have the cash for very expensive consultants who are knee deep in AI. With this money, we were able to afford AI engineers and some very highly paid consultants. The upside was that we had the resources to do this experiment, and the government loved these textbooks so much that they adopted them at scale across the entire district. We gave up the IP intellectual property rights for those books as well. Now they belong to the government, but the government is so happy with them that they keep printing hundreds of thousands of copies of these books and distributing them to students.Sometimes you need advice, sometimes you need

resources, and sometimes you need both. If this approach becomes a part of Ripplework projects as well, it will be very interesting.

The number of things you can do and the risk you can approach with these projects also becomes incredibly high. At the time, it was a small amount of cash, about $20,000, but since then we've done three of these experiments. We wrote about all the AI tools we built. Some organizations would do catalyst grants. The second one wasn't done by AI-for-Education.org, it was done by GSMA Foundation Global System for Mobile Association which is an aggregate of telecommunication companies. They were very interested in use cases to develop on phones to create technology to help people. We ran a second experiment. We built it, tested it, published evidence, and then the government took it up. That's quite a neat formula to pursue innovation because otherwise, organizations are stuck in cycles of resources already committed. They're already running neck to neck, and innovation exists in tiny corridors here and there where some cash opens up. You don't have to build the whole thing, you build just enough of it to demonstrate. At that time, for example, AI-for-Education.org just spent $20,000 on it, but the government right now is spending about half a million dollars just in printing and distribution. Imagine the ROI [return on investment] on impact as a result of being able to do this experiment.

Katherine Noble: What are the top three things you need to unlock your ability to scale, sustain, and even expand your work to other countries?

Haroon Yasin: The first one is definitely capital. For every single funder that has funded Taleemabad or given us a grant, we were the first ones they gave to in Pakistan. I can't stress how much time goes into first talking about Pakistan and selling Pakistan. People have assumptions about Pakistan, and so 8 out of 10 funders and granters normally say that's not a geography we are interested in. Then comes a long cycle of converting them. It has been an interesting constraint. That's why we were almost forced to consider the government as a customer to be able to continuously innovate. Now, we keep on developing the product. It's a lean team, and the government keeps on deploying it. In order to customize the product, keep innovating it, and keep adding new features to it, we're running up against a glass ceiling for the kind of grant capital available to social enterprises in Pakistan.

The second thing is that we've recently turned our attention to organizations in other countries. We call them partners. We understand it would be foolish to assume we would set up offices in every country and attempt to scale that way. Instead, we see our role as licensing and giving the technology to our field partners, who can then deploy it according to the context in their own countries. We understand we need to go deep into mapping out the organizational ecosystem in other countries. Let's say we want to operate in Afghanistan, Iran or Bangladesh. We need to know which organizations we can partner up with. We've been talking to some of them, and the main thing is that all these organizations are already cash strapped. For some of them, we are their payer. We pay them to deliver the program, or at least start to pitch it to the government. Finding reliable partners is the second thing.

The third thing is that Pakistan is experiencing a huge and worrying amount of talent drain. Anybody with a college degree is on their way out, and that worries us because we need talented, motivated people to scale an organization of this sort. Right now we're exploring hiring people remotely outside of Pakistan, because talent in Pakistan is growing so thin. We know we can only do that once we've got a certain amount of capital under the belt. Labor and talent in Pakistan is definitely cheaper than if you were to hire from the US or UK.

The fourth factor is that the government right now is stable, and so far, they've consistently paid [us]. However, we still have an uneasy feeling and still keep looking over our shoulders, because the Pakistani government has almost gone bankrupt every year in the last two or three years. We keep on scaling with the government, which means that every year the government puts in, let's say $2 million. When we grow bigger they might put in $4 million, and when we grow even bigger than that, maybe $10 million. If a payer that big suddenly capsizes, you sink as an organization with them. We've been thinking about how we can set up mechanisms and safety valves to prevent that from happening in the event that a 'black swan' event happens, which is more likely than we think. Sri Lanka went bankrupt a few years ago, and they had an economy that was very similar to that of Pakistan. We just hope that doesn't happen here, because that would mean the government can then default on all their payments.

Katherine Noble: Do you have a contingency plan for that?

Haroon Yasin: Not yet, not a well-oiled one. We have reserves that we are slowly building up, and these reserves are for rainy days such as the circumstances I've just described. We're moving some of our people to the government payroll, but in the event of a truly black swan event like a default by the government, they would even stop paying their employees. I don't know how much you can prevent. We're building reserves and holding these reserves outside of Pakistan, as well in US dollars, in the event that the whole country goes into deep recession and default, but that's about it. I wonder to what extent you can completely safeguard yourself from such an event.

Katherine Noble: Do you have an example of an experience from the Expert Office Hours that was immediately effective? Anything that would make it more helpful?

Haroon Yasin: I generally had a good experience with the Office Hours. We reached out to our portfolio manager when we were really struggling with AI. This was a different use case for AI. We were using AI to make illustrations and media that children could use to better understand a scientific concept, for example. It was very hard to control, and AI would be pretty random in the kind of outputs it gave us. We were connected to an expert who worked at some of the big names in Silicon Valley like Google and Microsoft. They were able to walk us through the problem, but they didn't have a solution. They were very upfront with the fact that this is an 'edge case' a situation or input that falls outside the normal or expected range, often at the boundaries or extremes of a system's functionality, potentially revealing unexpected behavior or bugs. It's right at the cusp of what's possible across a world that's still figuring it out. Then he gave some suggestions as to how he would solve it, if it were him. That was helpful. We

were going around looking for answers, but understanding also that we were on the edge of what was possible with AI at that time. That meant we were going into some very nerdy Stack Overflow communities to talk to developers, and we turned our attention to those people on the fringes to find better solutions.

Sometimes, we are not on the cutting edge. For example, once we started working with government schools, we were working with schools in very remote locations, and we had to make our material available offline. When you're working offline and downloading content onto someone's phone, you've also got to be mindful of the storage you take on their phone. Most people we served were very poor and didn't have phones with a lot of storage. We were caught between a stone and a hard place, because we wanted to download the content so the teacher could use it, but the teacher's phone didn't have enough space in it for our content to be downloaded. At that point, the expert we talked to was spot on. In fact, our strategy for offline was influenced quite a lot by the advice they gave us. That was a problem somebody else had solved previously, and it was great to tap into what worked for them. At some point, the table flipped, and we were the experts for somebody else in the Office Hours.

Katherine Noble: Would you want to do Office Hours again?

Haroon Yasin: Yes. The Rippleworks team is fantastic, and they keep reaching out. Every single time, we get a Rippleworks email asking if we want to do something like Office Hours or just touch base. In our work, the water is always above our heads and we're in the middle of a trench battle fighting for something with so much chaos that oftentimes, our biggest regret is that we don't even get the time to reply to Rippleworks' emails. We start our work days at 7:00AM and end at midnight. We don't even know when the week is starting and when it's over. At that point, it becomes tough to just take a pause, jump out, and go do an Office Hour. That's been a challenge.

Katherine Noble: Is there something Rippleworks could do to make it easier? What's missing there? Is it the timing, or possibly having more advance warning? What would make it so that you could say yes more often?

Haroon Yasin: Our team of 250 people are all very talented, they are all doers. They always have this itch to be building and doing stuff. We pull them out of the office to our cabin in the woods for three days without cell phone connectivity, Microsoft Teams, or email. This is explicitly to discuss strategy, innovation, and new things we need to build. Everyone is so cut off that they get to build in that way. Mulago Foundation does this kind of retreat very well.

I know a retreat is not ideal in most cases, but pausing work for leaders in some way is very important, and we don't get enough chances to do that. Part of the responsibility is the leaders themselves making that time. We do that, but whenever we find the rare moment to do that three or four times a year, it's mostly with our own teams and not with Rippleworks. I don't have an exact solution, except a thesis on how to create that time. I'm not sure how Rippleworks can fit into that. It might be interesting to have Rippleworks participate in our strategy sessions.

Katherine Noble: Is there anything that funders don't understand about capacity building that you'd like to tell them?

Haroon Yasin: The kind of capacity building I've found to be most effective is to lead by asking our team what they would like to change about the organization, and then get in the trenches with them. Oftentimes, there is a capital problem as well. In the example of the AI engineers, we had tons of people tell us strategies about how to build an AI-infused roadmap for product development. It's not that we didn't know how, or didn't want to, or were ignoring that. It's just that these experts who had done product development in AI were super expensive.

Eventually, a funder showed up who said if this is what we needed, that's what they would do, and they remain plugged in. One was mad enough to go and hunt for AI engineers with us, and to review their profiles with us. That kind of talent development is often overlooked. Instead, what we often get is lots of advice. The other piece is that once you get talent in the door, it is quite a substantial effort to mature and grow them. We now run an internal fellowship in the organization to develop leaders internally through the off-sites where we run these fellowships. That's been a very interesting approach, though I'm not sure any funders have been very interested in this fellowship approach to develop the second and third tiers of the organization. I often end up in fights with people who reach out to offer me a conference or fellowship, but I keep writing back to suggest other great leaders to consider. For example, I got selected for some fellowship with the TED conference, but unfortunately, they couldn't pick the leader I recommended. It's a challenge when everything is focused on the CEO. Other talent development approaches are hard to come by, so we've developed a mechanism to develop them ourselves.

Katherine Noble: Your other funding models are project specific, and not necessarily huge, but they allow you to scale innovation and technology to a certain point, and when it's clearly useful, then the government can fund expanding it.

Haroon Yasin: The government will fund programs and deployments. There is someone that will fund innovation, but there are still other aspects of an organization's growth that need funding, such as the day-to-day development of the product and day-to-day overhead. Generally, there's not been a lot of funding going to Pakistan. We put together an event with all our funders and all the other organizations in the country who are fantastic, but just aren't on anyone's radar. There is a terrible lack of financing coming into Pakistan, grant financing especially, to support social entrepreneurship. It would be interesting to remedy that.

Katherine Noble: How would that happen?

Haroon Yasin: Once they learn about Pakistan and see the standard of the work we're producing, then we introduce them to other organizations to expand their portfolio within Pakistan. That effort has been going well so far, but in terms of new organizations that are considering Pakistan, it seems like we've hit a wall. Existing funders continue to

fund us, and now we're helping them see other organizations within the country as well, but new funders into the country have slowed down to quite a substantial extent. Case in point is that Taleemabad has only two recurring funders that are long-term funders. They do $100K and $200K grants per year, so that's fairly limiting.

Katherine Noble: Are grants the primary funding mechanism for your innovation besides support from the government?

Haroon Yasin: Yes. Many foundations have a geographical restriction on working in Pakistan.

Katherine Noble: Does the government provide any funding for you to do innovations and research on new products?

Haroon Yasin: No, the government is pretty cash-strapped themselves as well with the existing budget in education that we use. Right now it seems they're more likely to fund just program deployments. Think of this as variable cost, and consider all the variable costs they will fund to deploy the program. They might open up the fixed cost of developing the product in the future. We also don't want to just put too many eggs in that basket right now. We want to be able to test it out a bit further, because if your organization's core operating budget is also coming from the government, then when that collapses, there is absolutely no chance of survival.

Katherine Noble: Is there anything else about your approach or program that's worked or hasn't worked?

Haroon Yasin: It just boils down to the belief in teachers and in kids. In a world of hyper-scaling, hyper-growing and multiplying 100X, this is patient work that often gets overlooked. As an organization, we used to be obsessed with speed as well, and we still are, but we woke up with the realization that time is short, but the life of the student and teacher is very long. We need to be in it for the long haul. The world has already seen enough hype cycles and projects that scale to millions and millions of kids and teachers but ultimately end up being not so advantageous, and we don't want that to happen.

Katherine Noble: You have patience and perseverance with teachers and children. How does that empathetic attitude work with families as well?

Haroon Yasin: We reach out to parents at home to encourage them to play a more active part in their child's life, because research proves that when parents are involved in their child's academics, results automatically improve much faster. We often call parents as well because we've got them all on file. Everyone has to man the lines and pick up the phone and dial a parent. There was one parent I dialed who was a security guard at a local bank who said he was very interested in our program, but he didn't have any time. I asked him when he went to work and when he returned, and he told me he worked from 7AM to 9PM. I asked him what he did after that, and he said he had dinner and went to sleep. For the longest time, our challenge was how do we remedy that? We made multiple calls to this person, and one day we asked what his wife was doing, but he wouldn't give her his phone to talk with us. We suggested he should try giving her

the phone for just a couple of days so that we could send her material to work through with the child at home. We promised to show him that this will improve the child's performance. For over two months, we worked with the mother and sent remedial content to the child. It was a journey for the dad to learn to trust the mom with the phone, but eventually he came around. His daughter was able to do a lot of mathematics sums in front of him for a maths program, and he eventually changed his opinion on it.

This guy came around much faster than some. There have been cases in which fathers have pulled their girls out of school because they don't think that girls should be in school. Our teams in the villages show up on doorsteps to ask if parents can please bring the girl back, because she needs to study. Oftentimes it's a very sensitive, very emotional thing to say to a parent, but time and again, we've seen that especially men and fathers do come around, although it takes a lot of counseling. Again, this is done by the coach. The coach who works with the teacher also works with the parent to make sure they're doing what they need to do for their child. People don't associate patience and perseverance with hyper scaling fast-growing enterprises, and I think they should.

Katherine Noble: Thank you very much.

Haroon Yasin: Thank you.

Katherine Noble Noble directs editorial partnerships at Sentient, including syndication, co-publishing, co-reporting, collaboratives, and special projects. Before joining Sentient in 2024, she worked for eight years to spread the practice of solutions journalism through the Solutions Journalism Network. As a reporter, she specialized in water issues, particularly in the western United States, and she also covered philanthropy, health, religion, education, and crime for daily, weekly, and monthly print publications. She has a graduate degree in history from Duke University and in business from University of Redlands. Her undergraduate degree is in political science from UC Berkeley.

* This interview has been edited and condensed.