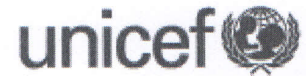
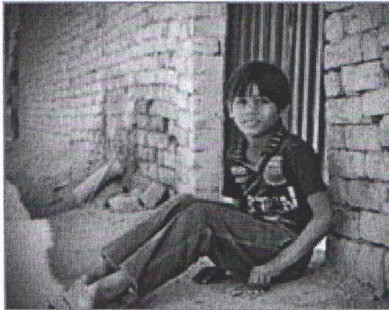


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From Garbage Bag to School Bag; IKEAF Helps UNICEF Improve Lives of Children in Punjab



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Abdul Rehman (10) sits outside his house in village Kissan Colony, Bahawalpur district, Southern Punjab

By: A. Sami Malik

Kissan Colony, Bahawalpur District, Southern Punjab, Pakistan: March 2014 –“I collect garbage every day and sell it to earn some money,” says Abdul Rehman (10). “My family expects me to contribute if I am to get a meal at home. If I don’t collect garbage, how else can I make money?”

Even at the tender age of ten, Abdul Rehman, has learned to work hard if he is to get three square meals a day. Hailing from a poor and disadvantaged family, he lost his mother when he was just a year old. His father remarried and moved to another town severing all contacts with his family. He is the youngest of 10 siblings. All others are married. Abdul Rehman pretty much lives his life on his own with little or no care and guidance from his family.

Most families in Kissan Colony work in fields during the cotton picking season. Once the season is over, earning a day’s living becomes the greatest concern. Men travel to the nearest urban areas looking for odd jobs on daily wages while women and children collect garbage and sell it to make some money.

Children in Kissan Colony have been deprived of education for a long time as there is no public school in the village. Formal schools are located at some distance and the families are too poor to afford the school fee and related expenses.

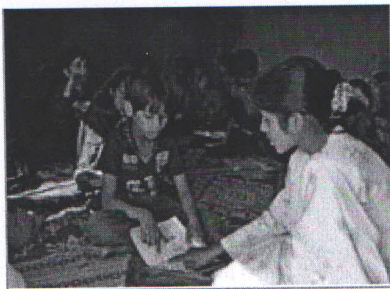
In 2012, with funding from the IKEA Foundation of Sweden, UNICEF initiated ‘Promoting Child Rights in Cotton Farming Areas of Pakistan’ project. The project aims at building the partnership between provincial and district authorities, communities, services providers and private sectors to child rights in all major cotton producing districts including Bahawalpur.

UNICEF with its implementing partner, National Commission for Human Development (NCHD) has mobilized and supported the community in establishment of 80 centres in Bahawalpur district, benefitting nearly 3,000 children. The centre set up in Kissan Colony is located in one of the village houses which belongs to the teacher of that centre. With current strength of 50 children, this centre has become a major attraction for the village children, girls and boys alike.

Abdul Rehman in being enrolled in the centre about eight months ago. Recalling the resistance he had to face from his family, he says, “They all thought going to school will be a waste of time. They wanted me to collect garbage all day long and earn extra money. At times, I had to fight my way to school. But now they don’t stop me as I go to school in the morning and collect garbage in the afternoon and on Sundays.”

“They all thought going to school will be a waste of time. They wanted me to collect garbage all day long and earn extra money. At times, I had to fight my way to school. But now they don’t stop me as I go to school in the morning and collect garbage in the afternoon and on Sundays.” Abdul Rehman

Holding two Bachelor degrees and pursuing her Masters, Ishrat’s is strongly motivated to enrol every child of school going age in her village. “Initially, it was difficult for me to convince Abdul Rehman’s family to let him enrol in the centre. They thought it would be



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Abdul Rehman (10) receives guidance on academic work from his teacher Ishrat Yousaf.

a financial loss to them. During the eight months that he has been coming to the centre, they forced him to quit thrice. Due to his own interest in studies and my pursuit, he now comes regularly and has already cleared Step I (Nursery level)."

Ishrat says, "These centres are a blessing for children. If it wasn't for these educational services being provided by UNICEF, many of these children would have been deprived of their right to education."

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Ishrat Yosuf, Teacher

Promoting Child Rights in Cotton Farming Areas is an initiative to help improve lives of children belonging to families involved in

cotton farming. It is meant to help them attain at least primary level education in a child friendly and inclusive learning environment. Students are provided free bags, books and stationery as an incentive. The teachers are selected from within the community and trained in interactive methods of teaching and non-violent disciplinary solutions.

"Child economic exploitation is prevalent as families have no means of income to support children and especially children's education, says Shagufta Bhatti, UNICEF Child Protection Specialist. "The value of hard earned money given to the parents at the end of the day has more perceived value than attending school and being educated, especially when employment after education is also not certain. The IKEAF funded project aims at promoting child rights of children including those involved in labour and is heartening to witness the opportunities that are available and how basic services are accessible to those that had none."

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