



EDUCATION: SOME THOUGHTS ON THE WAY FORWARD

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School education, K-12, in is doldrums in Pakistan. An estimated¹ 20 million children of school going age, almost one third of the children population, are out of school in Pakistan. There are clear gender, location and geographic patterns in being out of school. There are more girls who are out of school, out of school children are more likely to be from rural areas and they are more likely to be out of school if they are from Balochistan.

For children in school, Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) reports show the very poor levels of literacy and numeracy outcomes (foundational learning issues) that most in-school children are achieving². Our quality adjusted measures of years of schooling are almost half of the total average years of schooling: from 8.8 years they come down to 4.8 years³. Children are 4 odd years behind in learning. In other words, imagine the inefficiency and unfairness of the system where children stay in school for 8 years and parents and the society spend resources for those 8 years of education of our children, only for them to get 4 odd years worth of education.

This is the current state of our education system: one-third of the children are out of school, and the two-thirds who are in school are getting, on average, poor quality education.

Our K-12 sector is also very iniquitous, unfair and divided. It is divided along multiple lines: type of school (government, private, madrassa), school fee levels (high, medium, low, free), curriculum (madrassa, national), books (textbook board, other publishers, imported), examinations (madrassa, matriculation, O'Level, IB) and medium of instruction (Urdu, English). Government schools are free and there are schools in Lahore that now charge USD 300 per month per child.

¹Ersado, Lire.; Hasan, Amer; Geven, Koen Martijn; Kathuria, Ashi Kohli; Baron, Juan; Bend, May; Ahmed, S. Amer. 2023. Pakistan – Human Capital Review: Building Capabilities Throughout Life. © Washington, DC. <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/39629> License: CC BY 3.0 IGO.”

²Presentations here give details. Retrieved on 25th October, 2023. <https://aserpakistan.org/presentations>.

³World Bank Human Capital Index and its components for Pakistan. Retrieved on 25th October, 2023 from <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/848351539018875740-0140022018/render/HCI2pagerPAK.pdf>

The quality of education, in perception and reality, is tied to fee levels so access to good quality education is tied to parental income and only middle and higher income groups can afford to send their children to decent quality schools. Instead of creating social and economic mobility, some have argued, our education system is entrenching existing patterns of inequality and may even be making them worse.

All this despite the fact that Article 25A: Right to Education, added to the basic rights section of the Constitution through the 18th constitutional Amendment in 2010, guarantees free and compulsory education for all 5-16 year olds in Pakistan⁴. And we are signatory to various international commitments on the rights of children, MDGs and SDGs as well: all of them emphasise that all children, until high school, should have access to education as a right. There are functional arguments for providing education to all children as well, related to generation of growth and achieving higher levels of development. For example, it is argued that social and economic returns to educating girls makes it one of the best investments that developing countries can make even strictly from a returns perspective. Girls education leads to reduction in child marriage, lower fertility, spacing in children, better health and education outcomes of children, and labour force participation of women, to name a few benefits pointed out in the literature⁵. But we are not educating all our children in Pakistan and that is the bottom line for us.

It is not even clear we have any intention of educating all children in Pakistan. Rhetoric aside, there are no indicative actions. Government barely spends 1.7-1.8 percent of GDP on education. UN recommends 4-6 percent of GDP should be spent on education. After the 18th Amendment, some provincial governments have passed compulsory education acts but none of the provinces or the federal government have been able to implement them. We do not even have 5-10 year plans for how compulsory education is going to be implemented or phased in. We do not have the schools needed, especially at middle and high school levels, to accommodate the number of children who are out of school or the number of children who are going to be entering primary education age over the next decade or so.

We could continue to limp along, in education, as we have for the last decade or so. But this would be a criminal disservice to not only the children of Pakistan, it would be terrible for the future of the country as well. But what should be the way forward? Some obvious things suggest themselves.

One, we should, as a country and society, set some goals for what we want to achieve in education in the next five years and the next ten years. Do we want to educate all children or not? If not, what percentage of children do we want to educate and on what basis will we make the selection? How much do we want the quality of education to improve in these five to ten years? Access and

quality reforms take time. But how can we conduct reforms if we do not even know what are we aiming for? The goals have to have buy-in from all stakeholders, especially all major political parties so that education goals can remain pertinent as governments come and go.

Two, the goals have to be turned into plans. Provinces already make sector plans that are of 5-year durations and so are used to the methods. But these plans need to have agreed-upon goals in mind and have to put a cost to them as well. We need to know if we are going to raise enrolments by x percent, what resources do we need to put in and so on.

Three, there needs to be detailed work, with the plans, as to what sub-sectoral reforms we will have to conduct in order to achieve planned targets and thus the goals being set. These can be developed with sector plans. For example, if quality is to be improved: what needs to happen in examination reform, curriculum reform, textbook reform, pre-service teacher education, teacher recruitment, in-service teacher training, etc. Access, quality and equity goals cannot be achieved unless we have detailed work on sub-sectoral reforms as well.

Finally, there has to be strict monitoring of progress on achievements. The education department and planning departments can do their own monitoring but we should have systems for 3rd party validation as well. But monitoring/evaluation is not summative only, it has to be a feedback to the system to allow learning from mistakes and achievements and to allow recalibration of policy and plans. Currently, School Education Departments do not have effective loops between plans, implementation, feedback and recalibration. We are often flying blind.

Given the times we live in where the polity is very divided, fragmented, polarised and demoralized, it is hard to see how one party or even a government of one party can take us forward on education. One way might be for the government to set up a Commission⁶, with experts as well as interested members from all the main political parties, to work out what our goals should be for the next 5-10 years. The Commission, to be run for 2-3 years, should be tasked to get buy-in, for the goals, from all major stakeholders and then work with the provinces to develop their fully costed education sector plans and help set up some monitoring, feedback and evaluation mechanisms.

⁴25A. Right to education: The State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of five to sixteen years in such manner as may be determined by law.

⁵The UNICEF site gives access to some of the relevant literature. <https://www.unicef.org/education/girls-education>.

⁶People still refer to the Sharif Commission Report (1959) on Education as one that talked about some of more difficult issues we faced in education and proposed a number of interesting and useful solutions. Commissions, if they have the right ToRs, have government and stakeholder support and have the right combination of experts and interested parties, might allow consensus, on goals and plans, to be forged. It is hard to see any single party or even government of one/some parties being able to do it.

The Commission can disband once the implementation starts and the provinces and the federation are able to follow through. The Commission should have the requisite authority and support from the government and its membership should constitute people with expertise and interest in education, should be people of integrity, and should be people who can forge a consensus and way forward for us. And it has to be with concurrence of the provinces given the 18th Amendment and the devolution of education to the provinces.

Our education system is quite broken. We have lots of ideas on how to fix things at the sub-sector level but to move forward we need consensus on goals as well as the means to achieve the goals. This is the main work, it seems to me, that needs to be done before we can see any significant change in the education sector.

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