



Having said that, the issue of out of school children is not only restricted to Punjab. Different surveys report different results, but even from a conservative standpoint, the country has about 23 million (44%) children between 5-16 years of age that don't go to school – putting Pakistan in 2nd place on the list of countries with the greatest number of out of school children.

Hence there is indeed a need to both increase the capacity of current schools and build new ones. Yet, I would like to maintain that the paucity of school space is both, not the only and also not the foremost reason for children not going to school. An amalgamation of distinct factors come together to bring about this reality and include economic, cultural and societal factors. However, there is another important factor that contributes immensely – one that is often overlooked – which pertains to the quality of school education in Pakistan.

In addition to having tens of millions of out of school children, Pakistan also faces an acute learning crisis. According to the Annual Status of Education Report (2021), only 55% and 51% of Grade 5 students could read a story in their local language and perform basic arithmetic, respectively. What makes these figures worse is the fact that these passing percentages are for a test that is designed for Grade 2 competencies, but was administered to Grade 5 students. For students who are transitioning from Grade 2 to 3, the level for which the test is originally designed for, the passing rates fall to 15% and 20% for reading and arithmetic, respectively.

Given that Pakistan has tens of millions of out of school children to go along with a severe learning crisis, we find ourselves in a complex conundrum. Since we only have a limited number of resources, we cannot bring all children to school and reduce learning poverty at the same time. Theoretically it might be possible, but given that our government expenditure on education has hovered around the 2-3% of GDP mark for the last half century or so, only a significant rupture in the political economy apparatus would facilitate the sort of radical improvement that is required.

Given our financial constraints, we will have to make profoundly difficult choices. Difficult choices now are nothing new within the realm of public policy decision making – but before I delve further, I would like to delineate something that will add some nuance to our discussion.

The past three years of my life have been spent working with the most peculiar kind of social science researchers, i.e. economists. Economists often have a habit of taking commonplace ideas, ones that are perceptible to all lay senses, dressing them with mathematical equations and trivialising them to a point of no return, just to prove what already made logical sense at the outset. One such fundamental concept that underpins microeconomic theory is of 'Constrained Optimisation'. Behind the calculus of utility and budget functions, what the

concept barely stands for is that given a limited budget or income, a consumer has to choose between two possible goods – and that it is when a certain level of quantity of both goods are maximised given the limited spending budget can we say that we have optimised a constrained choice.

It is precisely such a constrained optimisation problem that we are faced with when it comes to provision of education in Pakistan. Given that we don't realistically have resources for both, should we focus on bringing our tens of millions of out of school children into classrooms or should we instead focus on improving the quality of learning for students already in school. A rational public policy professional or economist would advocate for a mix of both in a manner similar to the constrained optimisation concept in microeconomics. Yet, what most some economists (not all) fail to understand are the ethical dimensions of decisions based on mathematical calculus. A very valid ethical question to ask would be: if we divert money towards improving quality, are we not invariably taking away money that could be used to put some children into schools? What gives us the right to make a decision to keep kids out of school in this case, particularly when their right to be in school is enshrined in the Constitution? Such questions do not have easy answers and require sustained and careful discourse.

The role that quality education plays in the development and economic growth of countries is well documented. Yet for us as a country, having a major portion of our youth either not getting any education or getting sub-optimal education also poses a national security risk. This latter link might not be easy to prove using empirical models – but I fear if we were to wait too long to obtain years worth of data points – it might be too little and too late. For what can be the consequences of having tens of millions of uneducated and most likely alienated young people who cannot even read or write?

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