**Education Sector Reforms in Pakistan**

The aim of the 21st century schools can not be achieved in Pakistan unless substantial reforms are undertaken in the Education sector. All available evidence points out to the grim fact that Pakistan is a long way from achieving the Education for All God (EFA) by 2015, and will miss the Millennium Development goals on Education. Pakistan has the world’s second highest incidence of out of school children, 5.1 million, of which two-thirds are girls. Net Enrolment rates in primary, secondary and technical education levels remain far behind other countries in South Asia. Literacy rates of male population do not differ significantly among the four provinces but the variance in the female literacy rates in quite high. Almost half of the female population in Punjab and Sindh are literate but the rates in KPK and Baluchistan are one third and one fourth only.

Against the backdrop of the above scenario, the demographic changes taking place or likely to take place in the world bear the seeds of potential benefits for the Pakistani youth. Japan’s population has already started declining by 0.7% per annum. This transition is going to be soon followed by other advanced countries which will have majority of their population ageing and dependent on a shrinking younger working age labor force. Even in China, the rate of growth of the younger working age population would drop by more than I percent a year in the coming decade. The only regions where the youthful population forms the majority would be South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. In Pakistan, sixty percent of the population is below the age of 30. Although international labor mobility is restrictive, the demand pressures suggest that an educated, trained and health young labor force of Pakistan can become a source of work force for the rest of the world. Unemployment problem of absorbing the additional 1.5 to 2 million young workers every year can also be eased if we accelerate investment in primary, secondary, technical and vocational, education of our youth thus making them employable globally.

Another emerging mega trend is that of the dominance of Knowledge economy over Agriculture, industry and services. Technology, Connectivity, information explosion and innovation are changing the patterns of economic growth. Countries that equip their populations with the capabilities to compete in the knowledge economy will forge ahead . Empirical evidence based on the last six decades experience is unambiguously clear that economic development is clearly correlated with the status of education in a country. One year of additional education of the labor force translates into hundreds of billions of rupees in greater output of goods and services. In case of Pakistan also the 20 percent top income families who enjoy a relatively better access and good quality education receive almost seven years more education that the lowest 20 percent and about 30 percent Pakistanis live in extreme educational poverty, having received less than 2 years of education

Under the current set of our weak factor endowment the probability of Pakistan becoming a player in this game remains quite low. Access to the lower middle and lower income groups to tertiary and professional education has to be intensified and the quality of instruction and research at universities has to be upgraded failing which the rates of economic growth would remain dismal.

If the average Pakistani engaged in the labor force had the same level of educational attainment as the top income 20 percent of the population our per capita income today would have been twice as high as the current level. Poverty would have been much lower than one quarter of the population. Income inequality and Gender disparities would have been reduced with greater social mobility and equality of opportunity for advancement available to the majority of the population. The vast differences in the living standards observed between the rural districts of Baluchistan and KPK on one hand and Karachi and Lahore on the other would not have been so stark.

Cross -country evidence from different parts of the world shows that investment in female education has the highest rates of return compared to any other sector or project. The collateral benefits of educated females do not remain confined to education alone but extend to improved nutrition, better health care and sanitation, family planning and environment . Districts in Pakistan with the lowest female literacy rates and lowest female enrolment ratios are also the most backward and poor districts. Exceptional efforts have to be made to accelerate investment in female education in these backward districts to raise their standards of living.

So, if the benefits of education are so well known and the opportunities for the Pakistani youth to participate in the global labor force in the future appear so promising what seems to be the problems and how can this be addressed?

Is this a demand side or a supply side problem. There is no doubt any more that demand for education in Pakistan is quite high across the board. Even the conservative parents in the FATA tribal agencies want their -- both boys and girls--to attend school. A very powerful indicator of the demand is the rapid growth of private and non-government schools where parents are voting by their feet. Even small holder farming families in the Central and Northern Punjab are paying tuition fee and other expenses for their children to attend private schools. It is a myth that private schools are necessarily expensive. The majority of Private schools are low cost charging Rs. 200-300 per month.

The problem lies in the inadequate supply of schools and competent teachers. Government schools form 70 percent of the total supply but they are still insufficient to meet the growing demand. But more worrisome is the prevalence of absenteeism among teachers, poor quality of instruction and deficient infrastructure facilities.

The agenda for Education reforms should therefore be multi pronged. The current debate between public vs private schools, primary vs tertiary education, province vs federal and similar other contrived binary classifications is entirely misplaced. The enormity of the problem requires “All hands on the deck” approach in which public private, non-governmental organization, communities all take active part in supplying quality education and improving access to the children who are out of school or get dropped out of the schools or are unable to complete their education. Public expenditures on education should be raised to 4 percent of GDP and Article 25A of the constitution should be implemented by the Government but the doors should not be shut for alternative sources of supply. While it will always remain the responsibility of the Government to make sure that universal compulsory primary education is enforced and financing becomes available for meeting the education needs of the poor and the disadvantaged, it is not necessary that the private sector, non-profit sector, should be excluded from the provision of education A more inclusive approach would consist of sharing of these resources among all providers of primary, secondary, vocational and technical and high education based on pre determined eligibility criteria . Stipends and scholarships, vouchers schemes have been successfully tested for non public sector institutions by Punjab and should be replicated throughout the country .

There is a lot of emphasis in public discourse in Pakistan about increasing the level of government expenditure on Education. It is true that compared to other countries in the region the amount spent on Education by all tiers of government in Pakistan is quite low. However, given the leakages, waste and inefficiencies in this sector, any such increase should be clearly linked with implementation of a well thought out plan of improving governance and management of education. The broad contours of such a plan were developed two years ago after extensive consultation with the stakeholders but have found very little receptivity so far.

The starting point is a clear demarcation of responsibilities between the Federal, Provincial and Local Governments. In light of the 18th amendment of the Constitution Universal Education for children aged from 5 to 15 has become a right. It is therefore essential to delineate the boundaries of different tiers of government in meeting this objective. The Federal Government should have the authority to steer the development of National Education Policy and National Curriculum and standards in consultation with the provincial governments. A National Council of Education Ministers consisting of the Federal and provincial ministers should be entrusted with the task of deliberating, approving and monitoring the policy and the national curriculum. The existing monopoly of the Provincial Text Boards in publishing the text books should be abolished.

Higher Education Commission (HEC) has proved to be an excellent model for promoting access as well as quality of education at tertiary level. The present arrangements should be preserved and the HEC allowed functioning in its present form. College Education and Technical and vocational Education should remain in the domain of the Provincial Governments. An autonomous College Education Authority (CEA) should regulate the standard and quality of education at all public, private and non-government owned colleges. Minimum acceptable criteria for recruitment and promotion should be developed and training in pedagogical tools made mandatory.

Most of the Governance Reforms should focus on primary to high schools. Primary to High School Education should be delegated to the District Governments as it is simply not possible for any provincial government to have such a wide span of control. Under the present set up there is hardly any supervision or accountability worth the name as the capacity of the Provincial Education Departments is overstretched. They are not in a position to handle such heavy work load and that results in neglect of the system and widespread absenteeism of the teachers. The capacity of the DDistrictsDistricts should be strengthened by forming a District Education Board (DEB) in each district. This Board will bring about coordination, ensure uniformity in standards of public, private and non-profit schools, arrange inspections and take action against the teachers found negligent in their duties. The Board will consist of eminent persons enjoying a good reputation and the District Education Officer will act as the Secretary of the Board and implement the decisions taken by the Board. . The District Education Board should be allocated funds annually for carrying out the approved infrastructure projects, operations and maintenance, training of teachers in all the schools. The training will be delivered by the Provincial Government institutions who will also test the competencies of the teachers and the learning achievements of the students on an annual basis. Funds allocated to the District Boards will be audited regularly by the Audit Department.

Second, there should be separation between management and teaching cadres in all provinces. While the selection to management cadre will be open to the teachers having the right aptitude all teachers can progress in their teaching careers without becoming head master / principal / education officers. Those people who opt for head teachers/ principals cadre will be given appropriate training in management and also administrative authority to carry out the day-to-day operations of the school. They will also be given powers to initiate action against recalcitrant teachers.

Third, teachers’ cadres—from the University to primary schools-- should be de-linked from the National Pay Scales and allowed specialized pay scales with some built in flexibility.. Educational attainments in backward districts will not improve unless the compensation package is aligned with local market conditions. If, for example, a lady science teacher in Musakhel has to be paid Rs.15,000/- per month to attract her to work in this backward district she should be given that package. In contrast if qualified lady science teachers in Karachi or Lahore may be available at a salary of Rs.12,000/- per month and they should be paid that amount. Otherwise the present distortions – teachers appointed in backward districts are transferred to big cities along with their posts under political influence will continue to persist. Examples abound that the rural schools have no Maths teacher but schools in metropolitan areas may have six Maths teachers with only 60 students.

Fourth, all teachers should be appointed from among the candidates domiciled in a district through a test conducted by the Public Service Commission on merit alone. These posts will be non-transferable outside the district. Other posts for which suitable candidates are not available locally can be filled in from outside the district. The powers of recruitment, transfer, promotion, disciplinary actions will all reside with the District Education Board.

Fifth, the School Management Committees (SMCs) and / or Parent-Teachers Association (PTAs) should be empowered to effectively oversee the internal management of the school, i.e. keeping school infrastructure in good shape, ensuring teachers attend the school and other problems are resolved. Budgetary resources would have to be given to the SMCs but they will be accountable to the District Education Board for results.

Sixth, children from low income families should be given the option to choose private schools provided these schools meet prescribed eligibility criteria. These schools will be given per capita grant for the students from low income families. The activities of the Education Foundations in the provinces should be expanded and supplemented by other suitable means of fostering public-private partnership. All talented students from poor families and backward districts who secure admissions in private schools, professional colleges, business administration institutes, and institutions of higher learning should be awarded scholarships for pursuing their studies. Eligibility criteria should be announced before hand and advertisements should be placed inviting applications for scholarships.

Finally, ICT Technology should be used to promote a learning environment. A decentralized and empowered educational network can function efficiently only if it is monitored continuously. A Management Information System (MIS) should help the District Boards in monitoring the performance of the schools. For example, if the primary school in a locality is producing a constant stream of pupils for enrolment in higher classes, the up-gradation to the elementary school could take place immediately.

The more demanding and difficult challenge is to introduce good governance in the sector. Transparency, merit based appointments, performance-related compensation, and Accountability for results should form the core of this system. 18th amendment has devolved powers to the provinces but has created gaps and distortions.

The division of labor between the Federal, Provincial and local Governments needs to be clearly defined. The Federal Government should be responsible for curriculum, policy coordination, international liaision and Higher Education. The provincial Government should look after college education, technical and vocational education while the local government should have complete authority and powers for primary to high school education.

Teachers cadres from the university to Primary School-should be delinked from the National Pay scales and allowed specialized pay scales with some built in flexibility. Educational attainments in the backward districts will not improve unless the compensation package is aligned with local market conditions. Female Science teachers working in Awaran or Musakhel should be paid high premium salaries compared to their counterparts in Quetta.

District education Boards should be set up to manage all the government schools within a district, supervise and inspect Government and non government schools and ensure observance of discipline and academic standards. The district education officer will be secretary of the Board, while a reputed and eminent citizen will head it.