**[Broken promises](https://www.dawn.com/news/1782534/broken-promises)**

[Asghar Soomro](https://www.dawn.com/authors/164/asghar-soomro) Published October 21, 2023 Updated 2 days ago

The writer is an educationist. He has worked with national and international organisations in Pakistan

Listen to article

A LACK of political stability and policy continuity has always been attributed as the primary reasons for the failure of education in Sindh and other parts of the country. However, it is bewildering to witness continuous poor progress, stagnation, or even decline, despite the PPP being in power consecutively for the past 15 years.

Ironically, the very political stability that should have produced better results has had the opposite effect, as admitted by Sindh’s education secretary in a television interview some time ago. He said that 60 district officers of education, appointed on the basis of political considerations, seriously lacked competency. Just days before his transfer and a few weeks before retirement, the secretary seemingly absolved himself of any responsibility by speaking the truth. So, should he be appreciated for his honesty or held accountable for not fulfilling his role? Nevertheless, he has done a favour to the caretaker education minister by highlighting a major problem, even if not tackling it.

Since incompetent and politically favoured officers have been untouchable, various initiatives such as education reforms and legislation to make education a fundamental right remain mere rhetoric. As we analyse progress from 2007-08 to 2019-20 against four critical indicators — literacy rate, enrolment, gender gap and the population of out-of-school children — it becomes apparent that over a decade has been wasted without achieving significant improvements in these areas.

In 2008, when the party took over the government after Benazir Bhutto’s assassination, there was hope that it would genuinely deliver on its promises. However, when it comes to education, this hope appears to be a mirage. According to the findings of the Pakistan Social and Living Measurement (2007-08) survey, the overall literacy rate among the population aged 10 years and above stood at 56 per cent. Disappointingly, this rate has only marginally increased by 2pc, reaching 58pc during the entire period. Looking at the gender-wise break-up, male literacy decreased from 69pc to 68pc, while female literacy surprisingly improved from 42pc to 47pc. Surveys conducted during the intervening period indicate continuous fluctuations, with percentages sometimes increasing and sometimes decreasing. However, the overall trend demonstrates lacklustre progress.

In the AI era, we are miles away from ensuring literacy for all.

Many so-called experts within the education department and donor community offer clichéd opinions, without bothering to analyse the reasons behind the decline in male literacy rates and the increase in female rates. The latter is particularly perplexing given that 51pc of girls are still out of school. Therefore, it is essential to conduct an accurate analysis of these trends to identify their exact causes. Instead of making assumptions, it is worth trying to understand what has worked well and what has not so that remedial steps can be taken accordingly.

Regrettably, Pakistan ranks among the top three countries in the world in terms of being home to the largest proportion of out-of-school children aged five to 16 years. Balochistan has the highest percentage at 47pc, followed by Sindh at 44pc. Alarmingly, 51pc of girls in Sindh are out of school. Looking at the urban and rural breakdown, 58pc of children in the rural areas do not attend school due to the same chronic problems. The situation in district Thatta is especially dire, with 71pc of children out of school.

Additionally, there is the concerning trend of declining school attendance among children aged 10 years and older. In 2008, the atten­dance rate was 58pc, but it has since dropped to 55pc as of 2019-20. Ana­lysis of the net enrolment rate at the primary level, from class one to five, reveals progress at a snail’s pace in the province, indicating incompetence and insufficient capacity in planning and implementation. For example, in 2007-8, the net enrolment rate stood at 51pc, and it has only slightly increased to 55pc by 2019-20. Moreover, during this 12-year period, girls’ enrolment only marginally improved by 3pc, rising from 46pc to 49pc.

In the era of artificial intelligence, we are still grappling with basic problems in the education sector. Decades pass without any significant progress, leaving half of the population trapped in a vicious cycle of illiteracy and poverty. Regardless of who is responsible for the deterioration of education in the past, significant improvements could have been achieved if elected leaders had genuine intentions towards and concern for the children of hapless and poor voters. Sadly, neither the voters nor the leaders prioritise education.

*The writer is an educationist. He has worked with national and international organisations in Pakistan.*[*asgharsoomro@gmail.com*](https://mailto:asgharsoomro@gmail.com)

*Published in Dawn, October 21st, 2023*