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**A national education emergency**

The first 2.5 years of government by the PTI were extremely challenging because of the financial chaos that the present government inherited. Now, as things have stabilised, we can look ahead to a period of sustained economic growth.

In my recent meeting with Prime Minister Imran Khan, I stressed the need for declaring a National Education Emergency so that Pakistan can tap into its real strength: the 100 million or so youth below the age of 20. This youth bulge is a huge potential resource we are blessed with, in contrast to countries such as Japan, Korea and many European nations that have ageing populations.

The improved financial situation should now allow the present government to declare a National Education Emergency with an additional 0.5 percent of GDP allocated to education each year so that we reach 5 percent of GDP for education over the next five years, and 7.5 percent of GDP over the next 10 years. One-third of this increase should go to higher education and two-thirds to primary, secondary, technical and college education. This should be our top priority so that the huge untapped potential of our youth can be unleashed.

Our first focus must be to improve our school level education. Under the 18th Amendment to our constitution, a huge blunder was made when education was made a provincial subject. The fragmentation of an educational system is the best way to fragment a country as it creates persons with differing outlooks and standards, and results in severe disparities within society. The federal government now has little say on the poor quality of education that is being imparted in our schools and colleges since its role is limited to assisting in curriculum development and accreditation. This has fostered the monster of provincialism to emerge.

Article 25-A of the constitution makes it compulsory for the state to provide free and compulsory quality education to children between the age of 5 and 16, but this portion of the constitution has been torn to shreds by past feudal rulers who benefit from keeping the people illiterate so that they can exploit them without any questions asked.

It is a shameful reality that there are some 22.8 million children out of school in Pakistan, the second largest number in the world after Nigeria. There is a huge drop-out rate of 32 percent from our schools, with only 68 percent of the students managing to finish school. There are huge variations in the literacy rate within the country. The literacy level is 98 percent in Islamabad but it is only 23 percent in the Torghar district. In the tribal areas, female literacy rate is a dismal 9.5 percent. Out of about 2.6 percent of GDP allocated to education, very little (only about 12 percent) of the total national allocation to education goes to higher education, with about 88 percent being spent on lower-level education.

The international norms are that at least one-third of the total education budget should go to higher education. So, the overall distribution within the education sector requires serious adjustment. There are many ghost schools with ghost teachers who are actually working as servants for their master landlords but getting salaries as teachers from the government. This is particularly true in the province of Sindh where local landlords have been alleged to have taken over many school buildings and use them as their personal properties. This has been repeatedly highlighted in the national press.

The standards of primary and secondary education are poor with about half of 10-year-old students having linguistic competencies of six-year-old students. About 42 percent of government primary schools in the rural areas lack electricity; while about 40 percent lack access to clean drinking water and 49 percent lack functioning toilets. A nation cannot be built on such poor foundations, and so the call for a National Education Emergency by me is one that requires immediate action.

College level education is again a huge disaster. Colleges do not come under the ambit of the Higher Education Commission (except for degree-awarding institutes) and the provinces have largely neglected this sector too, resulting in poor quality candidates seeking admission to universities. Major reforms are needed to uplift this sector, including conversion of many colleges into technical institutions so that the national needs of highly-trained technologists including nurses, paramedical staff, instrumentation technicians, electronic technicians, experts in Artificial Intelligence, and other technical staff could be met.

Technical education requires complete reforms. There are some 1500 technical training institutions in Pakistan with about a thousand of them in the public sector. They need to be upgraded by converting 10 percent of them into teacher training centers in collaboration with countries such as Germany, Sweden, Australia and China. The well-trained teachers thus produced with foreign accreditation should then be absorbed in the remaining 90 percent of the institutions. The uplifting of this sector will have huge beneficial effects on the growth of our industries and on the quality of our products for exports.

Higher education has been in the doldrums in recent years. There are several issues that require immediate attention. First, to promote industrial research, a rolling five-billion-rupee research fund needs to be created through which universities and industries may make joint applications to solve specific industrial problems and to support the development and adoption of new emerging technologies by industry. Such a program for university-industry linkages was initiated when I was chairman of the HEC but it was not continued.

Another programme that needs to be restarted is to support the costs of international patents from our universities and research centers, for intellectual property protection. The tenure track system of faculty appointments has withered away with minimal salary increases. This too must be revived with 300 percent higher salaries than in the BPS system, as was the case when it was originally launched. Appointments under this system are made on contract with regular evaluation of productivity by foreign experts. All new faculty appointments should be made in this system and the old BPS system phased out, as the tenure track system ensures retention of good quality faculty only.

A network of quality engineering training institutes and universities of applied engineering should be set up on the model of the Pak Austrian Fachhochschule in Haripur, Hazara in which eight foreign engineering universities have agreed to partner, three from Austria and five from China. These, along with a whole host of other measures, will help transition Pakistan from the trappings of a low value-added agricultural economy, and transform it into a powerful knowledge economy.

The time to act is now, as tomorrow never comes in such matters. Feudal forces always succeed to give low priority to the critical issue of education when approving the national budget. Prime Minister Imran Khan must bulldoze the concept of a National Education Emergency through and ensure appropriate allocations for it in the next budget.

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