

# Literacy in doldrums

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depression stagnation

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**T**he UN General Assembly in its fifty-sixth session passed a resolution in December 2001 proclaiming the Literacy Decade for Education for All for the period 2003-2012. In its preamble to the resolution, the General Assembly states: it is convinced that literacy is crucial to the acquisition, by every child, youth and adult, of essential life skills that enable them to address the challenges they can face in life and represents an essential step in basic education, which is an indispensable means for effective participation in the societies and economics of the twenty-first century. The resolution reaffirms that literacy for all is at the heart of basic education for all and that creating literate environments and societies is essential for achieving the goals of eradicating poverty, reducing child mortality, curbing population growth, achieving gender equality and ensuring sustainable development, peace and democracy.

To unveil the UN Literacy Decade Plan of Action prepared by the UNESCO Director-General and to review Pakistan's programme for the implementation of the Ministry of Education National Action Plan, the UNESCO Islamabad office held a consultative meeting last week.

The international plan of action focuses on the implementation of the six goals of the Dakar World Education Forum Declaration which includes: "ensuring that the learning needs of ALL YOUNG PEOPLE AND ADULTS are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programmes".

The vision for the Literacy Decade "situates Literacy for All at the heart of Education for All". Literacy is central to all levels of education, especially basic education, through all delivery modes - formal, non-formal and informal. The Plan's highest priority is on: "Non-literate youth and adults, especially women, who have not been able to acquire adequate skills to use literacy for their personal development and for improving their quality of life". Its key areas of action are: Policy, Pro-

gramme Modality, Capacity Building, Research, Community Participation, Monitoring and Evaluation, Resource Mobilisation, International support and Coordination. The plan also speaks about implementation at the National level and provides a checklist.

Now where does Pakistan stand? If it is true that it sits at the lowest rung of the international literacy ladder, even amongst the developing countries, what are we doing to catch up with the rest of the fast-moving world?

We indeed come up with a lot of high sounding rhetoric in which we indulge at the highest level as and when an occasion to wax eloquence on literacy arises. Take for instance the statements and messages issued by the Chief Executive and the Minister for Education on International Literacy Days. Said the President on September 8, 2001: "We are celebrating International Literacy Day with the comity of nations. It is a universal truth that socio-economic progress is linked to education. Illiteracy is the root cause for a number of socio-economic ills. To achieve a higher literacy rate we will have to promote basic education across the country. The time has come for us as a nation to take revolutionary steps to eradicate the menace of illiteracy. Federal Minister of Education and Provincial Education Departments are undertaking concrete steps for the elimination of illiteracy. I have also constituted a Task Force with an objective to improve our literacy rate". And the message of the Federal Minister was: "This is the age of enlightenment. Among the developed countries of the Third World, Pakistan has a low literacy rate. Unfortunately, we have never been able to come up with a conducive environment to promote literacy. High drop-out at primary level, lack of community participation, less educational opportunities for females, especially in rural areas, high rate of population growth and inadequate supply of funds for education are some of the major hurdles in our endeavours for achieving higher literacy rate in the country. The Government's plan to raise literacy rate up to 70% by the year 2004 deserves appreciation and support from the people. The Ministry of Education, under the able guidance

of the President of Pakistan, General Pervez Musharraf would leave no stone unturned to get this target achieved. We, in collaboration with the Provincial Education Departments, Civil Society, Private Sector, are launching a National Literacy Campaign by opening Adult Literacy Centres to make 13.05 million people literate by 2004".

In concrete terms by way of achieving the goals set, three programmes have been planned: The Education Sector Reforms (ESR), National Action Plan for Education For All and the President's Task Force on Human Development (whose recommendation have since been approved by the central cabinet and an Ordinance issued creating a National Commission for Human Development).

Rhetoric and plans apart what are the results achieved so far? The answer: hardly a fraction of the targets.

**T**ake for instance target No 1 of the ESR: Women's Literacy for Empowerment Project (15 years and above) which aimed at making 1.1 million women functionally literate and empowered through a one-year cycle in 30000 centres. This was to be effected within the period 2000-2003. And how many such centres were actually opened Madam Minister? If the number of Centres started is less than even 15%, what has been done to remedy this dismal performance? You said on September 8, 2001 that government's plan to "raise literacy rate up to 70% by the year 2004 deserves appreciation". If by the end of the first quarter of 2003, not even a small percentage of the set numbers have been made literate, how would you respond to this realistic critical appreciation by a concerned citizen? Did you really "leave no stone unturned" to honour your pledge to "make 13.05 million people literate by 2004"? Also has your government exerted a little, to remedy the disoriented and dysfunctional programme of non-formal out-of-school children?

The third leg of this cracked and rickety tripod is the emerging role of the National Commission for Human Development. The commission, which claims to "organise support programmes and projects for assistance of

the line Ministers, Departments and agencies concerned", is virtually developing into a national agency undertaking parallel activities particularly at the local level. It has launched a few hundred centres with a methodology of its own (different from the Ministry's parameters) hoping to make adults literate in three months. The Commission according to its spirited chairperson plans to set up 6000 centres in one year. Its programmes are anchored on an elaborate structure at the district level to be headed by incubators (the nomenclature I understand has since been changed). How will the working of these units gel with central and provincial government implementation strategies is unclear. The matter will hopefully be picked up by the Ministry of Education in consultation with the knowledgeable officers of the UNESCO office in Pakistan.

The good news is that the Punjab government has created a full fledged department of literacy, headed by a Secretary and a whole time Minister. The minister was present at the Unesco consultative meeting held at Islamabad. He and his Secretary sounded quite enthusiastic about the promotion of literacy. They however expressed their deep concern about the availability of funds as only a small part of the current year's instalment has been received. The Federal Education Secretary too articulated his worries about the provision of funds required for the implementation of the plans. The Ministry will have to fall back on the international donors especially Japan and USA. It is time other international donors like the World Bank and Unicef which are parties to the Jomtien and Dakar commitments overcome their reluctance to support the national plan for enabling the totally illiterate 60 million Pakistanis above the age of 10 to acquire the basic human skill of reading and writing.

One tell-tale question that this account of literacy affairs in Pakistan yields is: Is the government of Pakistan really serious about the promotion of literacy in Pakistan?

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