

Education
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Ignoring the obvious



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It feels a bit stale to have to keep repeating the obvious, but when the ones in power refuse to listen, repetition is the option left to the critic. For anyone concerned with development planning of the country, education is one such issue. The arguments for investing in education are so obvious, but education continues to be such an ignored area in the planning of all Pakistani governments, including the current one, that one is forced to restate the obvious at the cost of being repetitive.

Why does any nation need to invest in education? What is the current government doing about education? What can be done to facilitate the spread of education in the country? These are the three important questions that need to be answered if any sound development plan is to be prepared. The answer to the first question is critical because it is surprising to see the number of people who still question the need for universal primary education. There are three main arguments for it: education is important for economic growth, for establishing useful norms in society and last but not the least for its intrinsic value.

An educated and skilled labour force is critical for economic growth because its productivity level is much higher than an unskilled labour force. A big population in developing countries can actually be an asset if it is educated and skilled as then that country is in a position to compete in the international market by producing quality goods with very cheap labour cost. Multinationals also like to engage this educated and skilled labour in developing countries as it is much cheaper than the labour in the western countries. However, even very simple jobs require certain level of education, be it to follow directions, ensure specific measurements, etc. A country where sixty percent of people are illiterate cannot hope to win many contracts from these international companies, forget about developing entrepreneurship and small business. To begin with, just to build any contact with the outside world requires education and ability to use modern communication technology.

East Asian countries have been able to ensure dramatic rise in their standard of living over the past three decades. They invested heavily in pri-

mary and secondary education followed by technical training. Starting with low technology products exports, these economies have now moved into exporting higher technology goods as they have developed and trained their manpower. China is following in their footsteps. It is right now concentrating on low technological goods but is expanding into higher ones. Chinese products ranging from hair clips to clothes and bags are flooding the markets from Pakistan to US. China again is a country that has invested massively in education.

Apart from economic reasons, education is critical for developing useful norms in society. Schools are places where children can be taught not just to read and write but where they can be instilled with values that a society desires. Basic hygiene and health education, gender roles, environment education, even traffic sense, all are issues that are very important to any society and a well planned education programme can cater to all these issues.

But, above all, besides its economic and social benefits, education has an intrinsic value. It facilitates intellectual and spiritual growth. "Iqra" (read) was the first word that God sent to Prophet Mohammad (PBUH). But, for the current government, as well as the previous governments, education remains a non-issue. Once in a while lip service is paid to it at one conference or the other but it has no place in active reform agenda of the government.

The answer, therefore, to the question of what the present government is doing about education is very bleak. There is not even a clear cut reform strategy presented by the Ministry of Education under the current leadership. There is just nothing happening. Ironically, it is also one of the areas where most of the NGO crowd is holding positions as ministers or advisors. But, clearly,

for most of them securing these positions has proved to be an end in itself rather than the beginning of the real struggle to bring about a change.

True, it is not easy to reform and change things and built new systems. But, clearly it is not impossible either. Much can be done. But, it requires hard work, dedication and above all political will. The last aspect is the most crucial one. Lack of political will has been the critical barrier to the spread of education in Pakistan. The reason is simple: it suits both military generals as well as the feudal lords who sit in our parliament to keep the masses uneducated. Education brings awareness and knowledge about rights and confidence to demand them. Neither the military generals who form governments through illegitimate coups or the politicians want that to happen. Otherwise, education today will be on top of the reform agenda in Pakistan, being the key preoccupation of the chief executive of the country.

If General Musharraf's government is sincere in spreading education, Pakistan's state of education can change dramatically. Resources in terms of money as well as manpower can be raised. Internationally, education is top priority of most western donors as well as international NGOs, who can provide both money and technical training. Domestically, the issue of education is close to the heart of most of the middle class Pakistanis, and many Pakistanis, from established businessmen to college students, will be willing to contribute time and money to help in the spread of education.

But, this potential has to be unleashed and that can only be done by the state. The top executive of the country has to be committed to the idea of educating the nation, and start a massive mobilisation campaign, which includes use of both print and electronic media, besides attracting the best of people to the Ministry of Education to chalk out a plan of action. Current system has to be improved and strengthened plus new ideas have to be explored and new means of providing good quality cost effective education developed. In this respect experiences from other countries can prove very useful. There is so much to do and so much that can be done.