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Education for all

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"Education is a matter of life and death for Pakistan. The world is progressing so rapidly that without requisite advance in education, not only shall we be left behind others but may be wiped out altogether". — Quaid-i-Azam, Muhammad Ali Jinnah

Unesco in Pakistan, has of late, contributed a lot to highlight urgency for achieving the goals set at Dakar, in Senegal, by the World Education Forum in the year 2000, a decade after the world education conference was held at Jomtien, in Thailand. Last week it helped organise the first ministerial meeting of the South Asia EFA Forum, held by the Forum secretariat housed in the Ministry of Education. The Forum deliberated for three days and issued the Islamabad Declaration on EFA. Although only three ministerial level delegates attended the meeting, the presence of senior officials from the ministries of education of all the seven south Asian countries and leading NGOs' representatives, made for a lively and meaningful discussion of the agenda issues, namely, financing of EFA, gender and quality.

Ministers Zobiaida Jalal, Hafiz Shaikh and Shaukat Aziz as also Sir John Daniel, Assistant Director General of Unesco, Paris and Sheldon Shaeffer, Director Unesco for Asia and the Pacific addressed the opening and closing sessions. The President who was expected to inaugurate the Forum couldn't come but he met in his office the heads of delegations.

First, for the lay reader, a word or two about the EFA. What is it and what does it mean for Pakistan? According to a Unesco statement, EFA means basic education for all children, for boys and girls, men and women young and adult alike. It draws its inspiration from the UN Declaration of Human Rights: "Every one has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory".

Progress on the EFA goals set at Jomtien in 1990 were reviewed at

Dakar in 2000 and revised goals/targets set for the period 2000-2015. These are:

1. Early Childhood Care and Education: Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable disadvantaged children.

2. Free and Compulsory Primary Education: Ensuring that by 2015 all children with special emphasis on girls and children in difficult circumstances have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality.

3. Meeting Learning Needs: Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning, life skills and citizenship programmes.

4. Adult Literacy: Achieving a 50% improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults.

5. Gender Disparities: Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005 and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls', full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality.

6. Learning Outcomes: Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognised and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy and essential life skills.

— Pakistan was perhaps the first country to draw up a draft plan of action as a follow up to the Dakar EFA commitments — thanks to Federal Education Minister's initiative.

Having been left behind most of, even the developing countries and remaining at the lower rungs of the international literacy ladder, it was only to be expected that urgent and adequate steps were taken to make up for the lost decades.

A world about the current EFA situation in Pakistan.

According to the 1998 Census 43.92% of Pakistanis above the age of 10 were literate. The number is said to have arisen to about 49% as against 60% in India, 92% in Sri

Lanka and 96% in Maldives with Malaysia, China and Indonesia nearing 90%. (There is a general scepticism about the figures quoted above for Pakistan and the quality of literacy is considered sub-standard) As for primary education, the participatory rate is less than 70% with six million children remaining out of school.

— A few more statistics. Two out of every three Pakistanis living in the rural areas are illiterate with the female illiteracy percentage as high as 80%. 90% of females in Balochistan cannot read and write. The dropout rate of children in primary schools varies from 40 to 60%. Factors responsible for this colossal waste, apart from poor and illiterate parents, are, poor conditions of learning in schools, unmotivated and incapable teachers, absenteeism of teachers, overcrowding and distant location of schools.

The Islamabad EFA Declaration is rightly focused on the mobilisation of resources and quality with special emphasis on gender equality. It appropriately identifies the challenges and lists the commitments on the part of the governments and the civil society in South Asia.

The crucial questions for Pakistan lie in the areas of implementation. In this context what is immediately needed is:

1. A critical review of the national plan of action and its targets to make it adequately realistic — to fill the gaps and tie up the loose ends.

2. A well-structured implementation plan (with space for local flexibility and adjustment). At present all the burden of implementation has been placed on the new district system without any clear guidelines, with district officers for literacy lacking expertise and motivation to draw up the district plans and the know-how to organise literacy centres in far-flung areas.

3. Secure the required funds. It is OK to recommend that the allocation to education be raised to 4% of GDP. But this is a pie in the sky. To expect that enough funds will be available to meet the plan targets is unrealistic. There is therefore pressing need to set up a Consortium for EFA

where international donors come together to commit clear-cut contributions. In this connection the processing of the Fast Track Initiative ought to be streamlined. As alerted in the Unesco EFA Global Monitoring Report: "Without a medium to longer term perspective the initiative may limit governments in their ability to plan with flexibility. It also runs the risk of being dominated by the concerns of a minority of core partners rather than necessarily reflecting the broader consistency, coordination and coherence sought by Dakar".

As indicated in the Declaration, it is not merely the provision of funds that matters most but also the mechanisms and procedures which ensure quick and smooth flow of funds down the line. The fact that teachers in the rural areas running non-formal primary schools in Pakistan are regularly paid after the lapse of 4 and sometimes 5 months (for the last many years) is telltale and indeed a most reprehensible deficiency. There is also the fact of the very slow pace of implementation of the national plan of action because of the severely inadequate funds provided to the provinces.

It will take reams to deal with the wishful recommendations contained in the Islamabad Declaration. Not that these need not have been made. What is vital for Pakistan is to come to grips with the grim challenges these ideas pose to the government and other stakeholders.

Finally, to undertake the gigantic job, there is no escape from reviving the National Literacy and Mass Education Commission which unfortunately fell victim to the myopic whims of a central economy committee. A strong and well-supported central mechanism (as is the case in a number of countries where successful literacy programme have been speedily carried out) is vital to translate the political will at the national level into well-planned plans and programmes, for coordination and for overall monitoring as well as building linkages with the international donors and supporters.

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