**Education crisis**

BY I N AYAT U L L A H K H AT TA K 2021-08-04

WE are already into the fourth wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Delta variant has been declared by leading medical experts as the fastest, the ñttest and the most formidable version of the coronavirus. What`s next is yet to be seen. What`s known is that far from being over, the pandemic is hitting us harder than before.

One of the casualties is education, especially at the primary, middle and tertiary level.

With over 1.5 billion learners impacted worldwide due to school closures in 192 countries, the educational crisis caused by Covid-19 may worsen as the Delta variant spreads. The matter poses a greater challenge to low-income countries such as Pakistan, where, according to Unesco, 22.8 million children, aged five to 16 years, do not attend school. The staggering ñgure equals 41 per cent of this age group in Pakistan.

Fifteen months into the current crisis, what awaits the country`s already dismal education milieu in the current as well as the post-pandemic era, depends a great deal on what kind of strategy our policymakers devise, and with what promptness its implementation is ensured. After all, one cannot live on the hope that the pandemic will end and normalcy will return to theeducadonlandscape.

Had the Covid-19 emergency been limited to Pakistan, internationally, there would be nothing to compare it to.

However, the infection has disrupted studies and led to the closure of educational institutions in several countries. The latter can learn f rom each other`s success stories, as well as their failures.

Other than the developed Global North, there are also examples of determination and innovation in the rest of the world to learn from. Wuhan in China, where the coronavirus ñrst surfaced, opted for conducting `air classes` for its more than one million learners. It also supplemented teaching with extra classes on how to stop the spread of the virus. The city of São Paulo, Brazil`s most populated city, sought strategies in addition to online instruction for learners. All over Bangladesh, the state-run Sangsad Television broadcast lessons for students. Kashan in Iran televised educational programmes for learners in the city; and Turin in Italy shifted to online teaching for students.

In March 2020, the calamity caught Pakistan not only unawares but also unprepared,exposingourlackofresources andinsufñcientinfrastructurein theface of such a crisis. The more worrying question is, whether we are better equipped now, 15 months into the pandemic. Whatsteps have been taken to resume educational activities for primary, middle and secondary school students, especially the ones who do not have the privilege of studying in privately run institutions? What is the way forward? The Teleschool at the federal level and Taleem Ghar in Punjab air lectures for learners from Grades 1 to 12 and 1 to 8, respectively.

Notwithstanding these welcome initial steps, the absence of a uniform curriculum has made it difficult to target students throughout the country. Providing feedback, achieving the relevantcourse learning outcomes and conducting assessments are issues that will still go unattended untilthey are given greater attention.

By taking their cue f rom the practices of most of the universities which resorted to online teaching in the country and collaborating with leading private schools that have developed their own online platforms, the educational authorities can run similar operations to reach out to the max-imum number of learners in Pakistan. It is true that massive investment will be neede d to ensure that no one is left out, even those who live in remote parts of the country. But the effort will be worth it at a time when the end of the pandemicis nowhere in sight.

Keeping in view the recommendations of the steering committee of Sustainable Development Goals-Education 2030, and understanding the fact that education is the primary responsibility of the state, it is imperative to avoid measures that could further dent an already weak and vulnerable school system. In our case, a strong sense of purpose is required to deliver what is needed: a well-thought-out strategy, generous funding to ensure that an alternative instructional system, in the form of online teaching platform, is established and made accessible to all learners.

Spending on education is not a cost but an investment that builds sustainable, inclusive and more equal societies. Establishing a resilient and prepared education system is the need of the hour in these times of Covid and beyond.  The writer is chair, Department of English (Graduate Studies) at the National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad.

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