**Focusing on foundational learning**

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Almost 800,000 Pakistanis – of which 100,000 were highly skilled – left the country the last one year alone to pursue better opportunities. This is a record high. These people were able to acquire, hone and eventually leverage their skills and qualifications in a system that is laden with a vast and complex set of intertwined factors spanning political, economic, social, law and order challenges.

While expats support Pakistan with a very valuable source of foreign exchange through remittances, the immediate impact of this void on the economic structure of Pakistan merits serious attention. Who will be replacing such high-skilled talent through the upcoming cohorts that graduate from a fragmented and poor-performing education system in the country?

Of all children in Pakistan, barely 5.0 per cent make it to universities. Of these few, only a nominal percentage are directly employable. This presents a striking deficit when compared to the needs of an economy that is to be rescued. Chronic challenges that impede and risk the development of one of the youngest population cohorts in the world as agents of economic growth stem from two basic issues.

One, access: we have not been able to get all children to enrol and stay in the education system. And, two, quality: those who do get enrolled do not learn enough to be able to build lives and livelihoods off the foundation provided. Girls and the rural population have been disproportionately impacted by this paired issue. Pakistan’s performance across key measures of access and quality fares much lower than regional and other comparable peers.

A spending outlay to the tune of billions of dollars through public-sector budgets, development projects and support from development partners has resulted in progress across different metrics and in provinces but we still have a long way ahead to move the needle on outcomes at a national level.

While we wrangle with the current polycrisis to find immediate, short and medium-term fixes, Pakistan’s best bet to kink the development trajectory towards an accelerated growth path in the longer term is to invest in approximately 70 million boys and girls under the age of 10. Ensuring universal, equitable and high-quality education that enables and equips them to not only survive but thrive in a hyper-evolving world is crucial. This all starts with ensuring they have developed adequate foundational skills – literacy and numeracy, during early years of schooling. These skills provide the base for lifelong learning.

To this end, an important development in Pakistan’s education journey is the establishment of the Pakistan Foundational Learning (PFL) Hub at the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training (MoFEPT). This is a dedicated unit aimed at supporting improvements in foundational learning in Pakistan. While many such structures have been established at different tiers over the years, there is a unique confluence of factors that lends promise to this intervention.

First and foremost is the explicit and sharp focus on outcomes instead of inputs and activities. This transformative shift in thinking can help align stakeholders to make decisions across a coherent results chain to make responsive and directed decisions.

Given the devolved status of education, provincial buy-in and linkages through sub-national interventions preserves the autonomy of provinces with a focus on context-driven design and delivery. The PFL Hub can support provincial plans through a range of aggregated functions like knowledge sharing and inter-provincial coordination improving value for money in a resource-constrained reality.

Support from development partners for the PFL Hub is responding to strong demand from the government to improve foundational learning outcomes. This ensures alignment of resourcing and requirements with clearly identified priorities.

There has been a purpose-focused clustering of interests, support and interventions by public and private stakeholders leading to an organic public-private partnership that is not governed strictly by contractual arrangements. This support can be instrumental in expanding the expertise available to the public sector for solving sticky problems.

Evidence and insights from global, regional and local contexts are an increasingly constant anchor to inform decision-making. A number of international collaborations and exchanges have created an active network of education enthusiasts to facilitate learning across contexts.

While these elements seem like obvious pre-conditions for improved service delivery in a sector of existential national importance, decades of reforms and efforts in education tell us that this mix is indeed distinctive. What has really enabled this aggregation and alignment, in my view, is the consistency of tenure and capacity of bureaucratic leadership at the MoFEPT that has withered two governmental transitions. The bureaucratic shuffles are a long-contested challenge to coherent and sustained governance, and this is a great case-study to assess tangible impact.

While the establishment of the PFL Hub is an important milestone, its operationalization and sustainability will require consistent and focused efforts. The design to engage proactively with the learning ecosystem will require embedded responsiveness and agility. Our need to achieve large-scale changes fast, will necessitate innovative thinking which puts learners at the centre of the equation. Unpacking and demystifying the diversity of learners and their contexts will be essential to design and implement effective solutions.

The MoFEPT has been focused on curating an enhanced institutional architecture that is beginning to place due focus on two critical elements for transformation in education – data and technology. A key metric of success for the PFL Hub, in addition to the objectively assessable learning outcomes over the years, will be its enabling role in getting the delicate balance of institutional strengthening right.

The Pakistan Institute of Education, designed to serve as a data and insights engine for education, should play a key role in generating and providing the evidence base to support the Hub’s activities. Similarly, efforts towards a forward-looking digital education portfolio under the Distance Learning Wing should inform and support work at the Hub. Duplication and redundancies should be avoided to optimise resource allocation, develop the requisite capacities at these institutions and cement their functional linkages.

Another key area will be to take a holistic view of learning in Pakistan where a significant proportion of the learners are serviced by the private sector with an equally concerning learning crisis for most.

While a plan has been envisaged to ensure sustainability of resourcing, a much greater need will be to focus on intellectual sustainability by augmenting the capacity and structures to carry on the work. Can this focused effort to improve foundational learning cause wider ripples in the education system that enable transformative leaps? Let us hope the PFL Hub offers us a great lesson on foundational learning for excellence in governance of service delivery.

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