**Going for local governance of schools**

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A few days ago, BBC reported a local mayor in southern Mexico attacked and dragged through the streets by local farmers for not living up to the electoral promise of repairing a local road. The mayor suffered no physical injuries but his experience sent a message across the globe that how local expectations and a physical proximity between the electors and the elected can lead to high level of accountability. Sufficiently empowered and accountable local governments offer a hope of improved provision of bedrock social services. Like health or policing services, education is among the foremost concerns of citizens and this primacy makes local governance of schools an important public policy issue.

In local context of Pakistan, there is a realization of need for ‘going local’ in provision of social services and this realization has led to legislation in a couple of provinces bringing management of school education in the ambit of local governance. But this raises questions related to sufficiency and extent of local empowerment and governance capacities. Would such transfer of school management to local governments make them less dependent on provincial education establishment? Can people hope for real gains in terms of learning outcomes and quality of education? Whether such devolution is going to make service providers accountable to local stakeholders? How far devolution of schools can facilitate local economic development and employment generation? When stakes are high, nitty-gritty questions need not be ignored.

A basic tenet of local governance is that it should reduce dependence on the higher tiers. Local management of schools and decentralisation of enrolment and universal provision of school education sounds simple but practically it entails an array of functions including planning, budgeting, financial management, project management, contract management, monitoring and evaluation even if provincial education departments continue to perform functions like curriculum development and assessment of learning outcomes. Capacity of local government managers in all these skills can define the extent of their vertical dependence.

In addition to managerial skills, local capacity to generate resources is a key determinant of autonomy of local governance. Progressive increase in enrolment of children requires a commensurate increase in number of schools, class rooms, furniture, laboratories, libraries and – last but not the least – well qualified and trained teachers. The prevailing limitations of local capacities make it a challenging contest between autonomy and dependence.

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More than anything else, it is the chronic problem of low quality of education which haunts both the society and the policy makers. Governance of such a complex policy problem demands higher level skills, knowledge and intellectual prowess. But here lies the challenge – if in spite of better access to in-house and hired technical expertise and resources, the provincial education apparatuses still find it a teething problem then how big a task it can be for a town or tehsil government to think of handling locally. The quality question seems to remain unanswered though if a robust accountability mechanism in built in local government, it may facilitate in plucking some low hanging fruits. School Councils are in place since long, which comprise both the parents and executive head of school, but in absence of having any meaningful instruments like power to hire or fire, such councils have remained incapable of contributing in improving quality of education delivery. Lessons learned from such past interventions need to be used for better local governance of schools. Local responsibility must accompany sufficient local empowerment to make service providers accountable to local people.

A good scheme of local governance should promotel ocal economic development. if education can spur national economic growth then by analogy it should play same role in local economic development. Preparing people for local market can generate local employment and stall migration to cities already under severe strain. Would it not be suitable for local economy of Murree if the local government could introduce courses related to hospitality and tourist services in local schools or for local government of Mailsi to train school goers in basics of agriculture?

Present scheme of things makes it amply manifest that there are miles to go on the path of local governance before it becomes meaningful enough to become a true driver of change. But small steps followed by regular evaluation of their impact are better than massive initiatives and colossal disappointments. In this context, local governance of education needs support of higher tiers but with a spirit of trust in local will to improve rather than a benign paternalism causing a stunted institutional growth. Provincial education managers become apprehensive of the potential consequences of local governments faltering on commitments related to foreign financed or donor led interventions or on global commitments like the UN SDGs. Such apprehensions prompt provincial managers to retain certain levers of control upon local governments. But even such justifications to exercise power upon local government betray the spirit of modern democratic local governance. A fine balance is important. It would not be impractical if something like randomized evaluation of charted out model is carried out by initially implementing in a couple of districts and then scaling up across the province while making adjustments based on experimental evaluation. But in real world it rarely happens that pure technical considerations guide public policies.

In a nutshell, successful local governance of education will largely depend on development of local financial and technical capacities to reduce dependence on provincial education establishment. Sufficient flexibility to take local initiatives in response to needs of local economic development can add meaning to entire exercise. Finally, doing away with a paternalistic urge to ‘direct’ and ‘control’ on the part of provincial education management and having a trust in people can substantially help in materializing the dream of local self-government and better education.

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