**Keeping children in school**

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Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif’s education emergency declaration is laudable. But declarations are not results. And for millions of poor illiterate people, the emergency means educational opportunities not in the long run – when we are all dead – but right away.

It is a daunting challenge. Here is how to alleviate the scale of the challenge: To begin with, we could do two things immediately to give to the ‘tillers of our land and hewers of wood’ something worthwhile right away. The cost is roughly Rs104 billion, which is just one third of the annual profits of two state companies, OGDCL and PPL.

The first thing is to build schools two kilometres apart on either side of the Indus, next to the villages so that little girls can walk to school, or roughly 6,000 schools to serve at least one million out-of-school children. And the second thing is to improve the children’s health by giving them daily hot meals and potable water in their homes.

Admittedly, these interventions do not capture the full spectrum of the things required to address the education emergency, for which more drastic remedies are called for. But medium-sized interventions, such as these, may be the best we can manage in the current situation. And they are the biggest takeaways from my decade-long work to educate over 3,000 underprivileged children in eight Zoya Science schools in remote villages along the Indus.

As the well-known adage in education goes: if you get it right for those most in need you will likely get it right for all!

So, why build schools along the Indus? For several reasons: one, because it means all the provinces will be served in places that need help most. That is, places where life is a grinding battle for survival, and which are thick with peasants and landless workers deprived of justice.

All along the banks of the Indus vast feudal landholdings coexist with extreme poverty and with the highest concentration of out-of-school and malnourished children. So, these places should be the first to come to mind in any education development effort.

Two, the schools will provide CPEC’s missing link – literate manpower – all along the economic corridor. Three, they will likely have powerful downstream effects on national politics. Because we are talking about affecting the lives of at least half a million families, and about snatching away two million or so votes and political influence from local honchos living off colonial land grants. This should pull the country’s political centre of gravity more towards the centre, and away from the politics of serving feudal interests. Isn’t this why these honchos oppose universal education tooth and nail? And finally, because there is a strong economic case for investing in our children. But more on this later.

Next, why give the children hot meals and potable water in their homes? To belabour a point that is obvious, because a hungry and sick child learns little if anything at all. You cannot expect her to properly work in class on an empty stomach. Chronic hunger and diseases scar the lives of our children, and end them. Healthier children are better learners. By not addressing their needs we lose talent.

Four-fifths of our diseases are waterborne and cause a third of all deaths. Children suffer most: statistics collected by Zoya Science Schools in a health survey some years ago (and reported in the article ‘No child left behind’ published in these pages on November 25) showed that almost half of the 847 children surveyed are seriously undernourished. Eighty-nine children are underweight. And 68 children are under-height and underweight and face three times more risk of dying early compared with normal children.

At any time, a fifth of children (in Muzaffargarh district where Zoya Science Schools are located) have fever and 17 per cent have diarrhoea, which are stark symptoms of poverty and deprivation and a horrific reflection of an uncaring society.

Therefore, taking care of the nutrition status and health of the children have to be part and parcel of any education effort. The cost is minimal and the returns are strikingly large. For example, in one Zoya Science School, we give all 260 children hot meals daily prepared by their mothers at a cost of about Rs15 per child. We also install tubewells (130 feet deep) and handpumps in the homes of the children, so far 309 tube wells, presently costing Rs22,400 each.

And a virtuous chain reaction is set in motion: girls’ enrolment sky-rockets, they come regularly to school and do not drop out even after Class 5, which is the common cut-off point for girls’ schooling in rural areas.

Scale up these costs to a million children and for Rs22 billion you can give them potable water in their homes; Rs4.5 billion per year will give them daily hot meals. Building 6,000 schools will cost another Rs50 billion. And teachers’ annual salary will be Rs28 billion (six teachers in each school getting twice the minimum wage). So, the entire programme should cost about Rs104 billion. That’s not a lot of money.

And, from the economic point of view these are stunningly good investments. You get Rs16 for every rupee spent to improve the nutrition status and health of the million children or Rs424 billion. Nothing else in the world’s development experience shows such high returns, says the World Bank’s flagship publication on this topic: ‘Repositioning nutrition as central to development’. And you get a return of almost 20 per cent to educate girls and 12 per cent to educate boys. Or about Rs12 billion annually.

Let’s be honest. It is high time to make these bold investments in our future right away. At ‘Shehbaz speed’ turning the education emergency declaration into results should be easy and swift. Just push all these buttons at once to reap colossal economic returns and political benefits.

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