[**Major response needed**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1740108/major-response-needed)

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WE had 20 million-odd five- to 16-year-olds out of schools even before the Covid pandemic struck. Covid brought with it school closures and major economic disruptions. Children stayed home for ext­ended periods and learning losses, documen­t­ed by many sources, were shown to be significant. Some surveys also found that a certain percentage of children dropped out of school altogether.

Offering strong remedial education progra­m­mes would have helped a lot in making up for the learning losses. Expanding BISP educational support and conditional cash transfers rapidly could have saved children from dropping out due to financial reasons at the very least.

The government did neither. The BISP was used to make a couple of transfers to alleviate financial distress for some families but this was not education-specific and definitely not enough to address financial hardship. On remedial programmes, although there was some talk of rectifying the issue when the next academic year came around, most sch­ools just went ahead with covering new material.

We had not yet recovered from Covid when we were hit by the floods. Thousands of schools closed down in Sindh and some parts of Balochistan and Punjab. Thousands of schools have been damaged, many schools are being used as shelters and in many places no alternative arrangements have been made for displaced populations.

There will again be major learning losses and there will also be an increase in the number of those who drop out of school. Again the government response — on remedy and rehabilitation on the education front — seems limited.

Over the same period as Covid and the floods, we have also been going through tough macroeconomic conditions and a financial crisis. We have been facing unprecedented and persistent levels of inflation.

In my memory, and it goes back to the early 1970s, I cannot think of a comparable period in terms of either the severity of the crisis or its longevity.

High inflation will have an impact on the education sector in a number of ways.

In the last few years, inflation has been in double digits but closer to the 10 per cent mark. Salaries, though they did not keep up with the inflation rate, were close to it. Real incomes were declining but the declines were not too steep. As inflation has climbed to the 20pc and now 30pc range, the gaps have widened significantly. People can feel the cumulative impact.

What they could buy for Rs100, they must now purchase at Rs200 or so. The prices of all goods have not doubled, but most items in the basket of goods that poor to middle-class households buy, such as food, fuel and transportation, have indeed doubled.

The high inflation will also have an impact on the education sector in a number of ways. Tuition fees for private schools will increase significantly. This is bound to happen. Schools will face higher costs and will need to give salary increases as well, the burden of which will be passed on to the students in terms of higher fees or other charges. Examination fees will increase. The fee for local exams will go up as boards will have to face higher costs for printing paper and transportation, while ‘O’- and ‘A’-Level fees, and fees for other international tests and examinations, will increase because of the devaluation of the rupee.

The cost of transportation to and from school has already increased a lot and will rise even further as the transport sector adjusts to higher fuel prices. Other costs of going to school have also gone up and will go up further: these include the cost of stationery, books and notebooks and uniforms. Public schools are given free textbooks. Printing costs have reportedly gone up by some 200pc.

This year, we are likely to see fewer textbooks printed by the provincial governments and a greater burden of textbook provision will shift to the parents. It is also unlikely that persistent teacher shortages in the public sector will be addressed in this financial climate.

The economic slowdown means salaries will face slower growth, which will result in some people losing their jobs while new jobs will not be easy to come by or not as lucrative. For most people, incomes will take a real hit. Many families will be forced to make hard choices.

The choices will not be between luxuries and necessities but between various necessities. One of the casualties of these trade-offs will be education. Not only will many families feel they cannot afford the cost of education and need to cut it or remove it, many might feel they have to get their children out of school and put them into jobs to not only cut expenses but to increase incomes as well.

The last Annual Status of Education Report showed there was some movement of children from private schools back to public schools. Was this because of economic stress and pressure given that tuition is free at public schools? Irrespective, we expect to see more of this. And, sadly, we expect to see many parents being forced to take their children out of school as well. Private provision can be unaffordable, and in many cases parents are faced with a hard choice when they consider the opportunity cost of being at school (as opposed to earning for the family).

The cost of educational disruptions for the individual child, for her parents and family and for the country as a whole is going to be quite large. Every child who drops out of school or has learning losses, lowers her earning potential and this hits her future as well as the future of the family. It also hits the country in the form of lower GDP growth.

We need to protect children from this disruption. What is needed is a major expansion in the BISP and in conditional cash transfers for education. The state needs to protect funding for education and, to the extent possible, ensure that funding is increased adequately to cater for rising costs. But, as in the past, one fears short-term interests will trump education needs once again.

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