**New ideas needed**

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IN a recent online talk at the Lahore University of Management Sciences, Prof Daron Acemoglu, professor of economics at MIT, while speaking of changing technologies and their impact on the world, said that these changes would have a very large and significant impact on countries that have big populations of less-educated and less-skilled people.  
  
Pakistan definitely fits the description. Our population is still growing rapidly, we have a young population with a very large proportion of youth, and most of these young people are not educated and do not have any skills. Prof Acemoglu felt that these young people will struggle to find productive and satisfying jobs in the economy. This should not come as a surprise to anyone in Pakistan. Lots of people have been saying this and similar things about the demographic nightmare we are faced with.  
  
What is surprising is that we continue to do nothing to address the situation. Some 20 million fiveto-16-year-olds are out of school. The majority of children who are in public sector schools or low-fee private-sector schools continue to receive poorquality education. An extremely small percentage of our children get access to vocational training programmes. And this situation is not new. This has been the case for a long time now.  
  
The awareness that education should be available to all children has been there for decades. We even inserted Article 25-A, on the right to education for all five-to-16-year-olds in the Constitution via the 18th Amendment in 2010. But not a whole lot has changed over the last 11 years. We still do not have universal enrolment and still do not see students complete the primary level. Our dropout rates continue to be very high so a small number of enrolled children complete their secondary education. Even today, only seven to eight per cent of the children who enrol in grade one are able to go on to benefit from tertiary education.  
  
In addition, the education system is iniquitous.Though the enrolment gap has narrowed a bit, girls still show lower enrolment and completion rates.  
  
There are significant differences in enrolment and completion rates across the provinces including the rural and urban areas. Access to good-quality education is, more than any other f actor, dependent on parental income and wealth. The education system is further fragmented along the lines of language of instruction, types of books and examination systems as well as dif ferences in pedagogical methods in classes employed across schools. The net result is a very fragmented, dysfunctional and, overall, poor-quality education in the country.  
  
The last two decades have also seen a lot of focus on the education sector, probably the most we have seen historically in Pakistan, and there have been very high-profile reform efforts in the education sector in the country accompanied by a lot of fanfare: Parha-Likha Punjab and then the `deliverology` of McKinsey and Michael Barber. World Bank, DFID and USAID funded a lot of these reform ef forts. And there have been significant changes in the education sectors in all provinces as a result.  
  
But the enrolment, completion and learning outcomes have not budged by much. They have inched forward a little at best and in some cases the numbers have stagnated; in some provinces we have even lost ground on some variables. This is despite the ef forts that have been praised, at various times, nationally and internationally. So, where has all the reform gone and what do we have to do to bring aboutchangeintheeducadonsector? The argument is not that some things have not changed, and for the better. They have. We have much better teacher recruitment, promotion, posting, transfer and compensation systems in place.  
  
School/ teacher monitoring has improved a lot. We have better data available on enrolments, attendance and f acilities etc.  
  
But for all these achievements, the bottom line is still that enrolment and completion rates and learning outcomes have not changed much. And ifthe dream is to provide access to every child to at least 10 years of quality education, we are f ar from the realisation of that dream. In fact, we do not even have a roadmap for achieving that dream. The federal government does not. None of the provinces do either. And if one looks at the current policyinidadvesofthefederalandprovincialgovernments, there do not seem to be any initiatives that will, even over time, lead to realisation of the importance of providing quality education to all children.  
  
Three years ago, while working on a UNDP national human development report on youth, we asked a lot of youth about education. A majority of them said that they would have liked to have had a second chance to either complete their education or to go back and acquire additional education or skills. But our education system and the way it is structured does not allow or encourage second chances. There are too many restrictions: Bachelor`s and Master`s programmes have age limits, there are many gender-related restrictions, if you have a third division in any exam, you can forget higher-level education. Even vocational training opportunities have many entry restrictions.  
  
Clearly, policy initiatives of the past two decades have not moved us in the direction we want to go and at the pace we wanted to and want to move.  
  
Current policy initiatives, federal or provincial, and the Single National Curriculum added, will not do it either. What is needed is much deeper thinking, more radical policies and far stronger implementation. But how do we do that? There does not seem to be any urgency attached to the matter. The future is bleak if we do not focus on the education and skills of our children and youth, but, right now, we seem to be quite happy to go in that direction with our eyes open.  The writer is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives, and an associate professor of economics at Lums.