[**Realism or pessimism?**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1712699/realism-or-pessimism)

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WE want every child in Pakistan to have access to quality education for 10 years of their life (five to 16 years). This is a promise that is enshrined in our Constitution (Article 25A). It is also part and parcel of a number of international commitments and goals we, as a nation, have signed off on.

Some 20 million-odd children between five and 16 years are out of school in Pakistan currently. And this situation has not changed over the last many years. But, equally tragically, most of the children who are going to schools (madressahs, government schools and low-fee private schools) are getting a poor quality of education. We have plenty of evidence, in terms of test results of the ‘learning poverty’. It is only the ‘elite’ high-cost private and public schools, that only two to three per cent of our school-going children attend, that are able to provide a decent quality of education.

We have known these facts for a long time. Nothing new to see and report here. The tragedy is that despite all the rhetoric of successive governments imposing ‘education emergencies’, creating ‘demographic dividends’, reforming education, imposing ‘deliverology’ and what not, nothing has changed. Enrolment rates have hardly moved at all and if we stick to the trend, we will not have universal enrolment at even the primary level for decades to come. Learning outcomes have been more or less static. Dropout rates remain very high. Gender gaps still persist.

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Covid made matters a lot worse: learning poverty increased, enrolment rates took a hit and even dropouts went up. The floods this year have made matters even worse. Thousands of schools are closed, many have been damaged; many are being used as camps. It might be months before schools in the flood-impacted areas are reopened, and it might be years before all affected schools are rehabilitated or reconstructed.

Revising educational targets may be ‘realistic’, but it will hit children from poorer households the most.

It is not that other countries have fared similarly. Not at all. There are so many examples of countries, even around us — many that started with far less than what Pakistan had a few decades ago — who have passed us by. Bangladesh is a recent example. It is not a question of tough economic conditions; it has been a matter of priorities and choices.

Government after government has promised to raise education expenditure, as a percentage of GDP, to four per cent, a sort of minimum that international organisations recommend. But no government has been able to do it. But if you look at any set of comparative countries, you find they spend a lot more than 4pc on education. The poor educational outcomes in Pakistan should not be a surprise. It is the outcome of decisions that we, as a nation, have taken and continue to take.

This is where the rethinking needs to come in now. Parents, civil society, development and policy professionals, and many others concerned with the future of the country and the future of our children have continued to argue for the ‘right’ to quality education to be extended to every child in Pakistan. And we should continue the good fight. But, do we need to set realistic targets too?

This is a hard question to resolve. And it is hard to get the balance right too. We know that if Pakistan is to develop, if the future of the country is to look better, we need the youth to be educated, motivated, trained and involved in the affairs of the country. It is hard to see a future for Pakistan if we continue on the current trajectory. But given the outcomes and choices of the last few decades, should we continue to argue for ‘10 years of quality education for every child’? If we step back from the demand for quality education for every child, will this not be a travesty of justice as well? We know it is the children from the poorer households who will bear the brunt of the lowered demand.

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If we decide to argue for education for all for five years only, the transition from primary to higher levels for the children from poorer households is probably going to get even worse. And if education is the way to break the hold of intergenerational poverty, reducing transition rates for children from poorer households would be the exact opposite of what we would want from educational outcomes.

If we say, let us focus only on foundational and/or functional literacy and numeracy for the millions who are out of school and not ask for 10 years of education, again, it will lead to the children from the poorest households being segregated into these programmes.

But, on the other hand, if we do not rethink the strategy for the millions who are out of school and the millions who are getting poor quality education, will things continue as they are? What is the benefit of that? Would it not be better to work out some more ‘realistic’ targets? Between the devil and the deep blue sea, as they say.

What is the way forward? The status quo is not working and is not sustainable: outcomes will continue to deteriorate with every passing year and with every shock that we sustain. To not argue for change is not possible. The future of our children and our country depends on the investments we make today. But should we continue to argue for ‘10 years of quality education for all’ which, it seems from all indicators, will not happen for many decades to come — if at all? Or should we start thinking through more ‘realistic’ targets? But is ‘realism’ another word for giving up on the minimalist dreams for a better and more equitable society?

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