**The forever problem**

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Education is good! Everyone in the world, except people like the Taliban, agrees to that. The question that remains is: where do countries, particularly countries like ours that lag far behind in literacy, place it in their priority list? Cases have been made for education as a means to achieving gender equity, a means to improve quality of life (read: ‘Pakistan’s generational shift’, May 22, 2022), or something more noble like achieving enlightenment. Today, let us consider a baser motive, the economic case – but supported by numbers analyzed specifically for the Pakistani context.

Unicef recently presented an investment case for out-of-school children (OOSC) to the Planning Commission of Pakistan based on a number of government and non-government data sources. While the data may not be the most recent and some exact numbers today may differ a bit, the trend is unlikely to have changed. The standout number is that each additional year of education raises wages by 6.85 per cent. Broken up by genders, that gain is higher for girls than for boys.

Analyzed for education levels, it shows that completing primary school increases one’s salary by 3.3 per cent over those that have not finished primary school. Similarly, completing secondary school raises wages 8 per cent over those who have only completed primary school. Finally, completing tertiary education raises wages 24.2 per cent over those with a secondary education alone.

People earning higher wages means higher income tax revenue for the state and a population that is less dependent on social safety nets. But how much does the government and do parents have to spend (invest) to enable those higher future earnings? Does the investment still bring an economic net-gain?

On average, completing primary-level education brings an additional lifetime income of $6,559 and at a cost of $752 to the government and $376 to parents – the lifetime income gain far outweighs the investment that has to be made by the government and by parents. Completing a lower secondary education brings an additional lifetime income of $7,690 at cost of $1,254 to the government and $627 to parents – a modest increase in income for a modest investment.

The increase in income makes a big jump at the higher secondary stage; Income increases by a whopping $18,394 for small investments of $502 by the government and $251 by parents. This sudden change in the scale of the net-gain at the higher secondary level is in-line with the bifurcation in quality of life between those with and without a higher secondary education found by the LEAPS study, especially for women.

Finally, there is an even bigger leap in income for those who complete tertiary education. The lifetime income of people with a tertiary education goes up by $41,247, enough to afford a modest house outside major cities, for a modest investment of $6,053 by the government and $3,026 by parents.

Clearly, the biggest gains are found at the higher end of the education ladder, but in order to get there one has to get past the prerequisite primary, lower secondary and higher secondary levels. All of these income gains assume the quality of education schools are imparting right now. Quality improvements in school education will further add to the dividends education pays.

How do we maximize the economic benefits of education when we have a finite amount to spend? How many more new schools do we add at each level every year? Or should we spend more on reducing student attrition from one grade level to the next? Maximizing the economic benefits of education presents an optimization problem.

However, one thing is certain, whatever we are spending right now is not enough. Some recent back-of-the-envelope calculations showed that at our population growth rate, our number of OOSC and the rate at which we are currently adding new schools we will not reach the capacity to put all children into schools even in the next 50-70 years. At present, we are barely keeping up with population growth, making OOSC a forever problem.

Although it is clear that investing in education yields a net economic gain, that gain is far from instantly visible. That gain comes with a delay that is too long for politicians that have to face elections at least every five years, if not sooner.

What’s more, we know that increasing levels of educational attainment set society up for a virtuous cycle, where each generation gets educated more than the previous. We need to decide for how long we want to let children languish out of schools, whether we want to take many generations, or whether we want to do it in fewer generations by making bigger investments now and taking bigger leaps to achieve the literate and skilled population we desire.

The economic case for education should be the easiest to make to the voter: “Vote for us, and we will make your children’s lives better than yours”; this is what every responsible parent wants. Instead of selling education reform to voters that way, politicians are selling it to voters with every other slogan but this one. The PTI pushed its big idea, the Single National Curriculum (SNC), as a massive social engineering project that would bring about a society of ‘equals’. Such a society, in which there are no elites, ordinary folks and poor folks, has never existed, at least not in the last few centuries. It was nothing but poorly thought-through Utopian fiction, especially in a status-obsessed society like ours.

The PML-N / PDM government is now trying to put lipstick on that pig and is talking about rebranding the SNC as the ‘National Inclusive Curriculum’. I appreciate that the PML-N / PDM appears to have given up on the obsession of one single curriculum for public and private schools, but it has not given up on the idea of a national project. It is selling its version as one that will impart a “strong inclusive identity”, “historical and national pride”, “true historical lessons” and “progressive and democratic values”.

While I am on board with championing progressive and democratic values, every parent’s primary concern is an education that will give their children a fair shot at upward mobility. “I am happy with the language, mathematics and science lessons my children receive at their public school, but I really wish they got some more of that righteous state indoctrination” – said no parent ever! And yet, that is what this government, too, is offering us.

As everyone in Pakistan has recently discovered, the IMF, multilateral financial institutions and foreign governments have no appetite for subsidization of the cost of fuel, utilities or any other consumption for a country that is not willing to put its own house in order. The currency of everything we import is the mighty US dollar, and we do not produce and sell enough of anything in the international market to earn enough (the Pak rupee is just monopoly money – only usable inside the country).

The good news is that international financial support is available for our forever problem. The Qatar Fund for Development recently offered to provide support to put one million of our 18-20 million OOSC into schools, which would reduce the size of the problem by a healthy 5 percent. To this end, the MoFEPT signed an MoU on the sidelines of the Doha Forum 2022. We may even managed to scrounge together foreign donations that cover a few more percentage points of the OOSC number, but at the end of the day this is our challenge, our problem, and has to be a priority reflected in our own budget.

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