**Getting our priorities right**

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When change is required, as it always is, since we have never reached the ultimate lasting situation, it is essential that we first analyse and make up our minds. In the title of the article, I say that we must have our priorities right, define the goals and aims, strategise, and keep at it, seeing results step by step. The ultimate goals are perhaps more like dreams than something concrete and nearby. We must do what is more important before what is less important.
I have a wealthy friend who keeps reminding me of the difficult living situation that many ordinary and poor people have, not the least in the current time with inflation and high price increases, also with shortages in some fields. The government has warned of challenges ahead of us, and has enforced higher prices for petroleum, electricity, and more, and higher taxes. These policies affect all, especially the middle and lower classes. Salaries and wages will not go up, and the money people are paid will reach shorter than before. That will impact people’s nutrition, health, housing, and living conditions in general. People can economise but there is a limit to that.
Companies will try to keep their profits as before, and they will often freeze payments to staff, even lower them, and cut, for example, meals during working hours and other things. Some employers will not be able to keep up standards and make reasonable profits, avoiding close-down. Other companies will take advantage of the situation and let the staff take a higher burden than they should. Some causes for the hardships can be placed on the Corona pandemic, the Russian war in Ukraine, and other international issues. But let us not use those causes as excuses, although they are important, and do what we can locally.
Recently, I heard about an employer requiring the staff to work fourteen hours a day, only with two rest days per month, and wages much below Islamabad’s minimum salary stipulations. In such situations, staff risk being laid off if they complain, as there are many job seekers lined up to take any vacancy, for short or long. In order to improve work conditions, it is essential that employees unionise. Also, employers will have their organisations. The state should regularise these issues as they are key when it comes to keeping priorities right in the working life.
As much as I am an advocate of education at all levels, indeed universal basic education, we must consider if tighter and cheaper ways of implementing education can be found. I believe that private schools can do things differently and cheaper, and that government schools have the potential for enrolling more students and doing well. In a country like Pakistan, often with big families and other children in the neighbourhood, fulltime kindergartens and preschools are not always needed as the families can organise things informally. The ruling concept of education is an urban Western model whereas it should be suited to the local situation. In the future, we should prioritise models that are cheap, yes, perhaps even better, to make education available for all, We should include traditional values, knowledge, and skills, along with modern content.
Schools must contribute to giving students a nice childhood, and help them become optimists and confident about their youth and adulthood. This is not only the role of education in Pakistan but in all countries. In my childhood in Norway in the 1950s and 1960s, I believe much of education fulfilled this role and function. Later, policymakers focused too much on theory and knowledge, making education for a large group of children an unacceptable burden. Still, the debate is more about knowledge and less about values and helping children to learn to live, looking after themselves and each other better. The students should leave school with a good feeling, and even be eager to take courses later in life, mostly part-time or in short blocks. We need much more vocational and technical training opportunities, and we also need higher education. However, the latter must be more applied than today, and higher education should to a lesser extent be seen as the ‘ultimate crown of education’.
We must prioritise education for all, and such education that promotes inclusion, equality, and justice, which is good for all children, remembering it is not only bookish knowledge that is important to run and lead tomorrow’s countries. We have for too long focused on education for those who are theoretically gifted, forgetting that universal education, also at secondary level, must be good for all children and youth. This is not only something we must address in Pakistan, but in all countries. We must also consider how much schooling is needed, and include other forms of education and learning, too. Alternatives are needed, from a cost perspective and from a pedagogical perspective. Yes, we must get our priorities right fast.
My education perspective also includes adults and what is called lifelong learning. In all countries, there is a need for various types of adult education, indeed in poor countries, giving a second chance to those who didn’t have education and training opportunities when they were children and youth. Furthermore, we must prioritise all-inclusive thinking, where racism and other forms of discrimination are discussed and rejected. It is the duty of the state to give room for a good life for all in the society; that includes physically, psychologically and socially challenged people, and it includes people who don’t fit into standard gender categories and orientation.
Religion is important in all societies and it often forms a basis for moral and ethical norms. It is important that there is religious tolerance and openness in society, and also that interpretations and understanding of dogma and rituals are debated to fit people’s needs in our time. In the West, where religion and faith play a lesser role in our time, I believe this happened because the church did not keep up with the new time and thinking.
It is essential that moral and ethical foundations and principles, with religious and non-religious references, are given more prominence in the future. Behind practical politics, there must be deeper foundations, for example, as regards key social issues, such as women’s right to abortion, divorce, gender equality and orientation, environmental issues, peace and development, and everything related to economic and social equality and democracy. Regulation of population growth is an important issue; some countries need more people and other countries need to control the growth, such as Pakistan.
We must not make light of any simple or complicated issue; we must discuss issues so we can find ways ahead that are good for all, and we must give room to those who disagree with the majority. Let us remember that politics is most of the time about how the poor and deprived can be given better opportunities, and how things can be good for all, locally and internationally. We must think with both heart and mind to get our priorities right. We must accept that often, it takes time to implement our dreams and plans, and still not give up.