**Bold initiatives needed**

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BY some estimates, some 20 million-plus fiveto 16-year-olds are out of school in Pakistan. This is 11 years after the inclusion of Article 25-A on the right to education in the Constitution. This change came in April 2010 through the 18th Constitutional Amendment. But neither the federation nor any of the provinces has done a lot to implement this `basic right`in their respective jurisdictions.

When we say that none of the governments responsible for the provision of education has done a lot over the last 11 years to implement Article 25-A, we mean that none of the governments has a) given roadmaps for how the implementation will happen and by when all children will be in school; b) legislated and/or approved rules for the implementation of Article 25-A; c) allocated funds for implementation; d) shared plans or strategies on how all these children are to be educated.

It is not that there have been no initiatives; there have been many. Afternoon schools, school meals, provision of stipends, provision of transportation and expansion of schooling through private-public partnership initiatives are all, at different times and by different governments, said to have been about expanding access and getting more children into schools. And where there have been claims that so many hundred thousand or so children have been `brought` to schools through programme A or B, there have been no comprehensive, budgeted, time-bound and monitored plans for the implementation of 25-A.

It is also not the case that this is not talked about.

It is talked about. Most political parties have talked of the implementation of 25-A in their manifestoes and other documents. Civil society keeps talking about the lack of implementation as well. Even the courts have, at times, heard cases related to 25-A.

The Supreme Court, a couple of years ago, spent some time talking about 25-A and the lack of implementation of the basic right to education. But, at the end of the day, nothing has happened. There are even international commitments that havebeen made about the universal provision of basic education, but even those have not been enough to budge the respective governments in the provinces and at the federal level.

Access is not the only issue in education that has been treated in this manner. True, it is the most blatant as it is a denial of a basic right that has been guaranteed in the Constitution, but it is not the only issue for sure. We know that the quality of education being given to most of the children enrolled in Pakistan in public as well as in lowto middle-fee private schools, is generally quite poor. We have evidence of the poor quality from local as well as international examination results. These test results are from high-stakes public examinations as well as from smaller, sample-based results of examinations that have been conducted by private parties. But the federal and provincial responses to the situationhave been poor,iftheyhave been there at all.

Again, this has not been for lack of trying. The provincial governments have carried out several reforms in the education sector: teacher recruitment has been revamped, postings/transfers have become better, salaries have improved, monitoring systems reducing the challenge of ghost schools and ghost teachers and improving teacher and student attendance as well as infrastructure provision have been implemented, and, not least, much investment has been made in infrastructure improvement (bathrooms, boundary walls, water, electricity and sanitation).

Yet, a) the impact on quality of education has been minimal if at all, b) the government never really had any quality improvement targets in mind and so these reforms were not targeted at improving the quality of education, and c) we still do not have good ideas on what the governments understand from `quality of education`. If we do not have well-defined quality targets, how can governments say that the reforms that they have carried out or that are being implemented are targeted at better quality?We are a young country whose population is still growing quite fast. We have not had our `demographic transition` yet. We have a huge population in the schoolgoing category and this situation is likely to continue for some time. The way job markets are changing, it will keep getting harder for illiterate or barely literate and unskilled individuals to have fulfilling careers. For countries with large populations and high population growth rates and low educational attainments, the problems are going to be more severe. We are clearly headed for more trouble.

Tinkering, making incremental changes and undertaking small initiatives and small programmes are not going to resolve the issues. What is needed are some bold and large initiatives. `I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before the decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to earth.` This is how John Kennedy put it at the Joint Session of Congress on May 25, 1961. And even though it looked difficult at the start of the decade, it was done before the decade ended. The resources were found, the requisite level of science and technology was developed and everything was coordinated to achieve the goal a goal that looked very difficult when it was first articulated.

We need to transform our education sector. We need bold goals too and then the commitment and effort to pull it off. We need a leadership that says `we believe, before the end of the next decade, every child in Pakistan should be getting 10 to 12 years of quality education`. And then we need the effort and commitment of the entire nation to pull this off. Pakistan`s future will depend on whether or not such bold initiatives are taken. The choice as a nation is ours. But the time to make the choice is running out fast. The writer is a senior research fellow at the institute of Development and Economic Alternatives, and an associate professor of economics at Lums.