**Progressing through education**

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wn beckons, talk of rebuilding Pakistan has begun. One aspect that is frequently discussed, but not acted upon with any considerable will, is the improvement of our education sector.

Education is often seen as the pathway to nation-building. When we talk of building a nation, we implicitly refer to economic growth and social wellbeing. But both these endeavours cannot be achieved without an educated society. Pakistan is in dire need of educational intervention now more than ever before.

Chronic illiteracy is a major issue facing our country and the mammoth task of educational reforms has been long overdue. The colossal failure of successive governments to tackle this issue has in itself given rise to a number of societal challenges, including economic inequality, social instability and the lessening of civic and democratic values on a societal level. Now that the election process is over and a new government will soon be sworn in, any meaningful plan on the future success of Pakistan cannot be drawn without placing education at the forefront of policy discussion.

These concerns are in no way new. Back in 2007, the Planning Commission outlined a number of steps to improve the country’s ailing education sector. However, more than a decade later, owing to lack of political will, the progress on these objectives is abysmal. The current spending levels (stagnant for a number of years), stand at 2.6 percent of our GDP. These are far lower than what is needed to bring about any meaningful change in the education sector. In fact, our spending is far lower than many other countries in the region, with many other South Asian and even Sub-Saharan countries spending four to six percent of their GDP on education.

The result of this chronic under-investment is that around 25 million children are out of school. From the ones who are able to go to schools, three quarters drop-out before reaching the matriculation level (class 10). Moving beyond tertiary education, one can see that vocational training is almost non-existent and our higher education provisions lack rigour and are hardly fit for purpose in the current ever-changing global world.

There is a need for a fresh national education policy, and good governance and accountability should be at the heart of it. A number of key steps are required at the macro level to enhance the scale and quality of education, and subsequently over turn the crippling social and economic system. The most crucial task for the incoming government will be significantly increasing its funding for the sector and spending it in a much more intelligent manner. The government will need to increase the level of spending to at least seven to 10 percent of GDP. The extra investment should be directed towards improving the scale of education through the development of ‘hard’ educational infrastructures, such as building more schools and providing essentials like furniture, sanitation facilities and hiring more staff.

In addition, the extra investment should focus on increasing the quality of education through the development of ‘soft’ educational infrastructure, such as updating the curriculum and enhancing teacher training. This is extremely vital as the current curriculum is outdated and unfit to cater to today’s societal challenges. The updated curriculum should promote values such as fairness, equality, respect and critical-thinking, and is fit for the 21st century demands of science and technology.

Another crucial aspect that has often been overlooked in discussions over education is the importance of life-long learning, specifically adult education. Over the last few decades, the near-collapse of our educational system let down millions of children who are adults now. These adults were denied the right to education. There is a dire need to provisioned education to these individuals to make them useful members of society. This is also important for their children, as research shows that educated parents play a more proactive role in their children’s education. Education holds fundamental importance for the future of the children and society at large. These measures could also impact enrolment as well as retention rates.

Coupled with all this is the urgent need for more vocational training institutions. A concerted effort is needed to fully understand the skills shortage facing our country and to map out what our future skills needs will be. Efforts should then be placed on creating the necessary training and educational courses needed to meet these shortages. Again, this requires investment and a strong will on the part of our leaders.

A particular issue created out of the vacuum left by lack of educational provision has been the establishment of religious schools by various charitable groups. Only a tiny minority of these schools provides a somewhat acceptable level of education, whilst the vast majority have failed in meeting the current needs of society. Within these religious schools are a number of extremist organisations which, taking advantage of the state’s inability to look after its populace, recruited disadvantaged children in great numbers for their vicious purposes. Previous governments have made far too many concessions to these religious organisations, such as allowing free control over their curriculum and assisting them with audit-less funding. The result of this has been a painful and ever so damaging nurturing of overt extremism. Therefore, there is a need of complete overhaul of this major component of our educational system.

The government must take a bold step, once and for all, and nationalise these seminaries. Only then will these institutions feel compelled to play their part in the development of society. The government should set aside specific funding provisions to develop their hard and soft infrastructure, so that students graduating from these schools can compete on an equal footing with the rest of society. These nationalised schools, like anywhere else in the country, should follow the updated national curriculum.

A healthy academic environment and an updated national curriculum, like other schools in the country, will hopefully nurture free-thinking minds rather than restricted ones. These steps will also allow the students in these schools to have a good grounding of societal knowledge and will enable them to serve society in a much better manner.

The suggestion of nationalising these religious seminaries and bringing them into the national fore may be too much to ask for from the forthcoming government, given its past policy of empowering madressahs. But nationalising the seminaries is vital for the country to prosper in the future. The government will also face a tough battle against these out-of-control groups, but we need to take steps in the right direction and such reforms are absolutely necessary to help the most disadvantaged and deprived sections of our society. The political leadership needs to show determination and be steadfast in their resolve to see things through with a clear sense of moral purpose.

To summarise, the state has to spend significantly more on education than it currently does and in a much better manner. Any superficial measures such as model schools and provision of laptops, that have with aching predictability worsened the situation, will continue to increase the divide between the haves and have-nots. The inequality that would result from a journey on separate paths is one that we, like any society, cannot afford. The nation is sincerely hoping for a better tomorrow.

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