

Progressing Pakistan should ensure quality education for all

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Abstract. The paper analyses the dynamics of education sector in Pakistan in comparison to other developing countries in larger Asia and Latin America. The lessons of history in these regions suggest that those countries have been able to develop on sustainable basis that have invested in education for all and also ensured quality by allocating sufficient funds to all levels of education.

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1. Introduction: Education for all ensures growth promotion with welfare generation

In Pakistan, there is an need to align current economic gains, though modest they may be, to pro poor outcomes especially if we take into account that from the start of the millennium Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) have taken over Structural Adjustment Plans (SAPs), whereby the focus of economic development has been switched to qualitative human development indicators from quantitative macro economic indicators. Contrary to a lot of rhetoric coming out from the echelons of government apropos PRSPs, government policies in Pakistan still set out to favor the rich against the poor. There are no short cuts if Pakistan needs to follow the development pattern of East Asian economies (Mamoon, 2012).

For example, Pakistan is following a much skewed education policy whereas more and more resources are being allocated to higher education and primary and basic education is somewhat ignored. Since higher education is mainly recieved by the affluent segments of the society, more funds to higher education means that government is providing indirect subsidy to the rich and excluding the poor as they are largely uneducated.

Interestingly enough, Pakistan is not alone in this as many countries have been following similar education policies whereby higher education is promoted at the cost of primary education. Here the question arises why so? The simple answer is that the rate of economic growth responds more to secondary or higher education levels rather than elementary schooling. This is true because processes of growth are deeply linked with higher education instead of primary education. For example, in developing countries international trade, which is one of the key determinants of growth, favors either highly qualified university graduates or those who have at least finished their high school. The sole reason that India and China have been the haven for international outsourcing and trade in contemporary times is because they have managed to accumulate relatively educated and skilled human capital by

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investing in higher education. It is expected that over the next five years, 3.3 million services and industry jobs and \$ 136 billion in wages will be outsourced only from United States, while most of them finding their way to the Indian or Chinese Shore.

It is no surprise that Pakistan is also following suit in an attempt to ensure higher economic growth. However there are serious repercussions for higher education focused education policy for the economy in general and the common man in particular. India in South Asia and Mexico, Argentina, Bolivia and especially Venezuela in Latin America are very relevant examples to this effect.

2. Has growing India ignored the less-affluent?

Today, India is considered to be a major economic player in Asia, especially urban India, which has seen economic prosperity to the likes of Europe and America. Well one of the most important reasons that our neighbor has made this so far is because the government of India undertook extensive investments in higher education in late 1970 s and 1980s. Consequently, much like China, Indians transformed a significant portion of their population into highly skilled labor who have been readily employed by the international corporate sector in 1990s and afterwards as they were much cheaper than the European and American skilled labor. To date billions of dollars of trade in services has taken place and with current outsourcing trends, India is to gain further billions from it. However, as good as it sounds the ground reality for a common Indian is different. Since India failed to invest in primary education as it had prioritized higher education, the country is facing severe inequalities. The rural and urban divide is widening day by day. The plight of common man is still not heard and the gains of growing India have failed to trickle down to the impoverished in an equal fashion. Out of a billion people there are only handful millions who can claim to be the beneficiaries of Indian economic boom. And these handfuls are predominantly the ones who dwell in urban and developed India whereas the rural peripheries have been excluded from the whole development process as they have been left largely uneducated and unskilled. It came as no surprise in 2004, when the common man in India rejected the slogan of 'India Shining' put forward by the then ruling party BJP to get yet another term in office as the party tried to exploit the current economic success of Indian economy. 2004 Indian elections were a subtle reminder to the world that all is not well in prospering India as it is following a skill bias economic transformation rather than a complete and overall progression to development.

3. A story of 1980s: 'Ailing Latin America versus Progressing East Asia'

Much like India and Pakistan, many countries in Latin American Region also followed a higher education focused education policies and consequently witnessed high level of inequalities as benefits of trade and growth were only concentrated to the urban, more educated and affluent segments of their societies.

The share of public spending on education in Latin America that is allocated to higher education has tended to be high - more than 20 % on average, compared to 15 % on average in East Asia. Venezuela and Korea are extreme examples. While in the early 1990s Venezuela allocated 35 % of its public education budget to higher education, Korea allocated just 8 % of its budget to post-secondary schooling. Public expenditure on education as a percentage of GNP was actually higher in Venezuela (5.1) than in Korea (4.5). However, after subtracting the share going to higher education, public expenditure available for basic education as a proportion of GNP was considerably higher in Korea (3.6) than in Venezuela (1.3). By giving priority to expanding the quantity of education and improving the quality at the base of the educational pyramid, East Asian governments stimulated the demand for higher education, while relying to a large extent on the private sector to satisfy that demand. In Latin America, government subsidies have

disproportionately benefited high-income families whose children are much more likely to attend university. At the same time, low public funding of secondary education has resulted in poorly qualified children from low-income backgrounds being forced into private universities or opt out of the education system at higher levels. Underfunding of education has meant that the guarantees of universal primary education in Latin America have become false entitlements for the poor: the education available to them has been of such poor quality as to make it of little real benefit.

During the 1990s, wage differentials between skilled and unskilled workers in Latin America have increased substantially. Many empirical studies find that changes in schooling widened education inequalities and the returns to different levels of education also become more unequal (returns to higher education rose relative to basic education.). Both factors contributed to the increases in wage inequality in the region. In short, though the supply of better-educated workers increased, it failed to keep pace with the increase in demand as technological change took place in response to opening up of Latin American economies to global trade.

4. Education for all is the key to development

It is intriguing to note that in 1960s East Asian and South Asian economies were at similar stages of economic development however the former were far ahead of both Asian least developed countries and South Asian developing countries in human capital. In fact, the total literacy rates for East Asian developing countries in the 1960s were as high as 71 percent for the Republic of Korea, 68 percent for Thailand and even Malaysia had a rate of over 50 percent. On the other hand, in case of all Asian least developed countries and South Asian developing countries, the total literacy rates were as low as only 9 percent for Nepal and 15 percent for Pakistan with Cambodia having 38 percent literacy.

After three decades, while Asian least developed countries and South Asian developing countries have some what augmented their human capital stocks, the total literacy rates are still far below 50 percent in cases of Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan. During the same period, however, East Asian developing countries have more or less achieved the formidable task of educating most of their people. As a result, in the late 1990s, the total literacy rate of the Republic of Korea has reached 98 percent, and Malaysia managed to achieve a rate of about 90 percent. Consequently East Asian Developing countries witnessed unprecedented increases in GNP per capita over the last three decades, e.g. 10 times for Malaysia, 65 times for Republic of Korea and 13 times for Thailand. While during the same period for Asian least developed countries (Bhutan, Cambodia and Lao People's democratic Republic) and South Asian developing countries (Bangladesh, India and Pakistan) only a meagre increase of 2 to a little over 5 times took place.

5. Universal education is not possible without ensuring the quality

There are two issues here. First is to provide universal education and second is to improve the quality of education in existing as well as newly built state run education institutes. Here both access and quality is mutually exclusive to each other and should be followed in unison.

As discussed the key behind East Asian Miracle was the education policies of their respective governments. Firstly, they adopted a balanced education policy whereby state funds were channeled to educate the masses and private sector was encouraged to provide specialized graduate courses for skill development. Secondly, the high quality was preserved in state run primary and secondary education institutes, whereas the standards in higher education were maintained through increased private competition and incentive provision.

Journal of Social and Administrative Sciences

The World Bank in one of its reports on 1997 on elementary education in Pakistan quality ensure access:

“The best way to improve access is to improve quality which would make coming to school or staying in school a more attractive option from the perspective of parents as well as children. Moreover, effort to improve quality will tend to increase the efficiency of the public expenditure and will encourage parents to contribute to children education’.

In Pakistan though the need to educate the masses has been accordingly realized, the question of quality still remains at large. Pakistan government is still struggling with literacy rates. Though there is a lot of donor pressure on the government to simultaneously address the issue of quality, the government seems to be handicapped due to two obvious reasons. Firstly the priority of the government lies in higher education instead of primary education and secondly, Pakistan’s development budget is still inadequate to meet challenges of development sector.

Not only has inadequate investments in primary education made the task of universal access very difficult but it has also proved to be instrumental in depreciating the quality. For the poor in this country, the opportunity cost of bad quality education from state educational institute is much greater than the incentive to educate their children. This is evident from the high rates of drop outs prevalent in Pakistan as well as the trends in child labor.

In Pakistan fifty percent of children drop out of school before completing primary school. More girls drop out than boys. The annual report released by the Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child (Sparc) has revealed that some 53 per cent of the poor children in rural areas drop out before completing class six. In a recent study by University of Arid Agriculture, Rawalpindi, 96% of the teachers and 86% of students of public schools only in Rawalpindi city believes that major reason for dropout is educational weakness at primary level. Further 78% of student respondents attribute high drop out rate to inadequate training and lack of refresher courses for the teachers. The overwhelming majority of 80% also attribute student drop out to standard of class fellows of rich families. This shows that increasing inequalities negatively effects education level in Pakistan. Assuming that public schools in Rawalpindi represent the general plight of public schooling in Pakistan, the main reasons of student drop out are poor primary education, shortage of teachers, non availability of teachers, in-spacious class rooms, untrained teachers, economic inequalities, poverty and less chances of employment after education. The last factor also leads to child labor in Pakistan. During last year the Federal Bureau of statistics released the results of its survey funded by ILO’s IPEC (International Program on the Elimination of Child Labour). The finding were that 3.8 million children in the age group 5 to 14 years are working in Pakistan; fifty percent of these economically active children are in the age group 5 to 9 years. Even out of these 3.8 million economically active children, 2.7 million were claimed to be working in the agricultural sector.

Due to lack of emphasis on quality and also due to increasing divide between rural and urban on the one hand and increasing disparities between the poor and rich overall results in education remain disappointing despite government efforts to improve the literacy rate. Pakistan’s net primary enrolment rate is well below its neighbors in South Asia. Net primary enrolment rate is 65% in Pakistan, 75% in Bangladesh, 77% in India and closed to 100 % in Sri-Lanka. Pakistan’s lower school enrolment rates and poor quality education means that it will lag behind its neighbors in improving literacy in future as well.

6. There are no two ways to quality education in Pakistan: Where does the problem lie?

To a large extent quality of education in primary, secondary as well as tertiary education has been undermined due to the fact that the government has failed to allocate adequate resources in education sector (Mamoon, 2007). To put it better government is handicapped against under-investment in education because most of the budget is spent on interest payments every year. Since debt has to be paid, it is anticipated that in near future education sector could only get priority in already under spent development budget but would not be a priority in the overall budget. Well development budget is all we have for the poor, and they need health and nutrition along with education, so there is not much space to increase overall investment in education.

Here, the question arises whether the government can really get the desired results from education sector with the amount of resources it has been allocating to it. The answer is no and it has a simple and self evident explanation.

There is under education prevailing in Pakistan at primary as well as higher level and resources are limited. In this scenario, how to get most out of the education policy whereby the maximum returns are accrued at minimum price? Since returns to higher education are greater than primary education, Pakistan has fallen for the trap much like other developing countries and has been promoting higher education at the cost of primary education.

Firstly, this higher education focused education policy has deprived basic education from much needed resources which in return has directly affected the quality of primary education.

Secondly and more importantly, the focus on higher education itself is discipline biased as certain subject areas are given priority over the others. Currently IT, Computer Sciences, Business administration and Engineering have been the preferred areas for the government as well as the private sector in higher education. From supply side, the focus in these particular disciplines has been an outcome of government anticipation that Pakistani IT, Computer Science and Business graduates will eventually be able to exploit the international corporate markets to the likes of India and China and would be a source of foreign investment and outsourcing by multinationals into the country. From the demand side more and more students are opting for these disciplines in an anticipation to earn better than their counterparts in other disciplines. As a consequence, Pakistan has been witnessing a mushroom growth in private institutes who offer business and computer science degrees. There are two distinct problems associated with this trend. The public universities in order to compete with their private counterparts have ignored other disciplines and have focused on IT, Computer Sciences and Business Administration. Since the government has also identified these disciplines as priority areas as well as they are more profitable due to demand factors, subjects like sociology, economics, history and literature etc have been suffering. As a consequence quality of education in public universities is declining.

Secondly the over-all quality of higher education has witnessed a severe blow because the mushroom growth of private institutions has ignored the quality factor. The private sector usually does not seek for the best students but the ones who can pay. Though the syllabus generally follow international syllabus, the teaching and examination system is un-satisfactory in most of the cases. The direct result is that the market is over-flooded with IT and business graduates and there are no jobs for them.

The government has been hugely investing in higher education in last few years as well as taken many steps towards capacity building and institution building of public universities. However the fundamental problems remain: It is still not enough!

The first right step towards a successful higher education policy is to adopt a balanced education policy whereby higher education is not promoted at the cost of

Journal of Social and Administrative Sciences

primary education (Mamoon & Murshed, 2013). The second step is to avoid prioritizing disciplines and give due importance to subject areas which have social importance. Last but most importantly, the government needs to allocate sufficient funds to education sector. There are no two ways and no short cuts to development. Only with adequate amount of funds, Pakistan can pursue a balanced education policy whereby quality and access is insured. This is the only way the poor in Pakistan have a chance to change their destiny.

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