

En Route

Education first

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Yesterday, the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon launched the latest global initiative on education, a five-year campaign called “Education First”. The campaign has three priorities: first, putting every child in school; second, improving the quality of learning; and, three, fostering global citizenship. The campaign will emphasize the long-term economic and social benefits of investing in education well beyond 2015, the current target year of Education for All and the Millennium Development Goals. Alas, many countries will lag far behind their goals, including Pakistan.

When I mentioned the new initiative of Education First to a young Pakistani man I know, a smart waiter in a restaurant in Islamabad, he thought I was confusing terminology, that I didn’t mean Education First, but the well over a decade old initiative of Education for All (EFA). My friend was right in the sense that we don’t really need new, catchy campaign names. We need results. We need to meet the targets we have already set. But then, the United Nations and all of us dealing with education know that it helps to sound the alarm and call to work the slumbering governments and NGOs, civil servants, and all others who want us to believe that they do what they can to get every child in school – but don’t.

And we may ask: Do they really do what they can when some 61 million children in school-age remain out of school in our time? More than half of them live in current and post conflict and war situations and multiple emergencies including poverty and disasters. Millions of the children are Pakistani. Many drop out of school before the basic education cycle has been completed and others get poor quality education. On top of it, as the University of Gujrat Vice Chancellor Prof. M. Nizamuddin noted in a conference about rights issues recently, the education curricula we offer children are often irrelevant and of little value to children as a basis for their lives. That means that even those who complete school don’t have the right knowledge and tools to become the great citizens they could have been.

Prof. Nizamuddin certainly had a point. He also said that we don’t make the required content analysis so that we can make the necessary curriculum changes; we just add new material to the old pile of textbooks, yes, often with outdated and incomprehensible content. We don’t do the obvious, in other words. We don’t use common sense either. Common sense goes beyond carrying out analysis and do what policy makers, planners, curriculum specialists and politicians tell us to do. Common sense is to be pragmatic and practical in the local community where the children are and where the good schools should be. Remember, to organize good learning environments for children is not rocket science. It is rather simple and easy to do – if we really want to do it and focus on doing it. It is not all that costly either.

Then the question becomes: Do we want Education for All? Do we want Education First? Or, put negatively: Why don’t we want every child in school, including every refugee and IDP affected child? And who is it in a society that is against achieving the goals we all say we are so much in favour of, especially when we sit in seminars and conference, write articles and talk on TV shows?

Having dealt with education for more than a generation, I have come to realize that there are many people who do not think that education is very important. Well, they think it is important for themselves, but not for everyone else. Some think a village boy or girl can do with less than a city dweller. Poor city dwellers in a shanty town need less than kids in the city’s affluent areas. And so on. This thinking is more widespread than we want to admit. It is based on a nasty thinking, wittingly or unwittingly, that labourers and workers at the bottom of the ladder need muscles, patience, ability to care, etc., but they don’t need a lot of knowledge and advanced skills. Besides, they do the work for much less if they have less education.

This thinking divides a society into rulers and ruled, happy and unhappy, fairly treated and unfairly treated. Yes, it is all against our better judgment, against our instincts, against our moral values and religions teaching. But we still seem to accept it.

To root out this kind of outdated thinking, we must identify who it is that is against Education for All and Education First. That task may be more complicated than meets the eye. It is not as simple as identifying some parliamentarians and civil servants who obstruct new initiatives. We have to identify the structures, institutions and organizations behind the individuals and offices in order to understand the causes and then take concrete actions. We have to find out who it is that is hindering allocations of funds and practical implementation of quality education for every child in the cities, towns and villages. We need basic research and action-oriented, radical studies. I believe social scientists can do a marvelous job, and they need to be trained in labour union thinking before they embark on their work. They need to understand what a class society is and how we can reduce class differences. That will be key background knowledge to provide education for every child, in Pakistan and the other developing countries lagging behind.

Can the poorest countries afford to give education to every child? And is it good investment in populous countries with high unemployment?

The answers are very simple: Countries cannot afford not to give education to every child. To invest in education is an investment that will give huge social and economic return, probably the very best investment any country can make, even if it has to borrow money and receive development aid to do it. But mostly funds should come from reduced military expenditure and higher taxes for the upper strata. Recent figures show that for every dollar – or rupee – invested in education, there is a ten to fifteen fold rate of return! In addition, there is the return that cannot be measured in monetary terms, the psychological and social aspects. And, if we have good content and work habits in education, children learn the right values. They will have self-respect and respect others. They will understand the importance of gender-equality and that peaceful coexistence and cooperation are the only way modern men and women live, even with diversity of faiths and traditions. In countries with conflicts, wars, extremism and large class differences, education is the key to a better future for all.

In his speech launching Education First, Ban Ki-moon gave a personal account of his own educational experience, and I quote: “Education has shaped my life and the history of my country”, the UN chief said. “I grew up in a society ravaged by war and mired by poverty. Schools had been destroyed. My classes were held in the open under a tree. We had no desks, chairs or other basic necessities. The Republic of Korea was on its knees, but education enabled the country to stand tall again.” And he said later in the speech that he wants every child to have the same opportunity to education that he had because “the power of education to transform lives is universal”. Parents know this, everywhere in the world. “They seek the same thing first: education”. And Ban Ki-moon underlined that free schooling of good standard education is a fundamental right. Yet, he said, that education seems to be slipping down the international priority list.

It is education for the underprivileged, as I mentioned above, that is given less priority, not education for those at the top. We seem to be willing to accept greater income differences in the North and the South, higher unemployment, poorer social security nets, and so on. We seem to live in a time when inequality, including educational inequality, is tolerated. But we must not tolerate it any longer, not in a Pakistani mega-city like Karachi, not among the refugee, IDP and resident populations in Peshawar, and certainly not in a wealthy city like Islamabad or in resource-rich rural areas. We must find ways of sharing resources so that every child gets Education First.

Ban Ki-moon’s school was not expensive. So money is not really the problem. It is the will to an all-inclusive education system that is lacking. We must find the reasons and then the ways out of the current situation. The key people to do the job are the parents at the local level. They must demand their rights and work with their local community leaders and officials. I am sure they can manage to establish emergency schools as good as the one Ban Ki-moon went to. Then in the longer-term, researchers, politicians and administrators must do their job as they are called to do. After all, to provide schooling for all it is not rocket science, as I said above. Some of the candidates will perhaps even become rocket scientists. But that is less important. What is important is that most of them will just become good and peaceful citizens living good lives and develop their country further. Let us become serious and put Education First!

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