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Education Denied

- Why does Pakistan not have Education for All?

By Atle Hetland

At an all party meeting with UNESCO last week all parties pledged to go for Education for All. Are they likely to keep promises? And why hasn't Pakistan achieved EFA decades ago?

Pakistan along with other countries in the South Asia region scores poorly in education as compared to other countries at the same economic level. Pakistan lags behind even poorer countries in Africa. It is not likely that Pakistan will achieve universal primary education (UPE) and close to universal literacy by 2015, as per the international Education for All targets, and Pakistan's own targets in its EFA Action Plan – sadly so, in spite of what the political parties promise. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) also include universal primary and further education, and improved health services, as key factors for poor countries' poverty reduction, economic growth and development. Sadly, in spite of political parties' promises and intentions, major shifts are unlikely. There is not yet an Education for All movement and a real demand for education in Pakistan. Perhaps if more voters show up, not only the expected less than 40%, the ordinary poor people's demand for EFA could become stronger. And if more women voters came out, they too, would know the importance of education, and could keep their MNAs and MPAs focusing more on education and poverty reduction once elected.

Kenya, which is in the international news now for its turmoil after the recent parliamentary election, introduced free (but not compulsory) eight-year primary education after its previous election in 2002. Kenya's GDP per capita is lower than that of Pakistan. In Kenya, parents believe in education as one of the few ways for their children to escape poverty and climb the socio-economic ladder. In Pakistan, many parents do not see the purpose of education, because it doesn't lead to jobs, its content is not seen as relevant enough and its quality is often poor. Some poor parents who see the importance of education send some of their children to madrassas or self-help schools, where they can learn some basics to lead them in life.

The question remains: Why does Pakistan not have education for all, free and compulsory elementary education, as stated in the 1948 Human Rights Declaration? Why do not the political parties in truthful ways promise their voters to provide education for all within the end of the next parliamentary term? If they did, and people believed they would keep their promises, the party or parties who did so would win the election. That is our prediction. Parents everywhere know the value of good education, relevant knowledge, positive attitudes, social and practical skills and good moral behaviour and beliefs. And parents know they themselves can only teach their children a fraction of what they need in the modern world.

In the autumn of 1947, Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah spoke about education at least on two occasions at conferences preparing for Pakistan as an independent nation. He stated that education was a fundamental element for the new country to succeed. In Pakistan's constitution of 1971, it is stated that free education up to secondary level shall be provided as soon as possible.

Yet, currently, over fifty million adults are illiterate. There is a very high dropout rate in the primary schools, thus leaving up to half of the children even without the short five-year primary school cycle. At least a quarter of the children are not enrolled at all. A few of them get some basic moral and religious education in madrassas and in self-help schools, but the quality is often poor. In addition to the madrassas religious and moral teaching, they need a core curriculum, approved by the Government, and better-trained teachers. Teacher training and teachers' salaries and status need a boost in general in Pakistan. There is hardly any more important profession!

There are few places in secondary education, vocational training schools, and fewer yet in higher education, leaving many of those who have done well at lower levels without possibilities to continue their education. Major investments have been made in higher education over recent years and results are to be seen in the coming years and decade. At all levels, there are inequalities based on gender, geography, social and economic backgrounds. This means that the poorest children, notably those from tribal and remote areas, from ethnic and religious minorities, refugees, handicapped and others outside mainstream society get shortchanged with poorest education opportunities.

Perhaps it is no wonder then that it is possible to recruit young and poor youth into antisocial and even terrorist activities? Maybe we should rather be surprised that they are not more in number since there are so many children and youth who are marginalized with little hope for anything but a miserable life?

But Pakistan isn't much different from its neighbours. Afghanistan scores lower than Pakistan on all social and economic indicators, of course, but then it has had wars and armed conflicts for three decades and the country is still *de facto* at war and being occupied by foreign countries, at the same time as it receives development aid, not least for education. In the South Asia region, Sri Lanka scores highest, India is making major investments, and even poor and populous Bangladesh is doing fairly well in education, also girls' education.

What is keeping Pakistan from introducing free and compulsory primary education for all? Pakistan can afford it, and the investment will yield fruits. People will become optimistic and finally feel integrated in a country, which includes all and everyone. In the longer run, Pakistan will be more peaceful, people will become more enlightened and the country will become more prosperous. Investment in education is essential for political participation and democracy. It is a key for cultural and religious preservation and modernization and a key to eliminate discrimination and ethnic conflicts. It is the key for economic development and production at all levels.

How come that our politicians, and even international aid agencies, do not realize the dangerous trend of not providing education for all? Even at the running up to this year's crucial election, education and poverty reduction were not passionately at the center stage. How come we keep denying the young people of the sub-continent one of the most essential human rights, a right that gives dignity to each individual, and he or she can be able to uplift himself or herself and help others?

Some specialists say that if the Human Rights Declaration from 1948 had become a Convention, not just a Declaration, such a treaty would have been much more binding than the Declaration is. And if the Cold War had not taken our eyes away from the Human Rights Declaration, we might have made it more concrete and ensured that failure to fulfill its ideals, its spirit and its concrete actions would have led to counter actions and disgrace for those countries who did not fulfill the Human Rights Declaration. If we had seen education clearly as a human right, and less as a tool for economic development, we might have reached further towards universal primary education in all countries – and it can still guide us for the future.

One of the most outspoken and sharpest critiques of the international community's, and especially the World Bank's failure to implement the Human Rights Declaration, even twist terms and meanings by using new terms, was the late *Katarina Tomasevski*, a former Special Rapporteur on the right to education of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and a Professor of International Law and International Relations at the prestigious University of Lund in Sweden. In her book *Education Denied. Costs and Remedies* (Zed Press/London, University Press/Dhaka and White Lotus/ Bangkok, 2003) she spares few defaulters. She advocates unequivocally for education for all, and education as a value in itself, not only for economic development, which has been 'in' over the last couple decades, blurring education as a fundamental human right. She underlines that not *any education* is good enough, because education can also be abusive to children and communities. The curriculum content can be wrong and the children can become victims of educational institutions and teachers. Here, the 1989 *Convention on the Rights of the Child* is essential, requiring that we must follow the yardstick of the best interest of each child, because each human being, each child and adult, has indivisible human rights.

Tomasevski emphasizes that it is every state's responsibility to give every child access to education, and if they don't they are in breach of international human rights laws. Thus all countries, which don't have EFA breach the laws, and many other countries do so in specific fields. The content must be of reasonable standard and the education system must be free of treating children in abusive or cruel ways, let alone using education for propagandistic purposes. The state has the responsibility to ascertain everybody's education and to set standards, but it doesn't have the monopoly to be the only provider. Although the states are the main abusers of education as a human right (and other human rights), they are also the main protectors of such rights. We always have to appeal to the state to be our protectors, but we need to use various watchdogs too, to keep the state in line, or put positively, to encourage and assist the state to fulfill its role and duty. Tomasevski also underlines that we should look at education as a human right, as a foundation in every person's life rather than as an investment for economic development. She claims that that is the only way that states failing to provide education can be challenged, or as a lawyer, she would probably have said *charged*.

Most of the above was probably common knowledge to many of TNS's esteemed readers. Still, perhaps some of it was helpful to refresh our memory, as it was for this writ to revisit the issues? It is also important to sit still sometimes and reflect in humility, as the undersigned did, having spent a lifetime in education, mainly in developing countries and in refugee education, and ask: Why haven't we been able to do better in providing quality education for all, in Pakistan and elsewhere? Did we not do our best and don't we perhaps, after all, want everyone to have education?

- What is puzzling is why Pakistan and South Asia in general have allowed their countries to stay in the backwaters for so long. How come that South Asian countries have allowed close to half a billion people become "*capability/opportunity*" *poor*, as it is termed in the latest *Human Development Report* from UNDP, the United Nations Development Programme? Yet, the poverty, including lack of education, is found in the midst of economic growth much higher than the population growth, which on the other hand, is also too high, making it more difficult for families to get out of the poverty trap. Simultaneously, the rich elite gets richer. In Pakistan and other countries in the region, the upper and middle-classes send their children to English-language schools, and later to further studies abroad, and if they return home they are "half-foreigners". In urban areas in Pakistan, up to a quarter of all children go to private schools. That is not necessarily bad, but it ought to be education of last resort, not first choice, as it is for everyone who can afford it. The state schools ought to be the best, and there should be a minimum standard curriculum for all, even in the "foreign", English-language schools.

- What is puzzling too is how the majority of the people can accept the extreme differences between socio-economic layers of the societies, from the feudal lords, the filthy rich by birth and inheritance and the newly rich who have reached there through legal or illegal means and methods. The upper echelons keep it all under control so that major changes do not happen and privileges are not lost. The petty bourgeoisie support it, too, because they struggle to climb the ladder as well. The rest, the large masses of humanity, doesn't even get a chance to compete. They are not even on the bus. They are not going anywhere at all. Every day is a hustle, an endless struggle to make ends meet somehow, and a trial to accept destiny's unfair and unequal treatment. Yet, without their sweat and labour, those higher up could not be sitting pretty, but they don't see it, they don't *want* to see it.
- What is also puzzling is that the poor majority allows *status quo* to remain. They accept living in master-servant relationships. They bow to those who are better off, those who give orders, those who push them around and harass them. They are even impressed by them, those who take advantage of their positions without any right to do so, those who disrespect their religion by not sharing with those in need, those who give lip service to poverty reduction, yet forgetting to give *zakaat* or work for real social change, not just cosmetic 'seminar talk' adjustments. Or, are really the poor impressed by the rich, maybe they only obey and keep quiet out of fear and to avoid trouble? If so, then South-Asians are more patient people than people anywhere else because there are few places on earth with greater disparities and inequalities, and yet most people still live in peace with each other - also in Pakistan. Against what foreign media tells us. We should be impressed by the poor and downtrodden who endure so much pain and injustice. And most of them live in dignity and maintain strong religious belief and hope for a better life in the hereafter. Most of us might well have questioned God's existence under the many hardships people suffer.
- What is puzzling too is that the upper classes tolerate to live under such conditions of great Inequalities and segregation, in divided worlds, yet people may live in the same cities, the same villages, even in the same houses, without seeing, or wanting to see reality. It has been said that it is not only the oppressed that suffers, it is also the oppressor. Thus, we cannot but feel sorry, too, for the cultured and civilized upper echelons of people of South Asia who can tolerate all these injustices. They too are deprived of living in truth, in honest and respectable relationships with their neighbours, their work mates, the people upon they to reply. Do we not see the harm we do ourselves – and the utmost harm we do to those below us?

Will the new parliament change all this? Probably not, especially since the majority of the new members of the national and regional assemblies will be men and women who come from the elite themselves – not proportionately represented, in other words, since the wealthy among the electorate forms a small minority in their constituencies. Yet, we can always hope for the best, and even patricians can speak on behalf of the poor, as was the case, for example, with the legendary Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme, and certainly also Muhammad Ali Jinnah.

Yet, the best advocate for people's education in recent history was Tanzania's founding father, Julius Nyerere, with the honorary title "Mwalim", teacher. He managed to make Tanzania almost entirely literate in the late 1970s, through literacy campaigns, and almost every child was enrolled in primary schools. True, quality couldn't be good considering the newly independent country's poor economy, the World Bank's opposition to its more socialist policies, and then it slid back to poorer education performance. Yet, it created an enormous optimism, confidence to one of the world's poorest countries. What cannot focus on education and poverty reduction do to Pakistan's people! Remember too, it is the people who are Pakistan's real resource, with economic investment!

The moot that Pakistan's political parties, with UNESCO, the United Nations Education Agency, held on Kashmir Solidarity Day on 5 February in the country's capital to discuss

Education for All, was an important event. The political parties all pledged to work for Education for All. However, action must follow.

Only prayers – and maybe ballot papers – can help us move towards achieving universal primary education and literacy for all the great people of Pakistan. But let us remember too that prayers only give strength and inspiration. The actual work, God Almighty has bestowed on his believers to do. You and I will have to do what we can, small or big, to achieve education for all and reduce poverty, and we need to pin down all politicians to go with us, for Pakistan's sake.

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