EDUCATION IN PAKISTAN: A LOOMING CRISIS

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This article begins with a brief description of the current state of primary education in Pakistan and the consequences of addressing or ignoring the problem. The primary purpose of the article is to spell out suggested recommendations for corrective action.

To give a graphic example of what constitutes a "looming crisis", we can turn to the drama that is playing out in the Hunza Valley in Pakistan's Northern Areas. On January 4, 2010 a huge landslide wiped out three villages and deposited tons of debris in the Hunza River, forming a natural dam. The people of Hunza are watching anxiously as the lake that has formed behind this dam has reached over 6 miles in length. As the snows melt on the high peaks this area is known for, there is a high probability that the dam will give way and the resulting floods will wipe out more villages and cultivable land, causing untold hardship and loss of life. Ironically, the Hunza Valley is one of the few regions in Pakistan which has a decent literacy rate.

The state of basic primary and secondary education in Pakistan is such a looming crisis, only on a much larger scale. The impact of ignoring it, for Pakistan and those beyond Pakistan's borders, will be long-term and potentially devastating. There is no question that the impact will be long-term. How effectively the crisis is handled will determine whether that impact is disastrous or can be a tool for change. With a population of 169 million,[1] Pakistan is the 6th largest country in the world and 43.4% (over 73 million) of the population is below the age of 15.[1] Pakistan ranks 160th out of 177 countries in literacy.[2] We are in danger of losing a whole generation of Pakistani children whose chances for a productive life will have been irreparably damaged by a failure to protect their right to education. Yet there is no alarm and no sense of impending doom amongst the political leaders of Pakistan.

Current State of Primary and Secondary Education

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) recently gave Pakistan the worst 'education ranking' of any country outside sub Saharan Africa and Afghanistan. The state of primary and secondary schooling in Pakistan can be described by the following statistics. These statistics are for Government schools, since this is the only option available for the vast majority of Pakistan's population:

Approximately 70 per cent of the schools in Pakistan have no toilets, 68 percent no drinking water, 92 percent no playgrounds, 60 per cent no boundary walls and 16 percent are without a building[3].

An estimated 30,000 "ghost schools" — nonfunctioning schools that exist only on paper — can be found throughout Pakistan.[4] In Pakistan's second largest state, a survey conducted by the Reform Support Unit of the Govt. of Sindh came up with an exact figure of 6,480 ghost schools and 7,490

shelter-less schools.[5] What the survey does not mention is that the remaining public schools are just marginally functional. Corruption is rampant and teachers play hooky with impunity.

From UNESCO Institute for Statistics data we are told that 59% of girls and 73% of boys are in primary school, but only 28% of girls and 36% of boys make it to secondary school. This sharp drop off rate says volumes about the quality of education being imparted and the perceived value of that education from the point of view of parents and children.

The Impact of Our Choices

Besides the lost opportunities for these millions of children, education impacts almost every aspect of human lives and the economic development of any nation.

At the current rate of population growth, Pakistan is expected to become the 4th largest nation in the world by 2050. Despite several population control initiatives over the decades, Pakistan's population has gone from 39 million in 1947 (what was then West Pakistan) to an estimated 169 million today. The country's resources are already stretched to the limit. The Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (2006-07) shows that educating girls to a middle school level reduces the birth rate from 4.8 to 3.2 children per family.

Education can also go a long way in improving health care, another critical issue for Pakistan. The aforementioned health survey showed that only 38% mothers with no education immunize their children, compared to 69% of mothers with a middle school education. Prenatal care for the same groups goes from 50% to 80%. Studies also show that a low education level is associated with increased risk of death from lung cancer, stroke, cardiovascular disease and infectious diseases including AIDS. Associations have also been found between the level of education and a range of illnesses including back pain, diabetes, asthma, dementia and depression.[6] Adding an effective component on hygiene to the curriculum, could also go a long way in addressing chronic health issues.

A low education level hampers the ability of Pakistan to actively participate in the global economy. Unless we succeed in delivering at least an adequate level of education to the younger generation, the quality of life will continue deteriorating despite several decades of development efforts.

Economic growth will stagnate, civil strife will increase along with a disproportionately high level of poverty and hunger. Pakistan needs a working education system to solve the many social and political problems that it faces.

Recommended Solutions, a Road Map and a Call to Action

Some effective and proven solutions for dealing with the education crisis in Pakistan:

Fix Ghost School and Absentee Teachers

The Pakistan government's latest Education Policy calls for increasing the allocation for education from around 2% to 7% of GDP. A portion of the $1.5 billion a year in non-military US aid planned for Pakistan for the next five years is also going to be earmarked for education. However, unless

the core problem of corruption is addressed, pouring any more funds into the system will have a marginal impact. The ghost schools may only exist on paper, but the money being spent on running these schools and paying their absentee teachers is very real.

The Punjab Education Sector Reform Program (PESRP) started in 2003 claims that by January 2007, the Punjab government had reopened 1,000 ghost schools and half of Punjab's total of 60,000 public schools had received 'toilets, boundary walls and additional classrooms' to some degree. On December 6, 2009, the Sindh Government stated that 1,700 building structures, which were constructed in the name of schools and found abandoned in various parts of the province, had been removed from the list of non-functional schools since they were not needed. The Minister also claimed that the government had succeeded in reopening another 1,400 schools and had ensured teaching staff and other facilities for students.

This sounds like great progress, but it needs to be independently verified and checked on an ongoing basis. This writer for one finds it curious that it was so convenient to expunge with the stroke of a pen 1,700 schools from the list of non-functioning schools. The stated reason was that "those phony schools were built despite the fact that the number of schools required in the respective areas already existed," this in a state where a huge number of children are still out of school?

Most of the reforms mentioned above have taken place due to pressure from the World Bank and the IMF. The lesson to be learnt is that, to ensure that the funds are not wasted, aid should be made conditional on accountability and reform measures.

We also need assurance that once the ghost schools and absentee teachers have been identified, all payments to them are also stopped and the responsible officials are held accountable. After addressing the drain of funds for non-functioning school, the next priority needs to be reopening these schools and providing adequate facilities and teaching staff to those functioning public schools that lack these vital basics. Currently the reality is that teachers in public schools are not held accountable for something as basic as showing up for work. This has to change.

Transparency and Monitoring

Student truancy-monitoring systems are in place in schools in many western countries. These can track and report the absence of a student not only for the day but even for one period. The least we can do is to be able to track the presence of teachers and students. There should be easy access to information regarding public schools for anyone who wants the information. All facts and information relating to each province's schools should be made available on a website. This could include the names of schools and teachers, addresses of schools, number of students, number of classrooms, annual expenses, academic performance assessments and other relevant information. Public access to this information would increase the likelihood of meaningful accountability.

Community-based school monitoring and reporting systems should be instituted. Citizens should be able to file a complaint about the absence of teachers or of any other irregularity that is found. The education department's budget for placing political advertisements should instead be spent on informing citizens on how they can monitor their local schools and make a complaint through an email, phone call, fax or letter.

Key performance indicators need to be created and reported by each school every month. The current method of school inspection and monitoring has collapsed and needs to be completely revamped. A public debate should be initiated and a consensus should be reached on how to address the issue and prevent functional schools from becoming ghost schools in the future.

Involvement of local communities, schools and society at large is crucial in ensuring educational reforms are carried out and progress properly tracked. The Punjab efforts can be used as a model for the rest of the country. With the help of non-government organizations (NGOs), 43,000 school councils have been set up across Punjab. Independent organizations have also been involved in PESRP for the first time to let the Government know if anything goes wrong.

The measurement and monitoring efforts should also focus on quality. Progress cannot just be measured by enrollment numbers alone, or by the number of ghost schools reopened. Millions of children today learn in elbow-to-elbow conditions in premises that still lack the proper facilities and motivated instructors to teach them. Drop-out rates are a strong indicator of quality.

Implement, Implement, Implement

Americans, including Pakistani Americans are concerned that a large portion of the planned US assistance will be wasted on studies by consulting firms and overhead costs. The truth is that the problems in Pakistan's basic education system have been the subject of repeated and thorough studies and policy documents. What is lacking is implementation.

The bill approving non-military aid to Pakistan is authorized to provide assistance in educational reform, including programs for "development of modern, nationwide school curriculums for public, private, and religious schools". Do we really need to develop a new curriculum? "The new textbooks written as a result of curriculum reform in 2002 have not yet been printed".[7]

Developing a new curriculum will not impact anything if the curriculum is never implemented; the gap is between policy and implementation. During the past decade, the Pakistan Government has published education policies in 2003, 2006 and 2009. If any of these had been implemented as written, we would not be in the shape that we are today.

Support Private and Non Profit School Systems

The "Learning and Educational Achievement in Pakistan Schools" (LEAPS)[8] project states that public school teachers are better qualified, trained and paid up to 5 times more than private sector teachers, yet the children attending private schools report higher test-scores in all subjects —partly because their teachers exert greater effort. While private schools cannot replace the public school system or totally solve the problem, reforms such as public-private partnerships where financial support is given to children regardless of the school chosen, can prove useful in augmenting the public school system and provide healthy competition.

Another sector which has produced excellent results are the non-profit schools that have appeared in the last fifteen years or so. Some of these like Care Foundation in Lahore and Zindagi Trust have taken over the operation of failing public schools and turned them around. Some outstanding organizations have been formed by Pakistani Americans in the Diaspora, like the Human Development Foundation (HDF) and Developments in Literacy (DIL). HDF schools are part

of an 'integrated community development' effort to ensure that the improvements in education are sustained over time. The Central Asia Institute founded by Greg Mortensen (Three Cups of Tea), has succeeded in building schools in very remote areas like Baltistan.

The largest of these non-profit education systems is The Citizens Foundation (TCF) which has 660 schools in all four provinces of Pakistan with a current enrollment of 92,000 children. Half of these children are girls, whose enrollment is encouraged by employing an all female faculty of 4,800 teachers. Despite the fact that TCF costs for educating a child are less than half that of public schools, in the last matriculation 10th grade exams TCF students had a pass percentage of 90% with 49% receiving a grade of A or better. The difference is that the teachers and administrators of the TCF schools and other non-profit schools are held accountable and a system of checks and balances exists.

Non-profits such as TCF have intentionally built a model that would be scalable to a larger system. The best way the efforts of these non-profits can make a sizable dent in the problem is if their success is emulated by the public school system. International aid agencies also need to take notice of and support these non-profit efforts because they offer effective, proven programs. Supporting their ability to reach as many children as possible can make an immediate difference at the local level.

Media Campaign to Develop a Grass Roots Movement

Funds allocated to a media campaign to create a groundswell of support for education reform would be money well spent. Until now the dialog and media coverage on education reform has been addressed to the educated elite of Pakistan. What's needed is a media campaign that would inform the underprivileged masses that a decent primary and secondary education for their children is a "right" and encourage them to demand this right. To be successful, any movement for education reform would need the support of all the elements of civil society in Pakistan. The recent lawyers' movement in support of an independent judiciary has demonstrated the power of a popular grass roots movement.

The Best Solutions Are Culturally and Socially Relevant

When designing teacher training programs for the large number of teachers that will be required to deliver mass education, it will be more relevant if qualified educators from Pakistan and the teacher training programs of the larger non-profits are utilized as models. Importing American "experts" would be considerably more expensive and not relevant to the needs of Pakistani society. There is no dearth of qualified professionals in Pakistan.

None of the ideas or recommendations presented here are original. The problems are well-known. The statistics have been gathered and numerous detailed studies performed.[9] The government of Pakistan and those who have Pakistan's best interests at heart do not need to spend time or money recreating the wheel. They just have to listen to the intelligent, knowledgeable and sincere people who have studied this problem and have been working towards solutions over the last decade.

The state of primary and secondary education in Pakistan is indeed a looming crisis, one that has grown during years of governmental neglect and ineffectual oversight. How it is dealt with now will have a long-term impact on Pakistan and beyond.

[1] Statistics Division, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Statistics, Govt. of Pakistan.

[2] UNDP Report, 2009

[3] Human Development in South Asia's 1998 Report

[4] Sarah Stuteville, Global Post July 1, 2009

[5] http://www.rsu-sindh.gov.pk/closed_School.asp#

[6]http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/document.aspx?ReportId=121&IF_Language=eng&BR_Country=5860

[7] Dr. Pervez Hoodbhoy, Professor Quaid-e-Azam University and a prolific writer on education issues.

[8] www.leapsproject.org

[9] A Sampling of Studies can be found at: http://web.mit.edu/bilal/www/education/opinions.html There are numerous other studies including the Soros Foundation study "Education in Pakistan, What Works & Why" http://www.soros.org/initiatives/esp/articles_publications/publications/pakistan_20070918/pakistan_20070918.pdf

Some of these suggested reform ideas were articulated in a series of articles by Mr. Naeem Sadiq an engineer who resides in Karachi and is part of a group called 'The Peoples Resistance'.