

Title: The Education sector : challenges and way forward

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1. Education is a fundamental right and a powerful
2. driver of development, capable of alleviating
poverty, promoting equality and fostering stability.
It delivers large, consistent returns in terms
of income, and is the most important factor
3. to ensure long term growth and innovation.

Nevertheless, the education system of Pakistan
is marred with a multitude of challenges.
Low enrollment and high drop out rates,
inadequate budget allocation, insufficient
teachers' training, widespread corruption and
a dilapidated infrastructure continue to
plague the country's education sector. Despite
some improvements in enrollment and
4. retention, progress in outcomes remains slow.
The bleak situation demands a thorough
analysis and vivid recommendations.

Global indices paint a dismal picture of Pakistan's
education system. In the "Global Knowledge Index"
of 2023, the country ranked at 117th out of
133 countries. Similarly, on the "Education
for All's Development Index", it holds 130th
position among 146 nations. In addition,

the World Bank's Human Capital Index in

2020 ranked Pakistan 152nd out of 190

countries in terms of education system quality. The prevalence of illiteracy hampers

Pakistan's ability to progress in these global

indices. Currently, the literacy rate hovers around 59 percent. Furthermore, it is characterise

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by a gender divide; only 48 percent of females are literate compared to 71 percent males. As a result, Pakistan fares poorly on international indicators of Education.

However, literacy rate is just the tip of the iceberg. Beneath these cold statistics lie deep-rooted, intertwined issues that continuously stifle the growth and development of a robust educational framework.

The Net Enrollment Rate (NER) drops drastically after the Primary stage. It is 51 percent at the initial level and dwindles down to a mere 13 percent at the matric level. Consequently, Pakistan has the highest number of out-of-school children, standing

at almost 32 percent. In absolute terms, 28 million children are not enrolled in school.

Access-related indicators exhibit stark disparities that persist along the lines of gender as well as regions. Females in urban and rural areas alike face systematic disadvantage at all levels of education.

For instance, Net Enrolment Rate at all levels shows a better off position of males. Consequently, females constitute the highest number of out-of-school children, standing at 37 percent of the population aged 5 to 16.

In addition, large education disparities exist across provinces. According to the Pakistani Bureau of Statistics, the highest illiteracy rates persist in Balochistan and Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). The former has an illiteracy rate of 69 percent; the latter, 70 percent. Moreover, rural-urban divide and gender gap further exacerbate the situation within provinces. For instance, literacy rate in urban areas is, on an average, 30 percent higher than rural areas.

A myriad of reasons contribute to the country's educational plight. Several research studies and surveys have pinpointed a range of factors impeding children's enrolment in schools. These encompass the poverty of parents and associated opportunity costs, coupled with a lack of parental awareness and illiteracy. Additionally, conservative attitudes towards girls' education, non-availability of nearby schools, especially for girls, and distant school locations pose significant barriers.

Direct schooling costs, including expenses for stationery items, uniforms and transport, compound these challenges. Moreover, children's involvement in household chores and child labour further hinder enrolment efforts.

The retention capacity of an education system is abysmally low. About one-third of students drop out before completing primary cycle and only 40 percent are retained by the system up to class ten. The main reasons for high dropout ^{rate} include teacher related

issues as well as a lack of essential facilities. According to National Accreditation Council for Teacher Education, 26 percent of teachers in Pakistan are untrained and 37 percent have basic training only. These teachers, in turn, create a non-conducive learning environment in schools, often perpetuated by corporal punishment. Furthermore, teacher absenteeism significantly impacts the educational experience. Asian Human Rights Commission reports that there are 40,000 ghost teachers alone in Sindh.

Beyond teacher-related issues, a plethora of challenges contribute to high drop out rates. Absence of crucial physical facilities such as adequate bathrooms in girls' schools force many to withdraw from schools beyond the primary level. Moreover, an outdated curriculum that lacks relevance and fails to engage learners pushes many children out of school prematurely.

Historically, Pakistan's overall national expenditure on education as a percentage

of GDP has hovered around 2 percent. This is contrary to its "Vision ²⁰²⁵" which pledges to increase it by almost 7 percent. The majority of education budget, approximately 80 percent, is consumed by teacher's salaries and maintenance of existing schools, leaving minimal resources for new initiatives. Moreover, the ratio of development expenditure in the aforesaid budget is inadequate to advance innovation in the education sector.

Non-formal education schools have been blatantly ignored by the government. Their plight has been worsened post the 18th Amendment to the constitution. The amendment did not transfer any subject from federal to provincial level in terms of Technical and Vocational Training (TVET). Therefore, there is a lack of clarity over governance roles and responsibilities in the technical domain of education.

In addition, multifarious challenges curtail

the progress of TVET in Pakistan. The foremost issue lies in a persistent skills gap within the manufacturing industries that the TVET ecosystem fails to adequately bridge. Moreover, the current curriculum offered by these institutes is disconnected from the market reality. Ineffectual coordination between market players and the formal TVET sector hinders ^{the} integration process between workforce and market. Compounding these challenges is the paucity of reliable labour market data; informed decision making in policy and program development is ^{severely} affected. Furthermore, the ^{meagre} representation of females in this sector represents an additional challenge.

Pakistan's distinct challenges have significantly impacted its comparative position within the region. Its South Asian counterparts, particularly India and Bangladesh, perform better in terms of international indicators of education. In terms of literacy rate, Pakistan's literacy rate stands at 59 percent,

lagging behind. India's 81 percent and Bangladesh 75 percent. In addition, budgetary allocations are also lower compared to India's 3 percent and Bangladesh's 2.2 percent. India's education policy is inclined towards innovation and policies like "Right to Education Act" have emphasized investments in digital education. Moreover, Bangladesh has made significant strides in enhancing education rates through initiatives like stipends for female education and the expansion of primary education. On the contrary, Pakistan's initiatives are still confined to curricula development and ^{provision of} basic facilities in institutions.

Pakistan, in line with its constitutional framework and international commitments, has ratified multiple agreements emphasizing the right to education for children. The country's adherence to Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Convention on the Rights of Child showcase its devotion to quality education for all on a just and fair basis.

Pakistan is also a signatory to Sustainable Development Goals 2030, goal 4 of which emphasizes on "Quality Education for All". The country, in alignment with target 4.1, aims to ensure free primary and secondary education for all boys and girls by 2030. In addition, target 4.6 emphasizes achieving 100 percent literacy among youth aged 15-24 and promoting adult literacy by the same year.

The government has formulated a long-term road map as the "Vision 2025" for the actualization of targets stipulated in Sustainable Development Goals. Pillar-1 of Pakistan's Vision 2025 promulgates the development of human and social capital: by improvements in all levels of Education. Its key goals include 100 percent net primary enrollment rate, increase in higher educational coverage from 7 to 12 percent and increase in number of PhDs from 7000 to 15,000.

Constitutionally, Pakistan has embedded the

eradication of illiteracy in line with Article 37-b. ^{similarly}, Article 25-A asserts the state's responsibility to provide free and compulsory education to all children between the ages of 5 to 16. Moreover, the constitutional provisions underline the accessibility of education to all regardless of gender, religion, residence or ethnicity.

The government has embarked on many projects and initiatives for meeting its national and international goals. In the Federal Public Sector Development Program (PSDP), it has allocated about Rs. 52 billion to the education sector, including higher education. Moreover, the National Economic Council has approved Rs 1463 billion Annual development projects at ^{the} provincial level. The Federal ^{government} is currently working on 21 projects, ^{assigned to} the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional training, including initiatives for single National Curriculum, now known as "National Curriculum for Pakistan". The provinces, however, are

working to improve physical infrastructure, construction of new schools and provision of scholarships through endowment funds and other scholarship schemes.

Nevertheless, initiatives at both federal and provincial levels are inadequate to address the deeply intertwined, multifaceted challenges of the education sector. An

all-encompassing, multipronged policy is necessary which takes into account all

the relevant stakeholders. As a first step, the coordination between the federal

and provinces, which has been marred

post 18th amendment, is necessary.

Establishment of a central education authority, that oversees policy formulation, curriculum development, and assessment frameworks while allowing provincial

autonomy in implementation can bridge the gaps created by decentralization. All

subsequent policy frameworks and initiatives

should emanate from this collaboration

to foster a more ^{and standardized} cohesive

approach in ^{dealing with} the education sector's problems.

Several imperative steps must be taken to emancipate the education sector and ensure its accessibility. One critical initiative suggested by the "Roadmap for Out of School Children" is "advocacy and enrollment campaign". It seeks to involve the education department in effective planning, mobilizing communities through door-to-door campaigns. Moreover, it aims for capacity building and mass sensitization through media campaigns. Formation of Parent-Teacher Associations and local school ^{councils} are part of its objectives to bolster net enrollment rates.

The "Accelerated Learning Program" ^{should be implemented} to target children aged 10-16, ^{thereby} focusing on a faster education cycle completion.

The program, developed in collaboration with Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), offers an accelerated curriculum to enable reintegration into

formal education quickly. In addition, the "Adult literacy program" should also be launched as a nationwide movement to break the illiteracy cycle.

Accessibility to education can be improved via "Formal Public Education Sector". Strategies like fully optimizing underutilized schools, using additional rooms, and introducing double shifts can create more learning spaces for the disadvantaged community.

Moreover, Public-Private Partnerships can be leveraged to support underprivileged children. Financing programs by the private sector like "Education Voucher Scheme" and "Adoptive School Program" should be encouraged by granting tax credits to the private education sector.

It is also important to take into account the

31,000 Deeni Madaris which constitute about 4 million children. The curriculum of Madaris should be established on modern lines, equipping the pupils to easily take admission in formal institutes. Currently, the National Commission of Human Development ^{implemented} has \uparrow this project in 100 Deeni Madaris. It should gradually be introduced in all of them, along with independent third party evaluation on program effectiveness.

In order to deal with gender gap in the education sector, Pakistan needs to adopt the model of Bangladesh. The latter focused on ensuring a safe learning environment for girls. Efforts were concentrated to reduce distances to schools and building more institutes in rural areas. Stipends and scholarships were introduced specifically for girls, making education more attractive for families who traditionally favoured

educating boys due to financial constraints and cultural norms.

Furthermore, initiatives were introduced to train and recruit more female teachers to provide role-models for young girls. Pakistan can also work on similar lines to improve female enrollment and retention in schools.

The efforts to develop the country's "skill education" need to be intensified.

TVEET's development should be prioritized, and it is high time to stop treating it as a by-product of mainstream education.

Modular Training system based on "Competency based Training and Assessment" approach

should be introduced. This includes introducing

part time and evening shift programs

after regular working hours to cater to

a higher number of people bound by job timings.

Moreover, dual enrollment options that

allow students of formal education sector

to simultaneously train in technical

institutes should be allowed. In addition,

certain courses should lower the academic requirements and allow students from all levels of education to excel further. Apprenticeship programs, as practiced in Australia and Germany, where the student goes to industry three days a week and comes to the institute two days, should be ^{implemented}. This will lead to increased capacity of present institutes and on-the-job training of students. In addition, online mode of learning should be adopted in some courses to increase access to groups facing barriers.

Lastly, incentivizing and training teachers is essential to bolster the education system. Offering performance-based bonuses and unique salary packages coupled with perquisites can attract and retain talented individuals. In addition, training programs should focus on modern teaching techniques and technology integration. Continuous workshops, seminars and certification courses should be made compulsory to upgrade teachers' pedagogical skills.

To conclude, the education sector of Pakistan has been persistently jeopardized over the years due to incessant problems at all levels of education. Out-of-school children, inadequate budget allocation, limited infrastructure, regional and gender disparities coupled with teacher training deficiencies hamper the growth in this sector. Despite these hurdles, the country has committed itself to global educational goals. It has effectively amalgamated Sustainable Development Goal 4 into its Vision 2025 to achieve universal primary and secondary education. ^{However,} concerted efforts are needed to confront the education system's challenges. Streamlined province-center coordination, curriculum upgradation, infrastructure enhancement, TVET development and teacher's training can revolutionize the country's education sector, paving the way for societal progress and a promising future.