

## Promise of a new day in education

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Maybe it can finally happen then, that Pakistan can actually get universal primary education (UPE) for all school-age children, and literacy, skills training and special education, too. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif promised that to happen during his 5-year term in office; he said the government will increase the education budget from about two percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) to four percent, as is the minimum recommended by the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). I hope he will succeed and that the intentions are indeed serious, although the budget for the government's first fiscal year wasn't very convincing.

Furthermore, at the United Nations in New York last week, the PM said that Pakistan intends to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), including education for all (EFA) by 2015. However, it is too late to reach many of the goals now, and the government knows that, but it sounds good that the PM says so when meeting with the UN monitoring teams. They were certainly glad to hear that Pakistan's and the world's foremost education activist Malala Yousafzai, and all those who are behind her, was more than supportive of the PM's efforts.

Several ministers in Pakistan's new government have said that to improve the education systems of the land and take more proactive actions to create a knowledge-based society, is the most important task for the country. Education is job number one.

Yet, there are indeed other important jobs to be carried out simultaneously, notably to improve security, reduce terror attacks (noting that more than half of the attacks in the world takes place in three countries, Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan); improve relations with the neighbours to the east and west, and develop more equal relations with the United States of America; reduce unemployment and poverty; improve governance and justice, including human rights for men and women; and finally, place Pakistan on a path of optimism, growth and redistribution of wealth.

These tasks may sound overwhelming, and to me they would be. But then I am just a columnist. The politicians and civil servants must steer the ship, with the country's professionals, including returning overseas Pakistanis, and the civil society institutions and organizations. Sometimes, new routes must be found and old waterways abandoned, but the waters will not always be smooth.

I believe in debate and people's participation, with a firm, enlightened and fair leadership – and an equally fair opposition to keep the leaders in line.

To have success, it is essential that the education sector be improved, as the PM and other ministers have said. I believe it was violation of the Constitutions and neglect not to give first priority to education decades ago, and in recent years, including this budget year. Last time there was a major increase in the government's allocations to education, was about ten years ago. Over half of the increase went to higher education as the University Grants Committee, UGC, was changed to form the stronger Higher Education Commission, HEC. It wasn't wrong to do that, and science and technology are important for growth and development, and so are social sciences and the humanities. But it was wrong not to increase the budget allocations to the lower levels at the same time.

This time around, when the promised two percent of GDP increases will take place over the next 4-5 years, it is obvious that primary and secondary education will be given the bulk of the funds, including teachers' training and education.

It is also important not to 'forget' functional literacy and skills training for youth and adult men and women in a country with a low literacy rate; the average just over fifty percent, higher for men than for women, and just in single digits in remote and backward areas in FATA and Balochistan.

There is no excuse for this when, for example, Tanzania, a much poorer African country, in the 1970s organized successful literacy campaigns, using radios, booklets, study groups in schools and other houses, and so on, in massive campaigns making everyone feel included and receive information, with many learning the secret code of reading and writing, too. But the other, positive nation-building messages were probably most important. We can turn the popular education slogan of 'No child left behind' into a slogan of 'Nobody left behind', no woman and no man, poor or rich, old or young, handicapped or able-bodied, etc. If we had done that earlier, extremism would have been minimal in Pakistan, because Pakistanis are good, pragmatic people, not fanatics. Let us do it now, with everybody in the country involved!

We need a major country-wide functional literacy, skills training and awareness campaign over several years. And it could end up in a permanent life-long learning organization or culture, not only in rural areas, but in towns and cities, too. Then all can become part of the learning society, and enthusiastic, supportive, thinking members of society.

Furthermore, we must not 'forget' that a large proportion of human beings anywhere in the world have learning difficulties and handicaps, such as being blind or deaf, having psychosocial needs, having physical handicaps and so on. Some are congenital and inherited; others due to accidents and trauma. Primary education must be compulsory for all, also the five to ten percent who need special education for a short or long period of time, or throughout the education cycle, with care and support later in life. Emergency education for refugees and after natural and man-made disasters must also be included.

In our bookish mindset, we often give too little attention to skills training and longer vocational and technical training and education, including apprenticeship and other combinations of on-the-job training and school. There is great potential for the private sector's contributions here, and hopefully, new ways of cooperation between the public and private sectors can be found.

We must discuss the relative emphasis to be given to the various sub-sectors of education, based on proposals mainly from the government and specialists. There is certainly also a need to have a public discourse about the general objectives and curriculum of the education sector, especially at school level and youth and adult education. There must be common standards and a minimum curriculum irrespective of the providers being the government or the private schools, including madrassas. In addition, local and other variations should be encouraged.

Let us make the school less bookish; it should be a school that develops well-rounded human beings, who are well informed and analytical, but they don't need to know all kinds facts (which they don't need and which may change over time). Students should learn values and attitudes with emphasis on honesty, tolerance, peace and cooperation; they should learn to think independently, yet live as responsible community members; and indeed, students should learn to be positive and optimistic and work for greater equality and prosperity within the country, the region and the world.

There is a golden opportunity to do all this now, thanks to the promised budget increases finally made by a Pakistani government. All stakeholders must contribute, and that pretty much means all of us.

October is the month of the year with most of the international days in education and related fields. Let us mark all of them: The World Teachers Day on the 5<sup>th</sup> of October, the World Literacy Day on the 8<sup>th</sup>, the World Mental Health Day on the 10<sup>th</sup> and the International Day of the Girl Child on the 11<sup>th</sup> of October.

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