

Education above all

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I was very glad when a friend in PTV World last Sunday confirmed that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was en route to Norway to attend the Oslo Summit on Education for Development, 6-7 July 2015. Since the largest group of immigrants from outside Europe comes from Pakistan, there is a special relationship between the two countries – and many first-generation Pakistanis, who came from the late 1960s, have done very well in their new homeland, with their entrepreneurial mind and willingness to work hard. The second and third generations are doing even better, but now more because of their performance in education, yes, often combined with values from their Pakistani heritage with Norway's equal opportunities for all.

Nawaz Sharif was one of the speakers in the Oslo Summit, along with the Nobel Prize Laureate Malala Yousafzai, UN's Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, UN Special Envoy for Global Education Gordon Brown, UNESCO DG Irina Bokova, and others. The Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg, who is Co-chair of the Advocacy Group for Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), was all smiles and full of enthusiasm as she opened the conference and held talks with Nawaz Sharif, Malala and all the other dignitaries. She said that Norway would double its development aid budget to education over the years 2013-2017. Norway has an aid budget about one percent of GDP, close to six billion dollars in 2015. Other donor countries must also renew their commitment to spend more on education, as must the developing countries who have not yet reach universal education. Pakistan is in that group.

It wasn't only the fact that Nawaz Sharif went to Norway that made me glad; it was also the clear priority the Norwegian PM gave to prioritize aid to education – and the emphasis that her government places on improving schools in Norway through expansion of further education for teachers. It is believed that good teachers are essential to improve schools and learning outputs. And special support to needy children, notably various kinds of special education is also very important. Countries that perform particularly well in education, such as Finland, have emphasized this for years. Statistics show that more than one-third, maybe half, of pupils needs special education for longer or shorter durations over their school years. There shouldn't be any stigma attached to it at all.

Government schools are very good in Norway and almost all children attend such schools; Crown Prince Haakon, whom Nawaz Sharif held talks with, went to a government primary school. At upper secondary level, he went to a Christian school, and his parents, the current King Harald and Queen Sonja, said they thought it would be important in order to develop good moral and ethical values. This was the 'added value' of a private school, which would otherwise follow the same curriculum as government schools.

In Pakistan, I believe we can draw lessons from this. Government schools must not be drained further for resources and support, including good teachers, good learning environments, interested parents, and so on. Today, about one-third of the pupils attend private schools in Pakistan, many using English as medium of instruction and their own more or less foreign curriculum. The best schools are private schools, although there are also good government schools, and indeed clever students in those schools, too. As a matter of fact, in actual number, there are more top students in government schools than in private school, and many go on to do well later in education and working life. Then there are also Islamic schools, madrassas, usually catering for the very poor students, mostly boys; those schools are often better than their reputation.

It is my opinion that the private schools, the ordinary ones and the madrassas, must be regulated better than what is the case today. There should be a common core curriculum for all schools in the country, maybe to

cover about two-thirds of the content, with the same books and learning materials in all schools. In addition, private schools, and various government schools, could have their own profile and emphasize.

That brings me to another key issue, notably the technocratic way of thinking we often have about education in our time, with over-crowded curricula and over-emphasis on tests and exams. Education isn't only about outcomes; it is more about the process of learning, the work methods and values children develop. If children during their school years can learn to enjoy learning new things, explore the world and content of the various school subjects, then that is what they school should do. It is less important to memorize facts and figures – which will soon be outdated; besides, we have Google. We must learn to think and explore, find out and do things with pleasure, alone and in groups, then we are en route to success. It isn't even rocket science to provide such quality education.

The Oslo Summit was about this, too, not education in itself, but education for a purpose, notably for development. But I also like to think of education being valuable in itself, also in developing countries. Not everything can be utilitarian and in direct support of a country's development.

For the last decades, we have focused on Education for All (EFA), including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Although Pakistan has had progress in many fields, as Nawaz Sharif explained at the Oslo Summit, it has fallen short of reaching most MDG goals. Hence, there is need for new and greater focus on education in Pakistan under the new term post-2015, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with targets up to 2030. Education in crisis and conflict, also termed emergency education, is a key field, since many of those who don't enroll in education or drop out before the school cycle has been completed are in such situations. Nawaz Sharif spoke about this in Oslo, related to natural disasters and IDPs and TDPs. Poverty in itself combined with sudden or slow disasters often deny children the right to education.

This time, the new SDGs focus not only on free and compulsory primary education, but also on giving further opportunities to youth to attend secondary education for a total of 12 years. The latter also includes technical and vocational education and training (TVET) with a combination of schooling and apprenticeship.

When Pakistan's Prime Minister comes back home, I hope that all politicians will congratulate him on his important contributions to the Oslo Summit. I am sure he has invited his Norwegian counterpart Erna Solberg back to Pakistan (she visited some years ago before she became PM) – with a coffer of development aid and plans for cooperative linkages between the two countries, which should also encompass private sector partnerships, such as the large Norwegian company Telenor, operating in Pakistan. In a few weeks time, there will be another international conference on Financing for Development, to be held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

When Nawaz Sharif took time to attend the Oslo Summit, I believe he did so because he sincerely wants to prioritize education and increase government budgets (to reach at least four percent of GDP, which is the general advice from UNESCO). This means that the other politicians in Pakistan, from all parties, must support the Prime Minister in his efforts to put *education above all* or, as Norway has had as a slogan, *Education, Job Number 1*.

In a speech at the Oslo Summit, the PM said: "I strongly believe that education of the youth is the only way forward for socio-economic progress of our future generation, and that eradicating illiteracy is essential for promoting peace, tolerance and harmony in any society."

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