



Case Studies

Education for a sustainable future: The case of Pakistan

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Introduction

The United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were developed in 2000, when 147 countries committed to addressing the issue of extreme poverty throughout the world. This was partly to be achieved by promoting universal access to primary education and reducing gender disparity to support environmental sustainability throughout the globe. These countries set a target to achieve their quantitative targets by the year 2015, however many of the Southern states are yet to achieve the goals discussed in the year 2000.

One of the countries that failed to achieve the Millennium Development Goal relating to universal access to education is Pakistan. The current situation within the education sector in Pakistan is, like many other developing countries, falling short of the targets set by United Nations. Indeed, according to UNESCO, the South Asian region is the second highest in terms of the number of out-of-school children not getting an education, after Sub-Saharan Africa. Despite some serious efforts toward improving the situation, the number of drop out children in Pakistan is close to 25 million. To put this into perspective, the population of Australia is around 25 million. There is therefore much scope for improving education within Pakistan.

The role of education as an influential instrument in eliminating poverty and inequality from society has been extensively recognised. Despite the government's commitments for universal primary education, Pakistan still has one of the highest rates of illiteracy in the world along with major gender disparity in education. Educational reforms in the educational systems of Pakistan are often focused on increased provision of resources and not on improving student-learning outcomes. This raises questions regarding the validity of those reforms

which do not lead to sustainable interventions and emphasises the need to make the educational system accountable for learning to the learner, to achieve the MDGs. To highlight these issues, this case study discusses educational reform within the context of Pakistan, specifically focusing on the measures adopted to measure improvement within the education system.

Globalisation, imperialism and education

Implementing the United Nation's MDGs would improve the lives of millions of children. The contempt by the state departments of Pakistan regarding the indigenous needs of the population is one of the numerous reasons why the MDGs have not been met. Additionally, the state has also failed in achieving another commitment: The Education for All (EFA) initiative, which placed major emphasis on the quality of education at the primary level. The review report of the implementation of EFA, published in October 2014, outlines that, despite frequent policy commitments, the primary target of universal primary education in Pakistan would not be achieved.

It is important to note that in addition to the public sector, private institutions and the NGO sector has been actively working to address this crisis of education. However, low-income countries are often caught in the contradiction whereby the education that is promoted by educational institutes is closely aligned to the overall objective of development – namely economic growth and poverty reduction. Most educational institutes, therefore, promote skill development within low-income countries to provide the necessary human capital and industrial processes that would support the neo-liberal politics of institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank. These institutions promote policies in the Southern hemisphere through their Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) on the macro level and have found a new role for education, which serves to reinforce imperialism through further limiting the capacity of low-income countries to determine their own educational agendas.

Education, throughout history, has been subjected to a continuous assault from the neo-liberal institutions of the capitalist power bloc, with the intention of building an oppressive system that reinforces capitalism as the only acceptable mode of production (Thomson and Bebbington, 2004). Further, Tikly (2001), notes that much of the literature on education and globalisation focuses on the western industrialised countries and their 'significant other', i.e. the newly industrialised countries of the Pacific Rim. In a similar vein, Goldsmith and King (2013), argue that the product of education in traditional societies, like Pakistan, is qualitatively different from the product of the whole educational process of developed countries, not in terms of individual intellectual achievement and assessment, but in terms of the role of education in relation to their economies. Education plays a direct and active part in the processes of production, skill development and producing such labour force that is needed by capitalist power bloc.

This raises questions about the role and relevance of such reforms in the context of globalisation and its implications on education policy, their resources as well as the process and educational outcomes in countries on the periphery of the global economy and politics. The spread of neo-liberal politics under the guise of globalisation and 'development' becomes contradictory to the key concepts that mark out education's role in relation to the repertoire, namely the development of human and social capital (Tikly, 2001).

The education system of Pakistan is facing tremendous challenges – lack of financial resources, increased drop outs, poor policy implementation, outdated curriculum and an unproductive examination system, that are linked to the role that education plays in a society. As the individual and collective values in the societies are shaped by the system of education, the ability to control educational outcomes becomes significant as it determines the role education plays within society (Thomson and Bebbington, 2004). Subsequently, individuals' understandings of the world are constructed through education and thus powerful actors seek to harness the education system to their own ends. This limits the potential of education to play a transformative role in a society. In this light, a certain role of education within a society is attained under which education is used to maintain the status quo. Therefore, there is a need to broaden our understanding of the implications of globalisation on education.

The measure of success for education?

In one attempt to end this educational crisis, the state of Pakistan committed itself to Vision-2025, which is a long-term plan to revamp the social protection system in the country. To aid public schools in improving their standards, the government has established an alliance through Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) with local successful NGOs, who recognise the needs of the indigenous communities to improve schooling in Pakistan. Although it is a significant issue for the country, there are only a few NGOs who have partnered with the public schools as most NGOs are reluctant to affiliate themselves with state institutions due to the bureaucratic distortion in both government departments and public schools. This has resulted in a trust deficit between government and NGOs. This cycle of inefficiency which affects all other institutions has led to this concern: how to promote education for the sustainable future?

The failure to address the educational crisis has resulted in calls to build an effective and accountable education system that meets the United Nation's MDGs and promotes sustainable education across generations simultaneously. It is vital to develop and adopt an appropriate measure of educational success that promotes learning based outcomes. To address obstacles to achieve such an education system several tools and measures have been adopted by national, international and development agencies but these organisations have failed to promote such educational outcomes that encourages learning. For instance, the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER, 2015), which is the only publicly