Imagining 'one education for all' By Arshed Bhatti, Education Consultant

When Prime Minister declared 2011 as year of education in Pakistan, many hoped that finally it would set the ball rolling for much awaited and mush desired education transformation. Some of us who worked on March for Education campaign for Pakistan Education Task Force which brought out critical report on Education Emergency in Pakistan were convinced that it was "last chance" for the governments in Pakistan do something for education. The 2011 passed as many years before it had, but nothing significant happened in education, in year of education.

One question that baffled before writing this piece was: what do people do when they have let their 'last chance' slip away from their grip? Should they quit the race, change the course, or lets someone else run? I don't know a short answer, so the rest of this piece is an attempt to share an innovative and alternative course of action which in my view promises a winning race.

One of the few good things Pakistan's education scene has witnessed in last couple of years, besides the 18th Amendment, Article 25a & the devolution of education's delivery to provinces, is ASER (Annual Status of Education Report). I see that ASER will soon start getting the same attention and respect which the annual report on the state of human rights in Pakistan does.

One of the most lethal bilind spots on the road to educational achievements – notwithstanding how bumpy, curvy & slippery that road may be – is credible, verifiable & quantifiable statistical snapshot of the ground realities of education in Pakistan. ASER has responded to an important need by collecting vital details of the big picture of educational achievements (the inputs & the outcomes - or a lack of both) succinctly & comprehensively. If there are still skids & derallments on this road, it would not be because of the bilnd spot. Jut for sleepy & non-serious drivers.

Now the next big challenge that follows ASER, in Baela's words, is: how to use ASER data for an effective advocacy at various levels so that the slogan of right to education' becomes a reality and does not haunt as repetitive rhetoric in the years to comel This piece is an effort to do that.

Some of the key statistical findings of the ASER 2011 (for KP & Sindh are) that over 60 per cent children still attend the public schools; the learning outcomes are very discouraging to put it politely; the facilities in public schools leave much to be desired; the teachers need to put up a better show both in showing up and showing the results; and the private schools, as believed by many, are not anywhere near in offering a panacea. However, one thing I noticed in the data is that the public sector, if improved, would still be a better bet for millions of children and it would neither be prudent nor advisable to write it off-vet.

In an opinion piece in Dawn in Feb 2011, i argued that 'doing more of the same' won't take our education anywhere. A year after, I reiterate it is time for citizens to act differently, definitely & defiantly to make governments act seriously for the provision of 'one education for all'.

I am underscoring 'governmental action' because I believe the eventual transformation will come through government with State's full backing, institutionally, politically & financially. But let us not confuse governmental action with government provision and let us not accept that the governments keep doing what they have been doing in the last 65 years, and keep failing the way they have always failed. It certainly means we change the way we have been doing it, involve all others in doing it and take new and innovative routes. Consider.

1. Merging the redefined 'public' and the 'private':

Access to (including management & governance of) schooling is the biggest challenges with four facets: there are not enough schools; not enough schools for girls; not enough high schools; and not enough 'good' schools (which make pupil learn & succeed in life). Another aspect of access, many parents cannot afford to send children to 'good' (read private) schools. The inadequacies of access also relate to failures of governance & inadequacies of publicsector's management.

Answer to this set of challenges is in blending the place & space of the public sector with face & pace of the private sector. In practical terms, this implies a set of initiatives & measures like:

Governments to provide land (space & place), while 'private sector' manages schools through more authorized principle, more involved parents & more qualified teachers.

The new management is subjected to a dedicated oversight of the elected people who are elected solely for this purpose: to manage education in their respective & defined jurisdictions.

This requires redefining & reconceptualization of 'education providers' by removing the binary of public & private and by agreeing that all education will be publically financed and provided by the new entities who are competent, keen, committed & qualified with demonstrated track record of missionary zeal and requisite expertise.

Mainstreaming the technology in the entire spectrum of educational provision:

Today, technology has made life & many of the challenges far easier than they were imagined to be 10 years ago. The intelligent deployment of technological advances in telephony, internet & web-based technologies can help improve all aspects of education's entire spectrum without negatively displacing the labour force (teachers & managers).

In practical terms, it will imply infusion and intrusion of technology in all arenas of education's system & sector viz. planning & provision; allocation & spending; management & monitoring; the teaching & the text; assessment & learning; relevance & application, et al.

However, the involvement of technology will require new curriculum, new pedagogy, newly trained teachers, new social & political attitudes to schooling & education and new structures & mechanisms that will act differently to education ministries, departments & other authorities.

3. Separating provision, supervision & regulation:

There is need to follow two principles of common sense in this area. One, regulators, providers & monitors cannot be clubbed in the same entity. Two, s/he who pays must do so for services and products which have met the minimum and agreed standards of quality.

In practical terms, this will involve certain radical steps. The current departments of education will perform two functions viz. education financing which is tied to outputs/ results (like Punjab Education Foundation pays the private schools for PEF sponsored children); and enforcement of regulation to ensure minimum standards of service provision & learning outcomes are met.

The provision will be dispensed by citizen-led, regional education authorities. The regions can be defined geographically & linguistically (Seraiki region, Pashtun region, Balochi region, et al).

The supervision will be bifurcated into administrative & governance related oversight through peoples' representative specifically elected to govern management and provision of education. Validation & oversight of results (learning outcome, cost effectiveness etc.) can be carried out by publically financed, independently commissioned, citizenled researches like ASER.

4. Laying a new, need-based, supply line of 'one education for all':

Adhering to the 'triple F' principle that engineers & designers follow the world over i.e. 'form follows function', we need to rebuild (more by readjusting & realigning than by reinventing the wheel) an education supply line that provides an education of same quality & content to all without any exception. Institutionally & structurally it will imply that a function is assigned to and performed by an entity whose core competencies match with the specifications of itsjob.

In practical terms this means, further & fully unfolding the process of devolution to districts as promised by the 18[®] Constitutional Amendment; doing away with the parallel and internecine streams & sets of schooling; providers are paid for a job well done, not merely for jobs that are assigned on paper but are either done halfheartedly or never done at all; and parents are more deeply and more actively involved in the governance of the schools their children attend.

5. Making research & evidence essential basis of all policies & plans:

There is hardly anyone who defles the logic and utility of research and evidence in informing, influencing & determining supply or its curtailment. However, in practical terms this means having one ASER for each region / cluster of districts & letting ASER be both the light and might of the planning and provision.

To conclude, one would assert that let us use & benefit from the wealth of insight the data in ASER offers. Let us do it seriously & carrestly; and let us do it like a marathon that is reinforced with regular sprints. The flipside of this assertion is that let us not have marathon sessions to plan a sprint that we know we—in all probability—would run like a marathon.

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