Goals for Learning: Post 2015

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It is now a well-known fact that getting children into school is only half the battle, the other half being that they acquire meaningful learning and leave school able to translate their learning into productive living. It is also well understood that children in developing countries learn surprisingly little. This evidence comes not just from internationally comparable achievement data but more recently from initiatives such as the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) in India and Pakistan with equivalents in the form of UWEZO in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda and BEEKUNGO in Mali and JANGANDOO being piloted in Senegal.

International assessments reveal a dismal picture of learning in developing countries. In the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), for example, the average eighth-grade test-taker in South Africa answered only 18 per cent of questions correctly on the maths portion of the TIMSS in 2003, compared to 51 per cent in the United States (Gonzales et al, 2004)\(^1\). Filmer, Hasan, and Pritchett (2006) note that on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) of 2000, the average science score among students in Peru was equivalent to that of the lowest scoring 5 per cent of US students\(^2\).

The ASER story reveals similar findings within South Asia. The latest ASER (2012) data from Pakistan for instance shows strikingly poor learning levels among students. When tested on grade 2 curriculum competencies in Urdu/local language, English and Mathematics, children in rural areas, and especially those residing in Balochistan and FATA, reveal very poor grasp of basic competencies. For example, among all children studying in grade 5 in rural Balochistan, almost 64 per cent cannot read stories in Urdu (the highest competency level tested in reading). Twenty-eight percent of grade 5 students cannot read sentences from grade 2 curriculum text. Almost 65 per cent of these students were unable to carry out grade 3 curriculum division sums despite reportedly studying in grade 5. A similarly depressing picture emerges from FATA – 54 per cent students in grade 5 cannot read Urdu/Pashto stories and as many as 11 per cent grade 10 students cannot read stories in Urdu/Pashto language meant to be based on grade 2 curricular standard. Similar findings prevail in other competencies.

The question: why? i.e. why do developing country children learn so little continues to resound in education policy circles. This is pertinent not only because we have now been asking this question for the last few decades but also in light of the post-2015 agenda where an answer to this question has become even more important. Some answers to the ‘why’ posed in debates include and are not limited to the following:

1. Per capita expenditure on education in developing countries is inevitably lower because they have to educate larger populations of school going children.
2. Teacher salaries in developing countries are on average 3.7 times per capita GDP and in many developing countries teacher salaries constitute a major chunk of recurrent expenditure.
3. Non-teacher resources, such as textbooks, are scarce.
4. Teacher incentives are weak; teachers are often not in school and when in school are not necessarily found to be teaching.

As the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) target period of 2015 comes closer, with many countries struggling to achieve the goals they had promised to achieve, 2012 has in particular seen a series of high-profile regional reflections and dialogues to shape the post 2015 learning agenda. The centrality of ‘learning’ is a common feature of all education debates. Consultations and expert opinions call for a renewed focus on the quality of learning being imparted to children with a need for education systems to ‘train learners to be innovative, able to adapt to and assimilate change and to be able to continue learning’. Increasingly, there is talk of learning to be creative, innovative, involving critical thinking and focusing on the development of non-cognitive skills and competencies that foster social cohesion and social and emotional development\(^4\).

The learning challenges faced by Pakistan, therefore, are multi-fold. As has been said, again and again, and yet again, the issue no longer is one of just getting a child into school. The crucial concern is to ensure that a 5 year old that enters school in a certain year exits it ready for the workforce with the requisite preparation to make a positive and productive

\(^1\) http://timss.bc.edu/timss2003i/intl_reports.html
\(^2\) http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/cf_dev/AbsByAuth.cfm?per_id=803507
\(^3\) http://www.uia.be/node/882109
\(^4\) ibid
contribution in society. The starting point, as many researchers increasingly argue, is to combine efficient educational spending with institutional change within educational systems. Within this framework, there is a crucial need to foster pedagogic change in the classroom. This includes focusing on better teaching techniques, use of quality textbooks and reading books, learning to read in mother tongue and effective teaching of reading in a second language, ensuring children receive enough learning and reading time and effective testing of learning outcomes to help ensure students learn more and teachers have the capability of teaching better.⁵

Meeting the learning goals for the future in Pakistan is highly dependent on effective teaching. Teachers are arguably the single most important input into education systems and Pakistan is not an exception. This argument is solidly backed by research evidence that confirms that teachers are the most important institutional factor in determining student outcomes. Given that improving teacher effectiveness is a policy amenable strategy, improving weak teaching may be the most effective means of raising school quality across the developing world (Glewwe and Kremer, 2006, p. 995). This includes ensuring equity, efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of teaching services and making efforts to align learning goals with effective teaching.

Additionally, and perhaps equally importantly, there is an increased need to use learning indicators not only to gauge existing performance but also to more effectively towards targets. Simply put, learning indicators can help achieve several goals: inform policy, provide monitoring standards and help create new ones, identifying correlates of learning, increasing public awareness, promoting accountability and informing political debate. Combining effective teaching, institutional change and effective monitoring with efficient educational spending can lead Pakistan towards defining and ultimately achieving learning goals.

⁵ Draws from ‘Punjab Learning Outcomes and Assessment, a DFID summary technical paper’, DFID, Chief Minister's Roundtable in London, DFID, Palace Street, October 2012.
⁷ http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002136/213663e.pdf