

THE NEWS **Rebuilding human capital [Part – II]**

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What type of human capital strategies does Pakistan need to put in place in order to improve its current standing and maximize the benefits for growth and welfare of the majority of the population? These strategies require effective coordination and ownership of the federal, provincial and local governments, as well as the private sector, academia, think tanks, media, non-profit organizations and parents.

At the outset, it must be conceded that this is the main stumbling block that has not allowed Pakistan to make any significant progress in the field of human capital. At the conceptual level, there is a huge divergence in the views about the priorities to be accorded, resources to be allocated and roles to be divided among the key stakeholders. There are too many experts in the particular areas of educational and health reforms who want their asserted opinions to be accepted exclusively.

Constructive dialogue and consensus-building have become difficult in a society where polarization and divisiveness have become so deeply entrenched and tolerance and trust have become rare commodities. The recent case of the Single National Curriculum is a vivid illustration of these prevailing tendencies in the country. All the efforts put in that project are likely to come to naught as the new government may abandon it rather than fine tune and rectify its deficiencies because if it becomes successful the credit would go to the previous government. The present government may pursue a different priority.

The impact of investment in human capital is felt decades later, but the political leadership want something tangible to show within their tenure. This is why the ground-breaking and inauguration of physical infrastructure projects is so seductive and gets the most attention as well as budgetary resources. Continuity, consistency and dedicated efforts towards

implementation over a long period of time, applicable to all structural reforms, are also the prerequisites of a successful human capital strategy. This disconnect between political expediency and pursuit of long-term goals has proved to be a bane so far.

Having sketched the current prevailing situation in Pakistan and the requirements of human-capital threshold to “allow all children to reach their full potential – growing up well-nourished and ready to learn, attaining real learning in the classroom and entering the job market as healthy, skilled and productive adults”, we identify ten areas where the gap between ‘what exists’ and ‘what ought to be’ needs to be filled (in no order of priority). The proposals given below are culled from research studies, field observations and extensive consultations with stakeholders by reform commissions and task forces.

First, restructure the governance and management system of education and health delivery by clearly delineating the responsibilities between the different tiers of the government. The federal government should restrict its scope to higher education and national health programmes – universities and national centres of excellence, the National Institute of Health, regulatory authorities, testing laboratories, and accreditation. The provincial governments should restrict themselves to colleges, technical and vocational training, tertiary hospitals and medical teaching institutions. And district governments/metropolitan, municipal corporations and municipal committees should operate schools from KG, primary to higher secondary levels, primary healthcare, basic health units, rural health centres, tehsil hospitals and dispensaries and district and municipal hospitals.

District education and health authorities should be responsible for standard setting, supervising and inspecting private and non-profit schools, hospitals and clinics. Colleges and universities should have their own boards of management while schools should have school management committees with adequate powers and resources devolved to them. The present artificial distinction between development and non-development expenditures should be abolished and replaced by a programmatic approach.

Second, reduce the gender disparity and bring women's enrollment ratios and literacy rates to equal or more than those of men. The evidence about higher returns in female education are so incontrovertible and externalities so positive that grants, scholarships and safe transport arrangements have to be made for them.

Allocations of conditional cash transfers under BISP for female students should be raised – particularly for Balochistan, the merged districts, southern Punjab and rural Sindh. At the school level, a nutritious lunch should be served regularly. Female teachers have proved to be more productive and devoted while teaching. They should be the first choice in appointments in government schools (all other things being equal) where the quality of teachers is a binding constraint on the learning outcomes. The example of TCF schools where the teachers are all women and have performed exemplary well testifies to the validity of this recommendation.

Third, bring the 23 million out-of-school children back to the formal and informal learning structures and equip them with vocational skills. Most students drop out after the completion of elementary schooling due to the dearth of middle schools in their localities. The ratio of middle and secondary schools to primary schools is lopsided, and new middle and secondary schools need to be established in areas where there is a demand. A second shift in the existing school buildings, with a compressed but relevant curriculum including vocational and life skills, could be a cost-effective method of bringing these children into the learning net.

Basic community schools run by individual operators was a promising experiment for non-formal basic education where the premise is provided by the community whereas textbooks and the salaries of the teachers are provided by the government. This project, which caters to children aged 4-16, has been neglected in recent years as a result of a tussle between the federal and provincial governments on the funding of these schools. In view of cost effectiveness and community partnership, these non-formal schools should be revived, strengthened and expanded. Students who are willing to resume their studies should not be charged any tuition fees. Retired well reputed teachers

living in the area or nearby can be hired on contract to teach these students, lowering the financial burden on the exchequer while ensuring good quality.

Fourth, introduce science, arts and mathematics gradually right from the early days of schooling to inculcate critical thinking skills and avoid rote-learning, memorization and cramming for exams in pursuit of grades and diplomas. Our future is bleak if 90 per cent of students across Pakistan are underachieving in math and science. To fix this, the whole process of recruitment, orientation and training of teachers has to be reconfigured and compensation linked to learning achievements rather than across-the-board uniform pay scales.

Skill premium and performance measurements should be the guiding principles. Science laboratories where students can carry out hands-on activities to learn the concepts should be set up at middle and secondary schools by all providers of education. Studies focused on Pakistan show that for every one year increase in secondary education for the entire workforce, the GDP of Pakistan will increase by 13 per cent.

Fifth, lady health workers had made a promising beginning to increase access to essential primary care services and support health systems at the household and community levels. However, for a variety of bureaucratic and short-sighted decisions, they have lost their efficacy. These workers as well as family planning workers should be merged to form a single cadre with clearly defined duties. They should be selected on meeting certain criteria, trained continuously, supervised diligently, given security of service and located in their own communities and villages. They should be provided the necessary vaccines, etc and handsets to record what they have accomplished.

To be continued

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