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Transforming education: Five tasks

FROM PAGE 14

The past experiments did not work because the basic conditions for implementing the changes were not present in our school system. Most critically, the teachers were not prepared and did not have the skills and necessary motivation. They could not be trained to do their part and were not given the support and supervision needed. They were not motivated because of the adverse working conditions and lack of incentives to perform. Too meager public investments in education meant too large class sizes, poor physical conditions, and little by way of learning aids (other than textbooks, which apparently students did not want to use). It is often said that a major expansion of education has been bought cheaply by sacrificing learning outcomes for children. This situation has not changed enough to produce visible results.



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

The 2030 SDG agenda and the 2041 vision of reaching the status of a developed country call for wide-ranging change in the education scenario, but the pace and nature of change do not show that we are on track to bring about the envisioned difference.

The newly appointed Minister of Education has promised to listen to stakeholders and experts beyond those who have been too closely involved with the present initiative to avert the looming risks to children. A pragmatic solution requires taking some time for reflection and learning and adjusting the timetable for rolling out the reforms.

FIVE CRITICAL TASKS
So what about the five

critical tasks in education? As noted, silver bullets will not provide the solutions. At the same time, everything cannot be done all at once. Setting priorities, identifying catalytic measures that may trigger a chain of positive changes with cumulative results over time is necessary. In fact, the new curriculum and textbook initiatives, as well as other activities, such as the distribution of millions of free school textbooks at the beginning of each year, ICT-assisted multi-media classrooms, and monthly stipends to millions of primary and secondary students have been presented as game-changers in education. It did not quite turn out that way.

Each of the actions individually is important and has made a varying degree of difference in our school

education. But overall, these activities, individually or collectively, have not made a sufficient difference, beyond expanding access, in learning outcomes. As has been reported in official student assessments and other studies, the needle has not moved significantly concerning learning outcomes over the last three decades. More than half of the children completing primary education do not acquire a functional and self-sustaining level of literacy and numeracy. With this weak foundation, there is a knock-on negative effect at secondary and tertiary levels of education and vocational-technical skill formation. Evidence also suggests that education, with the predominance of private tutoring and coaching, has become more of a commodity in the last two decades, available only to those who can pay. It

appears that we are stuck in a "learning poverty" trap.

The 2030 SDG agenda and the 2041 vision of reaching the status of a developed country call for wide-ranging change in the education scenario, but the pace and nature of change do not show that we are on track to bring about the envisioned difference. As noted above, analyses of the education sub-sectors and the cross-cutting issues across the sector show evidence of the partial, reactive, and conventional 'within-box' activities in educational development that have not quite produced the desired results. A more comprehensive and holistic transformation of education has to be conceived, designed, and implemented. The priorities and strategies have to be set within a framework of transformative development. This is what is

attempted to be explained in the book on educational transformation and presented in the 20-point action agenda grouped under five themes - policy, goals, strategies, organizational capability, and political commitment. These themes help to define the five areas of critical tasks.

1. Policy priority: Promoting an equitable society through education. Education will be the instrument for combating disparity and discrimination in society and not the tool for aggravating and creating new inequality. This overarching policy priority would subsume as policy objectives enhancement of the public good character of education, and making the four fundamental principles of the constitution - nationalism, democracy, socialism, and secularism - the touchstones for policy guidance in education. Contemporary and contextual implications for the education of these generic concepts have to be worked out and reflected in policy and programs.

2. Foundational goal: Implementing a time-bound plan for equitable and inclusive K-12 school education of acceptable quality for all children. Sub-tasks related to this basic goal would be setting and achieving targets for early childhood development and preschool education, vocational-technical skill development, tertiary education, madrasa education, and lifelong learning. Universal school education is the foundation of the system.

3. Key strategy: Strengthening the education workforce in their professional skills, motivation, performance and adequacy of numbers. Ways have to be found within a ten-year time frame to attract to

the education workforce the brightest young people and keep them in the profession. Related strategic actions would be area-based decentralized education planning and management, shaping education response to climate change impact, and effective use of digital technology in education.

4. Organizational capacity-building: Establishing district education authorities for delivering equitable K-12 education. This would be the key element of education sector planning and management covering sub-sectors and cross-sectoral issues, bringing education and human capital development under one central ministerial authority, and creating a strengthened higher education commission.

5. Political commitment: Vowing to promote academic autonomy of the education system and education institutions and protecting education from partisan and narrow political interventions. Related tasks would be to establish a high-power permanent education commission, adopt a right-to-education law, and education resource mobilization for equitable and inclusive education with acceptable quality for all.

The five tasks and related sub-tasks do not by themselves constitute an action plan for educational transformation.

The 20-point action guides and five-point thematic priorities derived from critical analysis of subsectors and cross-sectoral areas can provide the building blocks of such a work plan with further priority setting and phasing of implementation.

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