

## **THE CHALLENGE OF LITERACY IN PAKISTAN:**

A major mission of UNESCO is to promote the cause of literacy and education. As the advanced or developed world is already almost 100% literate, UNESCO's literacy programs are focused on the developing countries. At present about one billion people in the world cannot read and write. Most of these illiterates live in South Asia and the Muslim countries. In 1990 the biggest ever education conference was held in Jomtien, Thailand attended by more than one hundred education ministers and senior representatives of almost all the UN agencies including the World Bank and of course UNESCO. Pakistan too attended it and committed itself to the goals set for the next 10 years. Unlike China, India, Indonesia and many other countries. Pakistan failed to meet its commitments primarily because of lack of political will on the part of the government and indifference of the federal education ministry and provincial departments of education.

In the year 2000, more than 150 education ministers, UN agencies led by UNESCO and civil society organisations attended a meeting of the World Education Forum at Dakar, Senegal, reviewed the performance of various countries and refixed the goals for the next 15 years.

### **These goals are:**

A Framework of Action was also agreed upon and all countries asked to prepare National Plans of Action for achieving the revised targets. Pakistan was one of the first to prepare such a plan although the finalized version came to be formulated in mid 2003. To watch the progress of various countries and to assess the pace of implementation, UNESCO has set up a world monitoring committee. Its annual reports indicate that Pakistan is one of the 20 or so countries which may not be able to achieve even one of the six Dakar goals.

- 1.** Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.
- 2.** Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality.
- 3.** Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes.
- 4.** Achieving a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults.
- 5.** Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by **2015**, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality.
- 6.** Improving all aspects of the quality of education, and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy,

numeracy and essential life skills.

The goals as set in the Pakistan National Plan were (a) to increase the literacy rate to 86% by setting up **270000** literacy centres by the year 2005, and thereafter enhance the numbers (b) raise the number of non-formal basic education centres for out of school children from 7000 to 30000 (and more) and also to establish vocational centres for imparting income generation skills to the new literates. To date, less than **10000 literacy centres** have been opened while there has been little increase in the centres (8000 or so) for out of school children. And hardly any vocational training centres for the new literates.

To some extent this regrettable lapse on the part of the central government (including the Planning Commission) despite eloquent speeches by the prime minister and the president and some of the chief ministers, has been sought to be rectified by programmes launched by the National Commission for Human Development headed by its spirited chairperson, Dr. Nasim Ashraf. **NCHD** is reported to be working for the target of more than **85% literacy** by the year 2011.

It has yet however to be seen if this commission has the capacity to develop the institutional strength and human resources to do the job. Its initial start was not very well conceived as its programme hinged on the unrealistic goal of making illiterates, literate, in 3 months. It has now revised it to 5 months with post literacy phase yet to be firmed up. The point to be stressed here is that without a post-literacy programme, after an initial phase of imparting basic literacy skills of reading, writing and elementary calculations there are considerable chances of learners relapsing into illiteracy. This was manifestly established in a National Consultation Meeting held recently at Islamabad by PACADE – the national NGO for literacy in Pakistan. Will there be enough of financial allocations for literacy to enable the NCHD to deliver the goods? This question is crucial as the financial allocations for education in Pakistan have been the lowest in the world and the promise of raising this allocation to 4% of GDP next year (as against the present around 2% or so) will not guarantee that the requisite funds out of the enhanced grant will be earmarked for literacy.

There is also news of the Ministry of Education asking for money to open thousands of additional literacy and non-formal basic education centres. It remains to be seen if this actually happens. One may also refer to the initiatives taken by Punjab and NWFP governments to increase the number of literacy centres.

Viewed in terms of the existing experience of running these centres, however, one has to recognize serious deficiencies in the way these centres are opened and operated. The position briefly is as follows.

The burden of implementing almost the entire literacy programme in the country has devolved on the districts, and on the EDOs literacy to be more precise. These EDOs (Executive District Officers) exist only in the Punjab. In other provinces only Dos or ADOs hold this responsibility.

Now these district officers are not properly trained for the job and have inadequate staff and poor logistical facilities. So what do they do? They hand over the task to local literacy NGOs most of which lack the capacity to undertake the complex job of efficiently operating the centres. No training institutes or resource centres exist (as in India or Bangladesh) with the result that teachers are indifferently trained and there is hardly any credible system of monitoring. There is thus an urgent need for setting up institutions for training and production of suitable reading material and also resource centres at provincial and district levels. Without professional expertise and effective training and monitoring systems, much of the effort and funds are liable to go down the drain.

Finding that countries like Pakistan are not making the desired headway, United Nations has passed a unanimous resolution declaring a UN Literacy Decade (2003-2012) spelling out in detail the need for credible and comprehensive policies and strategies, flexible approaches and involvement of all stakeholders to ensure the achievements of targets laid down at Dakar and Millennium Development Goals.

Mention may also be made of a recent decision of UNESCO to launch L.I.F.E – Literacy Initiative for Empowerment under which special and additional support will be provided to countries lagging behind in literacy. Pakistan and Bangladesh will thus be receiving funds and technical assistance to streamline its policies and strategies and to build up capacity at various levels. One must appreciate this laudable move by UNESCO and it is to be hoped that Pakistan will avail of this opportunity to review and strengthen its literacy programmes.

Pakistan, India and China had more or less the same rate of literacy in the late 40s when they achieved independence. China's literacy rate is more than 80% today and India's nearing 65%. Pakistan claims to be 53% literate although many of us view this figure with skepticism. In the 1998 census the figure was about 43% and one wonders how without an effective national literacy programme we have reached 53% with population increasing still at a fast pace.

According to a conservative estimate about 55 million Pakistanis above the age of ten, today are utterly illiterate.

It is time to wake up and take seriously to the task and not dilly dally with insufficient funding and continuing with an inadequate and largely inefficient infrastructure. Not that there are no bright spots. NCHD, the Punjab literacy department and the Elementary Education Foundation of NWFP hold a lot of promise. A handful of NGOs too can be identified for blazing pioneering trails for promoting literacy.

But the task is so huge and the challenge so daunting that all stakeholders in addition to international agencies like UNESCO, MNAs, Senators, MPAs, the Media and the civil society have to play their vital role to ensure the availability of funds and expertise at various levels for Pakistan to make up for the lost time and catch up with the rest of the world.