

UNESCO's new initiative:

Pakistan is one of the more than two dozen countries which, according to the Global Monitoring Report (GMR 2006), will not be able to achieve any of the targets set at the World Education Forum in 2000.

Pakistan is committed to these targets for 'Education for All' and as a follow-up of the Dakar Declaration was able to prepare a National Plan of Action fairly quickly. The implementation of the Plan however has remained halting and unsatisfactory. The plan, for instance, envisaged the opening of more than 300,000 literacy centers by now and about 80,000 non-formal basic education centers for out of school children. But the actual number of centres on the ground is a fraction of the targets.

The central government's budgetary allocation for literacy has been about Rs100 million as against the planned more than Rs10 billion a year. Yes Punjab and NWFP have taken commendable steps. Punjab has a full-fledged department of literacy and non-formal basic education headed by a full-fledged cabinet minister and secretary. And the NWFP government has set up an autonomous foundation for elementary education headed by a dynamic chairman with considerable funds provided for the literacy projects. Both the provinces have launched impressive programmes for adult literacy and non-formal basic education. But these efforts even if successfully managed will only make a limited contribution towards meeting of the huge literacy challenge facing the country.

The picture in Sindh and Balochistan is quite bleak. Practically, these two provinces have yet to prepare provincial and district plans, earmark adequate funds and work for the creation of appropriate organisational arrangements to start viable literacy programmes. A ray of hope has come from the National Commission for Human Development headed by Dr Nasim Ashraf. The Commission has drawn up a national programme to strengthen the primary schools and establish thousands of literacy centres all over the country. Has the Commission the capacity to massively up- scale its operations countrywide and address the literacy challenge? Will it be able to get the required funds? Much will depend on the answers to these questions.

With all the rhetoric and tall claims about the need for literacy and education emanating from the highest levels, the movement towards the attainment of the goal of a literate Pakistan is painfully slow. It also needs to be said that the figures given by government about literacy statistics do not carry much credibility. For quite sometime the post of the director general of the Federal Statistics Bureau has been lying vacant. Why this neglect? Is it deliberate as suggested by some critics? It is suggested that the figures can be engineered with junior officers in-charge.

Now a look at the government figures. According to the Ministry of Education as many as six million children are still out of school. The Punjab education minister says that 53 per cent of children joining primary school still drop out in the first two years. A major reason for this wastage is poor quality of teachers and an unwholesome school environment. More

than 52 million Pakistanis above the age of 10 are totally illiterate. Two thirds of them are women.

Credit goes to Unesco for keeping literacy centre stage, in its programmes in Pakistan. But for its spirited support for this cause governments' record might have been worse.

Unesco's latest contribution is LIFE - Literacy Initiative For Empowerment. 34 countries lagging behind the rest of the world have been flagged for special help with funds and technical assistance. Pakistan because of its poor record has been chosen along with Bangladesh for special treatment.

In December, Unesco Islamabad office held a national consultation meeting on LIFE in the context of the literacy challenge facing Pakistan. In a Unesco presentation the issues identified were :a) insufficient political will b) weak organisational structure. c) inadequate financing and delay in disbursement . d) low-level of Capacity. e) low awareness of the importance of literacy. F) lack of monitoring and evaluation system and g) absence of uniform national curriculum.

The recommendations proposed were:

- i. Enhance political support
- ii. Raise financial allocations for education from 2% to 4%
- iii. Earmark 5-8% of educational budget for literacy and non-formal education
- iv. Streamline organisational infrastructure for literacy and NFE- from national level to district level
- v. Set up a National Literacy Authority

This curtain raiser meeting on LIFE was followed by a Regional Planning Workshop in March. It was attended by Unesco experts from Paris, Tokyo, Hamburg and Bangkok as well as Indonesia, China, India, Bangladesh and many other countries. These specialists interacted with Pakistani officials and NGO representatives to evolve a schedule of need assessment and develop a strategy for revitalising and accelerating the spread of literacy in Pakistan. The existing programmes and approaches were reviewed. Recommendations were made for the formation of a national steering committee which will plan and oversee project implementation with emphasis on strengthening institutional capacity, improvement of efficiency of literacy manages and teaches and the production of need-based reading materials.

Hopefully, the Pakistani government will avail of this opportunity to gear up its will to build institutional capacity for planning and implementing literacy programmes. Hopefully the funds to be provided by Unesco for remedying the flaws and deficiencies in the present efforts and the offer of technical assistance would not be frittered away by a listless and myopic approach.. It is not clear if the top leadership has the requisite commitment to own the cause of literacy. One may hear recall how the baby was thrown out with the bath water when the much-needed National Literacy Commission was abolished on the recommendation of a shortsighted economy committee.

The good news is that the education budget is expected to be raised from two per cent to

four per cent of the GDP. Federal Education Secretary says that funds would no longer be a problem. This assurance has yet to be tested as while allocation for education may increase, the amount provided for literacy may remain inadequate. Equally important is the making of right policies, programmes and methodologies as well as a practicable implementation strategy. An essential part of the strategy will relate to building up of infrastructural and institutional strength. There is much to learn from the way India has managed to reach more than 65 per cent literacy rate while Pakistan sits at the lowest rung of the South Asian literacy ladder.

I close this column with an excerpt from the publication, *Literacy-- a Unesco Perspective*: "Literacy is more than reading and writing. It is about how we communicate in society. It is about social practices and relationships, about knowledge, language and culture. Literacy contributes to freedom and equity; it is part of any social project, which aims at a fairer and more just society. Open and democratic systems of governance require open and adequate communication channels; no society in today's world can function without the written dimension of communication- text on paper, on the computer screen, on the TV, coupled with images and icons of all kinds. Literacy is an inescapable part of life in today's world. In his book *Development as Freedom*, Amartya Sen observes repeatedly that the expansion of literacy, especially female literacy, has a positive effect on basic aspirations such as life expectancy and political voice".

E-mail: [pacade@brain.net.pk](mailto:pacade@brain.net.pk)