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LEARNING FROM THE PAST, STRATEGIZING FOR THE FUTURE

EDUCATION FOR ALL IN INDIA: THE PRESENT AND BEYOND 2015

Abstract

Education for All has been an international driver in the past decade for states that have been progressing rapidly and been making remarkable progress in education practically eradicating illiteracy and achieving nearly universal primary education along with gender parity.

India being the second largest populated country in the world constituting a significant portion of the world population has made significant progress over the last couple of decades in the field of education. This progress undoubtedly has been through the efforts of the political system within the country and undeniably it can be attributed to the international targets such as Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). Such national and international efforts have been made to prepare globally competent citizens in India as well as in other countries. Yet as the deadline for EFA approaches, some states and regions within India remain far from achieving some goals and urban rural disparities exist that hold back India as a whole from achieving set targets for 2015 as a nation. India remains to be under the lower third in the Educational Development Index with EDI of .790 (UNESCO, 2012). Therefore, it is important to make a final assessment of progress under the framework of EFA with a vision beyond 2015 that will help achieve international and national targets in the coming decade. This paper concludes that as India prioritizes to prepare globally competent citizens in the coming years there needs to be a well thought-out education strategy that can be implemented via reforms in these key areas – access, quality, governance.

Introduction: Progress in the MDGs and EFA Goals

The global agenda Education for all (EFA) was launched at Jomtien in 1990 and reaffirmed in Dakar in 2000 that adopted six major goals for education, two of which also became UN Millennium Development Goals later in the same year. The Dakar goals covered the attainment of Universal Primary Education (UPE) and gender equality, improving literacy and educational quality, and increasing life-skills and early childhood education programmes, and were to be achieved within a span 15 years active from 2000. UPE and gender equality were recognized in the MDGs as goal 2 & 3.

India has abided by the 11th Strategy of Dakar framework for action EFA implementation and published EFA assessment reports. The national EFA assessment reports haven't gone beyond the data more specifically into the weaknesses and the challenges in the system that would help in strategizing for the future.

Before EFA goals were adopted by India, a major step towards education in India was in the form of The National Policy on Education (NPE) in 1986. Thereafter, in 1988 National Literacy Mission was launched in India. NPE laid the

foundation of several centrally assisted schemes in order to accelerate progress towards the EFA goals. In fact, NPE 1986 amended and adopted in 1992 states “In our national perception, education is essentially for all...”.

The situation many countries as well as international organisations face now is no less than a fork which has led to a debate which can be only resolved with time. The question on one hand is whether the EFA & MDGs goals be continued and revised on the base of the original set of goals or whether to introduce new international targets. Either way it is important to evaluate the feasibility, sustainability of the conclusions that may surface around 2015.

Current Scenario of Education in India

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)

The formulation of Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) in 1976 under the national policy for children ECCE did not create a major impact until the 86th amendment to the Indian Constitution which enjoined the state “to provide ECCE and education to all children until they complete six years of age”. Over the course of the last two five-year plans there has been a significant jump in preschool enrolment from 19 percent in 1990 to 55 percent in 2010 (UNESCO, 2012), though there is a huge ground that still needs to be covered. Estimated infant mortality rate is also at a staggering 48 percent. Along with neighbouring countries such as Nepal and Bangladesh the gap in nutrition between the richest and the poorest in India also exceeds the gap between urban and rural areas (UNESCO, 2012). Furthermore, the quality of pre-school education remains to be inconsistent between government and private pre-schools. Though private schools provide better quality it reinforces inequality between the rich and poor and between boys and girls. It necessitates for a comprehensive and co-ordinated approach to early childhood development from birth to transition into schooling. The quality of pre-school education in the early years of childhood make a crucial difference to children’s learning in early primary grades.

Universal Primary Education

In retrospect, the focus of EFA and MDGs was more on the quantity and quality was sidelined until quantity targets were met. India increased access to primary education over the last decade but that has not ensured quality. Deformed quality of education has inevitably led to inequalities in the system that has had negative consequences. One such consequence is private tutoring that has been an offspring of the inequality which is further leading to inequality and waste of educational resources. National and regional initiatives such as mid-day meal scheme, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (Movement for Education for All), Right to Education Act, Educational Guarantee Scheme, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya Scheme etc. have pushed the net enrolment ratio in primary education around 92 percent in 2010, yet nearly 1.6 million out-of-school children exist. India constitutes for about one-third of the worlds’ out of school children. Access to the children left behind should be provided by maintaining standards of quality across the country to ensure a healthy state of primary education in India. Quality assurance is a prerequisite for reducing dropout rates and increasing survival and primary cohort completion rates. It will also improve significantly the transition from primary to secondary education.

In future, target assessments combining enrolments into primary school together with completion rates will provide a better view of the situation.

Skill development for the youth

The issues related to adolescents and youth fall under the purview of various ministries such as MHRD, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Ministry of Labour etc. who have actively pursued this target under policies like NPE, 1986 and National Youth Policy, 2003. Despite great achievements in national youth literacy, the unemployment rate (age 15-24) has persisted around 10 per cent over the last decade and for age group 20-24 the usual unemployment status was more than 18 per cent in the year 2009-2010. Such high unemployment rates partly suggest mismatch between the skills demand and supply, although they are affected by other factors as well (Mitra & Verick, 2013). This scenario mandates a comprehensive view of skills development through public and private initiatives with an aim to maintain high standards of quality and the labour market dynamics. Children need to complete lower secondary education to acquire foundation skills. Completion and drop-out rates in lower secondary have been affecting youth skills especially among the disadvantaged groups (UNESCO, 2014). Youth illiteracy among the marginalized groups should also be addressed soon because this youth illiteracy translates into adult illiterates.

Adult literacy

Though, proportions of adult illiterates have improved in the last decade the number of adult illiterates in India has remained at 287 million since 1990 to 2010 because of the population growth. India constitutes of more than one-thirds of the world's adult illiterates which needs serious attention from the government. Defining literacy has been a debate in many developing nations, and literacy should be recognised as a continuum and as the laying stone of lifelong learning. Adaptation of skills and ICT (Information Communication Technologies) with functional literacy skills as base for lifelong learning has to be a core element of the basic education agenda. The goal, targets and indicators for literacy have to be defined in a way that makes sense in relation to an overarching human capability agenda (Ahmed, 2013). Furthermore, multiple literacy skill levels need to be recognized. In India, like many other countries there is need to expand formal and non-formal adult education with the concept of life-long learning.

Gender parity and equality

Girls' education has been a cause of concern for India for a long time. EFA goals and given indicators for gender parity have adopted the liberal feminist approach of having the same number of enrolments for boys and girls. Measures for quality have not been given adequate focus and relationships with other factors play an important role (Ramachandran, 2009). India recognizes the importance of improving the status of women and empowering them with the means of proper education. Several programs, schemes have been implemented across the country such as Mahila Samakhya Programme, Sarva Shiksha Abhyan etc. that have had a positive impact on the gender parity index in recent years. Yet, the task at hands is unfinished and needs attention to improve access and most importantly quality to girls. It is vital to understand the intermeshing of various inequalities that are associated and gender relations as they dissect in different ways in different regions of the country one offsetting the other reinforcing the other in some way. In

secondary education, gender parity trends vary by region, income group and level (UNESCO, 2014). India should address the challenge it currently faces in achieving gender parity in secondary education, in the post 2015 development agenda.

Quality

Quality aspect of EFA has witnessed various results in accordance to the various efforts made by different countries. India has made efforts for the same, yet significant quality deficiencies exist that are visible in indicators of the other five EFA goals. Countries with have achieved targets in terms of quantity are aggressively pursuing ways to improve quality which in itself is explanatory of the fact that quality is the backbone of an education system. Focusing and prioritizing on improving the quality of education in the coming years will have an immediate effect on various educational levels in India. Pupil-teacher ratio should be reduced in India by introduction of well qualified teachers; currently this indicator is much higher than world average in primary as well as secondary education.

India in totality has evaded the commitment to improve the state of education and despite the visible efforts of the government and civil societies; the indicators in the country are still far from satisfactory. As various countries across the world progress rapidly, it necessitates India to design and follow a strategy post-2015 that would encompass the needs and correspond to the concerns in the education sector.

EFA goals and MDGs have played an important role, and acted like a catalyst on an international level to create the urgency to point out and address the issues in education. India has indeed benefitted from the same and made commendable progress in some areas yet, the experience in the last decade should be taken as a learning lesson to further improve and build upon the foundation laid by EFA goals and MDGs. International as well within state learning should be promoted to capitalize on the strengths of the education system in India and eliminate the weakness in the future. Major reforms in key areas such as quality of education and governance are the need of the hour.

Post 2015 Strategy

The past decade with EFA goals & MDGs should be a basis for evaluating and visioning a future. The global and national agenda beyond 2015 needs to be articulated in a coherent manner that would be complimentary each other. First of all, education needs to be recognized as the main concern for development in India as it has been widely acknowledged in the past internationally. Education will not only facilitate individuals' escape from poverty, but also generates productivity that fuels economic growth. A one-year increase in the average educational attainment of a country's population is estimated to increase annual per capita GDP growth from 2% to 2.5% (UNESCO, 2014).

The post 2015 education agenda must be regionally flexible to adapt and sensitive to states wise needs and differences. Recent trends suggest, universal primary completion and universal lower secondary completion are not expected to be achieved for the poor, marginalized groups in India for at least another two generations (UNESCO, 2014). The post 2015 targets would be a herculean task to achieve without great contribution from the government and cooperation with civil societies and international organisations. Future course of action has been suggested

briefly regarding each EFA goal in the previous sections, and along with that India needs to shift focus to a few key areas in the coming years.

It should prioritize to address the learning crisis in India by enhancing access and quality of primary and lower-upper secondary education. To achieve universal lower secondary education and work towards universal upper secondary education in India, it is of vital importance to reach out to those who are facing disparity due to poverty, location, ethnic and gender. Public current expenditure on secondary education per pupil (unit cost) at PPP in constant has decreased from approximately US\$422 in 1999 to US\$375 in 2009, yet the next section discusses some financial options that India should consider to increase government spending. Improving teacher training and quality of teachers is most vital to address the learning crisis. Increasing number of teachers with qualifications is necessary to ensure quality in education.

Furthermore, it is necessary to go beyond conventional definition of learning and re-think learning. India needs to cultivate lifelong learning to build a learning society that should enable all youth and adults to participate in lifelong learning programs related to work, citizenship and personal fulfilment. Non-formal education should be given equal importance such as Community Learning Centres etc to help eradicate a major hurdle of adult functional literacy.

Globally there is also a pressing need for Education for Sustainable Development and many countries are practising ESD and strategizing to develop ESD beyond 2015 as the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD, 2005-14) comes to an end. Education for Sustainable Development allows every human being to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary to shape a sustainable future. Education for Sustainable Development means including key sustainable development issues into teaching and learning; for example, climate change, disaster risk reduction, biodiversity, poverty reduction, and sustainable consumption. It will help sustain people, communities and ecosystems and advocate the message of learning to live together. It is utmost important to re-orient education in this direction. Education for Sustainable Development requires far-reaching changes in the way education is often practised today. Moreover, as the latest Global Monitoring Report by UNESCO (2014) has suggested each post-2015 goal must be clear and measurable, with the aim of ensuring that no one is left behind. To achieve this, progress should be tracked by the achievements of the lowest performing groups, making sure the gap between them and the better-off is narrowing.

Financing Education beyond 2015

The lack of a financing target for EFA should be addressed after 2015 on a global level. In contrast to the huge challenge India faces in the quality of education, percentage spending on education of Gross National Product (GNP) has gone down from 4.4% in 1999 to 3.3% in 2010. The total public expenditure on education as % total of government expenditure has also seen a decline from 12.7% (1999) to 10.5% (2010). Both expenditures are currently lower than the world average. India should allocate at least 6% of GNP to education or at least 20% of their budget to education and an international target post-2015 for the same would cement the need for greater financial support (UNESCO, 2014).

In 2011, India devoted spending of as low as US\$212 per primary school child and US\$375 per secondary school child. Inter-state education spending varies across the country which affects the marginalised sections. For instance in the state of Kerala, education spending per pupil was about US\$685 whereas, in the poorer state of Bihar it was US\$100. It is necessary to distribute and allocate financial resources evenly across the country. Introducing education cess and increasing it to 3 per cent of all taxes collected by central government in India, was a positive yet insufficient step in making more resources available towards elementary education. If India reduces tax exemptions, tackles tax evasion and diversifies its tax base, it could greatly change this picture (UNESCO, 2014). To achieve Education for All, it is important to develop funding mechanism so as to shift education spending in favour of the marginalized to overcome educational deprivation and inequality.

Conclusion

The trend over the last two decades suggests that India has made relatively slow progress in achieving the EFA goals and the MDGs. India would not be able to achieve most EFA goals by 2015 along with many other countries. It necessitates a revision of these goals with better indicators for evaluation and targets that shall play a role in better shaping education in the next decades. It is expected that the challenges highlighted and suggestions presented in this paper will present cause for dialogue and future research to understand the educational scenario in India and strategize ways to improve it. As explicated in previous sections the education in India, in the coming years will play a major role to prepare globally competent citizens. Therefore, education development beyond 2015 must be given greater priority not only in India, but all over the world.

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