Expanding access to education with equity in South Asia

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Since the Dakar Framework in 2000, remarkable progress has been made globally regarding access to and participation in primary education. However, as a region, South Asia, which accounts for a quarter of the world's population, and is starting its journey towards universal primary education from a low base, is unlikely to reach this goal by 2015 (UNESCO 2008, 2010).

Governments in South Asia have expressed their commitment to expand educational services with equality of opportunities. They have policies and programmes in place, which aim to combat both inequalities and the deprivation of disadvantaged groups. However, educational disadvantages persist and leave large sections of society marginalized. These disadvantages, as underscored in this special issue on universal primary education in South Asia, arise from deeply rooted social, economic, and political processes, which resist change.

This special issue on South Asia focuses on important aspects of universal primary education in the four countries of the region with the largest populations: Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan. The articles on India, by R. Govinda and Madhumita Bandyopadhyay, and on Nepal, by Shiva Lohani, Ram Balak Singh, and Jeevan Lohani, provide an overview of the primary education status and progress in each country, the contours of disparity and disadvantage, the policy and strategy choices made, and successes and constraints in pursuing these strategies.

The article on Bangladesh, by Zia-us-Sabur and Manzoor Ahmed, brings out the role of diversity and multiplicity in provisions for primary education. This phenomenon exists in most countries and has significant implications for universal access and participation, but its role and significance appear to be underestimated. Kulsoom Jaffer's article on Pakistan draws attention to the operational elements of improving school quality through effective supervision of schools: external assessment and internal self-evaluation, building institutional mechanisms and professional capacities for this purpose, and creating the conditions for strong accountability.

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We are privileged to have a Viewpoint by the Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen: a commentary on a study about primary education in West Bengal, based on surveys conducted almost a decade apart by the Pratichi Trust, set up by Sen with his Nobel Prize money. Sen's (1999) concept of the Capability Approach affirms the importance of the enabling environment and of people making value-based choices to achieve human well-being. The Capability Approach creates the enabling conditions in which participants develop skills and capacities and learn to assess and exercise their options. It has been the conceptual framework for analyzing and supporting educational development work in West Bengal, but it certainly has much wider relevance, beyond West Bengal.

In the run-up to 2015, South Asia's struggle to make as much progress as possible and to lay the foundation for solid advances highlights the overwhelming reality of inequalities within countries: between regions, provinces or states; between urban and rural areas; between rich and poor households; between males and females; and among people with ethnic, linguistic, caste, and similar group identities.

The authors of the article on India draw attention to the less than satisfactory outcomes from the policy, legal, strategy, and operational measures taken to address the various dimensions of exclusion. Positive discrimination measures are guaranteed by the constitution in the context of the historical legacy of discrimination. Programmes have been in operation to bridge the gap and bring the children of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and the Muslim minority to the same level as the rest of society. However, the deeper structural constraints in society and the educational system and "the nexus of numerous interacting influences" have created almost insurmountable constraints.

The authors of the Nepal article conclude that the generally low learning outcomes and disparities in learning achievements are manifestations of social exclusion. This situation calls for targeted interventions to overcome the disadvantages of communities, groups and locations, accompanied by effective methods and institutional mechanisms to assess learning achievement. The government has made it a priority to expand the scope of decentralization and school-based management, and to deepen their reach. This underscores the need to continue a sustained and systematic approach, building on what has been attempted so far and learning the relevant lessons from it.

In Pakistan, Jaffer argues, the strategy of using inspection and supervision to establish accountability and improve quality in education depends on several interacting variables. A systemic view is needed to balance and attain synergy between adequate physical, human, and financial resources; effective and empowered leadership; and effective monitoring, evaluation, and professional support for schools.

In Bangladesh, the authors point to the "wariness in relationships" between government and non-state actors in education, generating tension and distrust about each other's legitimate roles, rights, capacities, and motivations. The policy imperative, they conclude, is to develop a regulatory framework for universal primary education, one that will reconcile the state's obligation to guarantee basic education of acceptable quality for all children with the reality that, in a situation of multiple providers, some can reach certain marginalized groups more effectively than others.

After assessing the West Bengali experience, Amartya Sen makes a plea for urgent consideration of two central issues. First, he sees a "fierce urgency" to reform the primary curriculum to reduce the load for children, in order to make unreasonable "home tasks" unnecessary, and to reduce the alarming prevalence of private tutoring. Second, he stresses the importance of explicitly recognizing the role that class and caste barriers play in educational underachievement, as a starting point from which pedagogical measures can be tailored to overcome disparities in quality.

Sen considers the educational and the social issues to be interrelated; therefore, to promote quality with equity in education he calls for a multi-pronged approach in which the various basic policy components will be complementary. When based on clear diagnoses, he argues, this multi-pronged approach will bring rapid and significant results.

This special issue, analyzing various aspects of universal primary education in South Asia, might also help to orient future diagnoses and fruitful action in other regions. We express our deep appreciation to the guest editors, Manzoor Ahmed and R. Govinda, for the care and effort they devoted to bringing this issue together and the depth of experience and insight they brought to this task.

References

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