

Education for All: A global issue

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Abstract

Education is the first step towards empowerment and the most crucial factor in the overall development of the individual, as well as, nation. Literacy sets one free from ignorance, exploitation and poverty. It liberates the mind, opening up new horizons, new opportunities and self-confidence. Prof. Gajaraj Dhanarajan, president, COL, in his paper titled “Literacy as an international challenge: Jomtien, Dakar and Beyond” has referred to the report on “population and quality of life” prepared by global commission, in which commissioner has termed persons as severely handicapped.

Education For All is a global movement led by UNESCO, aiming to meet the learning needs of all children, youth and adults by 2015. A recent report on poverty found that 135 million children in the developing world between the ages of 7 and 18 had no education at all, with girls 60% more likely than boys to be so „educationally deprived“. Gender disparity in education is significantly greater for children living in poverty. Reforms to help girls enroll and stay in school can have similar effects on boys, advancing the aims of „Education For All“ and the development goal of universal education.

Key-words: Education, Universalization, Global Issues

Introduction

It is a fact well established that, education is the biggest enabler of human civilization. The direct dependence of quality of life and progress in fronts like technology, arts, politics and economy of a nation, on the quality and extent of education of its citizens, has universally been observed. As the world furthers its steps in the 21st century, it becomes even more visible that terrorism, poverty, spread of diseases, discrimination and all other such classical challenges, that have plagued the well-being of mankind can be

rightly dealt with only a proper proliferation of quality education, not only in the so far privileged nations, but more so in the developing and underdeveloped nations.

Efforts so far

“Education for All” has been duly recognized as a collective pressing concern by the international community. To give this statement a historic reference, the “Education for All” movement was launched in 1990 at a world conference in Jomtien, Thailand. It was attended by 155 countries and 150 independent important organizations. To “universalize primary education and massively reduce illiteracy by the end of the decade” was agreed upon as the conclusion target. However, by the end of 2000, it was realized that the target undertaken was extremely unrealistic, especially in the light of commitment and resources that various stakeholders were willing to ration.

In the year 2000, the international community met again at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, an event which drew 1100 participants. They agreed on the Dakar framework for action which established six measurable goals to be accomplished by the year 2015. These goals were:

1. Expand early childhood care and education.
2. Provide free and compulsory education for all.
3. Promote learning and life skills for young people and adults.
4. Increase adult literacy by 50 percent.
5. Achieve gender parity by 2005, gender equality by 2015.
6. Improve the quality of education.

The forum also mandated the UNESCO to lead and constantly monitor the progress of the pledge.

Named ‘Reaching the Marginalized’, the recently released (2010) ‘Education For All’ global monitoring report by UNESCO gives mixed opinions about the progress made so far.

According to the report, some positive results of the movement are:

- i. In India, the adult literacy rate has risen from 50% to 67% in the previous decade. This, coupled with the fact that adult population itself has risen by 45% over the decade can be labeled as an impressive progress.
- ii. There has been a considerable decrease in the dropout rate in primary schools all over the world.
- iii. In Sahara Africa, the enrollment in primary schools has multiplied by 5 times.
- iv. In Senegal, the girl to boy ratio of enrollment in primary schools has increased from 85:100 to 100:100.

However, the report also presents a rather gloomy side of the coin as well:

- i. As many as 72 million children and 71 million adolescents are still deprived of primary and secondary education respectively.
- ii. Except China, the rate of improvement has been extremely slow in other countries. So slow, that it renders this 'much practical' target of universalization of education by 2015 as unachievable as the previous pledge.
- iii. Quality of education has emerged as a major challenge. In rural India, only 28% of students in 3rd standard can add/subtract 2 digit numbers or tell time.
- iv. Vocational programs have reached only 3% of the rural youths in India so far. Over that, most of them have been found to be irrelevant and hence don't fetch livelihoods.
- v. There has been a declining trend in terms of giving financial aid to primary education.
- vi. Except Senegal, there is still a massive gender discrimination against females in most developing countries.

Way Ahead

The global monitoring report, rather than being evaluative, is meant to invoke remedial actions. The need of the hour is to identify major factors that have caused this 'lagging behind' and formulate a comprehensive strategy after meticulously studying all the factors including current situation.

One of the major hindrances in the previous decade has been the sub-prime crisis of USA and the on-going economic slowdown of Europe. Spending in education has been severely hit by these conditions. There is a great need to make educational spending immune from the economic conditions. Some useful suggestions in this regard are:

- i. Encouraging global philanthropy for education.
- ii. Allocation of international funds for the benefit of education.
- iii. Making special efforts for developing cost effective strategies for the proliferation of education.

Societal structures also affect the educational prosperity of a state, often in a magnitude far severe than anticipated. Gender disparity and racial discrimination are amongst the biggest enemies of education for all. While males, whites and upper castes have a better access to education, it is often the other section that is usually deprived and a wider societal rift is thus created. It can be an effective strategy to lay more emphasis and spend extra resource on girls' education, reinforce and develop more schools in areas inhabited by the so far downtrodden people, and provide appropriate scholarships for the needy.

A special emphasis on higher education can be trusted to provide a trickle-down effect on educational outreach of the nations. Hence institutes of excellence should also be established for extra meritorious students without any constraints of financial burden.

It is also highly likely that most children who are not going to school today have parents who are not educated. For the adult populace and the youth, night schools should be provided for. Also, the curriculum of the training should be vocational in nature, and designed strictly after considering the local circumstances, although confirming to a global standard. This relevance with local industries and non-interference with their existing regime can encourage them to send their children to regular schools.

An appropriate mix of vernacular languages, which most certainly help in better learning and also confirm with the culture of local people (thereby decreasing their resistance to education) and global languages, which enable people learn transcendental things of global importance should be laid emphasis upon.

Finally, as is the requirement with all other ventures, for education to successfully reach deprived masses, there is a great need to encourage all stakeholders. There has been seen a common trend for the declining interest of teachers due to over allocation of extra teaching work and reducing incentives. This problem is particularly responsible for alienation of students and parents from the school system. There is a great need to device effective strategies for attracting teachers to schools. For example, local students can be taught on scholarships on condition that they devote a minimal fixed amount of time teaching junior classes.

Conclusion

For the stakeholders to realize the dream of “Education for All”, a long distance still remains to be covered. There have been some encouraging signs shown, but at the same time many areas need drastic improvement. If the challenge is analyzed in a committed way, it is not difficult to see, that ‘Education for All’ is not a utopian dream, but a pressing necessity, important for the mankind to take its next leap. Active interest and endeavors by all the stake-holders in fighting the social, economic and political barriers can definitely help all children of tomorrow reach schools.

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