

Pakistan: Report reveals deplorable state of country's education system

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28 March 2011

A recent report from the government-established Pakistan Education Task Force paints a harrowing picture of the state of education in the world's sixth most populous country.

Titled "Education Emergency Pakistan," the report says that approximately 10 percent of the world's primary school-age children who do not attend school live in Pakistan. In the global ranking of out-of-school children, Pakistan is in second place.

"Pakistan is crippled by an education emergency that threatens tens of millions of children," the report states. The social devastation caused each and every year by the underfunding of education is equivalent to a flood on the scale of the one that devastated Pakistan in the summer of 2010, contends the report. Last summer's devastating floods caused approximately \$10 billion worth of damage, including destroying or damaging a thousand schools.

"At least seven million children are not in primary school," notes the Pakistan Education Task Force. "Three million will never see the inside of a classroom at all."

The task force was established to oversee the implementation of a rightwing education reform proposed by Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani and the Pakistan Peoples Party-led coalition government in October 2009. Gilani claimed 2011 would be the "Year of Education" and that efforts would be made to meet the UN's Millennium Development Goal of 100 percent universal primary education by 2015.

But in keeping with the policy prescriptions of the World Bank, IMF, and other international capitalist agencies, Pakistan's education reform emphasizes privatization as a means of promoting educational outcomes, claiming that the additional financial resources needed by the education system should come in large part from families, not the state, and that the private for-profit schools are a cheaper, better alternative to a state-run system.

Although the Pakistan Education Task Force has been established to promote and implement this reactionary agenda, its report nevertheless constitutes an implicit indictment of the entire Pakistani elite.

"Pakistan risks not achieving universal education to the age of 16 in the lifetime of anyone who is alive today," the report states. Punjab province may achieve its constitutional commitment to ensure universal education in 2041 and Sind in

2049, according to the report. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (the former North West Frontier Province) could possibly achieve universal education in 2064. And universal education will be achieved in Baluchistan, Pakistan's poorest province, no earlier than 2100.

The report also notes the stunning gender disparity in schooling in Pakistan. Less than half of Pakistani women have had any formal education. The figure is even worse in rural areas where just one in three women has ever attended school.

In the second decade of the 21st century, two thirds of rural school children between 6 and 16 years of age cannot read a story. And only 50 percent of rural school children can read a sentence.

Among youth as a whole, the literacy rate remains very low, with 31 percent of men and 41 percent of women between the ages of 15 and 24 unable to read or write.

The overall outcome is staggering: 30 percent of Pakistanis live in "extreme educational poverty," having received less than two years of education, according to UNESCO, the UN's educational, scientific and cultural organization.

The lack of facilities is also a pressing issue. Only 36 percent of public schools are in satisfactory condition, according to the report. There is an urgent need for new buildings, and many school children lack access to clean drinking water and latrines while at school. The report finds over 30,000 schools "need major repairs or are in a dangerous condition," while 38 percent of schools do not have a latrine and 35 percent lack drinking water. 21,000 schools have no shelter or classrooms to facilitate their studies. And 39 percent of schools do not have electricity.

The grossly underfunded education system is but one example of the miserable social conditions under which the children of Pakistan must live. Child labour is common throughout the poverty-stricken country. According to an All-Pakistan Labour Force survey, there are 21 million child labourers in Pakistan. Many children are employed as domestic workers for wealthy families and are often mistreated and abused. Child hunger and malnutrition remain serious and persistent problems in every part of the country.

While the report provides a glimpse into the horrific state of Pakistan's education system, the report claims that the failure of the education system is due to politicians' unwillingness to

implement privatization and other rightwing reforms. “Because past reform efforts have failed to deliver results, some have concluded that Pakistan can never overcome its education challenges,” the report states. However, it also claims major improvements can be made within two years of market-driven reforms being implemented.

Although the report does not describe the prescribed reforms, the reactionary agenda of the task force becomes obvious when the report describes some of the “myths” it claims to debunk. These include:

- “without money nothing can be done,”
- “the public most wants better school buildings,”
- “teachers are not paid enough to do a good job,”
- “private schools are only for the rich.”

In fact, Pakistan’s education has been woefully underfunded by the state for decades.

The current government has allocated less than 1.5 percent of the country’s GDP for education, as compared with the still woefully inadequate figure of 2.5 percent of GDP in 2005.

With the PPP government determined to cut expenditures in order to meet the budgetary dictates of the International Monetary Fund and secure the last tranche in an \$11 billion loan, it is highly unlikely that even a budgetary allocation for education equivalent to 1.5 percent of GDP will be maintained.

The report seeks to shift blame for the education crisis onto teachers, declaring that public school teachers can earn three times as much as qualified private school teachers and 4.5 times the average per capita income of Pakistan. The report claims that teacher salaries account for the majority of expenditure on both public and private education and declares that the supposedly generous salaries paid public school teachers—they make on average two thirds more than their private counterparts—have not translated into a higher level of commitment among teachers.

This is a gross misrepresentation of reality. A public school teacher earns on average 14,330 rupees or little more than US \$150 US per month. If this pitiful sum can be construed as large, it is only because the majority of the population earns less than \$US 2 a day.

The authors of the report cite the lengths to which parents are willing to go to provide their children with an education, including enduring severe economic hardship. “Every day, parents make huge sacrifices for their child’s education,” the report states. In Punjab, 13 percent of family income is spent on public school education and 20 percent is spent when a family resorts to private schooling.

Stating that parents have been “quick to react to the failure of the public school system,” the report adds that as many as 30 percent of children now study in private schools and that government statistics “probably underestimate the explosive growth of the non-government sector.”

The report uses the worsening crisis of Pakistan’s education system and the desperation and frustration of parents to justify

the push for further privatization, which would only deepen the already colossal social divide between the small percentage of the population able to afford quality private education and the rest.

This divide is already great: the richest 20 percent of Pakistanis receives 7 more years of education than the poorest 20 percent, according to the report.

That the Pakistan government’s education task force advocates privatization is no surprise. It is co-chaired by Sir Michael Barber, the architect of the regressive education reform implemented by British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s Labour government and the head of the Global Education Practice division of the big business management consulting firm McKinsey and Co.

The British Labour government’s education reforms involved sweeping attacks on the public education system, including the privatization of school management and school services, the promotion of a curriculum tailored to big business, and the introduction of teachers’ aides as a low-paid, poorly trained substitute for increasing the teaching staff.

Implementing such policies in Pakistan would only exacerbate the appalling state of education in the country, depriving the vast majority of youth of a quality education.

Decades after “independence,” the Pakistani bourgeoisie has proven itself incapable of providing the most basic needs of Pakistan’s workers and toilers, including education. The provision of quality schooling for all Pakistanis will only be achieved as part of a revolutionary struggle of workers and toilers against the bourgeoisie and the profit system it defends.

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