Foreword

Realizing Quality Basic Education for All

Almost one third of the time has passed since adoption of the global Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 on equitable, inclusive, and quality primary and secondary education for all, and expanded lifelong learning opportunities. At this juncture, the world is not on track to achieve its education goals for 2030; so warns UNESCO's Institute of Statistics and the Global Education Monitoring Team in their message to the High Level Political Forum. The Forum representing governments and other stakeholders met at the United Nations in July 2019 to review progress toward several SDGs, including SDG4 on education (UNESCO, UIS, GEM, 2019; UNESCO, GEM, 2019).

There is a learning crisis, declared the 2018 World Development Report (WDR, 2018). The premise of this report is that education has always been vital to human welfare, but that it is immeasurably so in a time of rapid economic and social change. The report argues that the learning crisis has three dimensions. First, there are widespread poor learning outcomes, with the achievement gaps between and within countries closing too slowly. Second, the causes of these gaps remain deep-rooted and intractable – children unprepared to learn, teachers not skilled and motivated enough to teach effectively, inputs and resources insufficient and not reaching where most needed. Third, all of these problems are aggravated by systemically weak governance and management.

Drawing attention to a learning crisis in many countries is not new. More than five decades ago, Philip Coombs (1968) published his seminal book *The World Educational Crisis: A Systems Analysis*.¹ It had drawn educa-

1 The book was based on deliberations of the International Conference on the World Crisis in Education, held in Williamsburg, Virginia, in October 1967.

tion leaders from 52 countries. The conference participants agreed that there was indeed a crisis in education's ability to match performance with expectations. They concluded:

In all countries, rich and poor alike, educational programs, structure, management, and the learning process itself require the most immediate attention to ways and means of replacing inflexibility with innovation, traditional or outmoded ideas with fresh approaches and new ventures. The conference believed that these postulates must be accepted both by educators and by the society that supports them if education is to rise above an attitude of business-as-usual and perform the tasks that the very future of mankind requires. (Coombs, 1968, p. 175)

In a sequel, Philip Coombs and Manzoor Ahmed wrote *Attacking Rural Poverty: How Nonformal Education Can Help* (1974). Its key message was twofold. First, learning was not synonymous with schooling or formal education; it had to embrace non-formal and informal modes of education to meet the learning needs of people. Second, this broader vision of learning acquired its relevance by contributing to people's well-being and development, such as by combating rural poverty, which afflicted hundreds of millions in the developing world. These were relatively novel ideas at that time. A broad concept of the educational system, one that includes flexibility as well as diverse modes of learning, is now part of mainstream thinking – though formal schooling is still the dominant means for providing basic education for children and young people. Today, the accepted standard by which the quality and relevance of education are judged is this: are the objectives of realizing individual potential and promoting society's well-being and development well-served?

In our corner of South Asia, in the aftermath of the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) transformed its post-conflict relief and rehabilitation operation into a rebuilding and development program. Education was seen as a key component of our nation-building mission. Drawing inspiration from Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), we launched a literacy and adult education campaign as a means to raise people's awareness of their situation and encourage them to read the *world*, not just the *word*. At that time, 80% of adults could not read or write. Interestingly, BRAC's participants, those in poverty-stricken communities, told us firmly that their priority was educational opportunity for their children, because existing primary education was not serving their children well. Almost half the children had no access to primary education, and most of those who did enrol did not complete that stage.

In response, BRAC pioneered an innovative approach: community-based learning centres for children of age 8–14 years, two thirds of them girls. The teachers, all women, were drawn from the community and supported by BRAC with training, supervision, and learning materials. A strong monitoring and quality assurance regime was a key feature. Families, mostly low-income, paid no fees. This came to be known as non-formal primary (NFP) education, but its objective was the same as that of primary schools – to equip children with literacy and numeracy skills and prepare them for secondary school. It was a success story by the objective pursued. At its peak, more than one million children at a time were offered access to primary education. Over 95% completed the equivalent of primary education, and over 80% moved on to a secondary school. Although such a program is still very much needed as a component of the national primary education system, BRAC had to curtail the number of NFP schools because donor funding dried up; bilateral and multilateral contributors began channelling their funds directly to the government.

In the half-century since then, progress has been made in Bangladesh and elsewhere in South Asia. Most children of primary school age today are enrolled in school; more are completing primary education; and the gender gap in school enrolment has been eliminated or narrowed significantly. But opportunities of acceptable quality are far from equal for the poor, those with special needs, ethnic and language minorities, and those living in remote and ecologically disadvantaged locales. These groups together add up to the majority of children not being served by basic education of acceptable quality. Expansion in access has not kept pace with learning outcomes; moreover, the benchmark for basic education in the twenty-first century has risen to include secondary education.

The learning crisis alert half a century ago remains valid in contemporary South Asia, as John Richards, Manzoor Ahmed, and Shahidul Islam have documented. Education opportunities throughout the developing world are wider than they were a half century ago. However, large segments of the population in the developing world, including in South Asia, are not benefiting, in terms of well-being and prosperity, from strong learning outcomes.

The low-hanging education fruit, so to speak, of widening access to children, including large numbers of disadvantaged children, have been harvested. Progress appears to have hit a plateau with respect to improving quality as measured by learning outcomes, effective outreach to marginalized groups, and mobilization of financial resources so that schools can ensure quality. One explanation may be that governments are failing to provide adequate financial resources and hence school results are erratic. However, the level of national public budgets for education does not correlate closely with pupils' learning achievement. The more

important likely cause is widespread deficiencies in governance and management of resources, both financial and human – as the authors have argued. These weaknesses point to what may be described as the structural problems of national education systems. Thus, solving the problems will require innovation in organization and strategies rather than tinkering with incremental changes within existing patterns and ways of doing things.

The authors of this volume emphasize a number of measures, among them – decentralization for effective governance and better use of education resources; regulatory mechanisms for effective public–private partnerships; new thinking about teachers’ role and performance; monitoring and measuring outcomes to modify courses of action; and addressing the political environment of policy-making in education, which fails to place a premium on quality, equity, and inclusion.

The public resources for education in South Asia are at chronically low levels, and in addition, excessive centralization of education governance has resulted in inefficient use of scarce resources. The authors make the case cogently that governance-strengthening and improved resource management are more likely to come about through greater decentralization, when authority and accountability are devolved to schools in the public system.

In South Asia and elsewhere, it is evident that a direct link cannot be drawn between the “public good” role of education and the public provision of schooling. Public systems have not created the desired equal opportunities and learning outcomes – consequently, they are not preparing young people for the rapidly evolving employment, and social cohesion challenges. The rapidly expanding “low fee” private schools cannot be the principal vehicle for promoting equity and inclusion. Regulatory mechanisms that promote public–private complementarity may mitigate the resource mobilization problem as well as governance weaknesses. This is likely to be the practical way to achieve the quality, equity, and inclusion objectives. However, the mechanisms for this purpose have to be developed with meaningful participation of the stakeholders and a recognition of the need to uphold the state’s role as the provider or guarantor of last resort for basic education of acceptable quality. These results can be achieved, as the authors underscore, if the mechanisms are designed judiciously and applied efficiently and fairly.

Connected with new regulatory mechanisms is the idea of separation of powers in governance, something not much discussed in the context of education. A separation of powers intended to facilitate optimal governance roles would contain three key elements: (a) transferring the

running of government schools to independent public organizations (preferably district school authorities in a decentralized structure); (b) setting up an independent, fair, and efficient adjudication mechanism to settle challenges to rules and enforce regulations; and (c) creating an autonomous body with adequate technical capacity to assess learning outcomes. The separation of powers idea would entail considerable organizational restructuring in education governance. Given the problems in the education systems, which appear to be intractable, this idea deserves serious consideration.

Few would dispute that an education system is as good as its teachers. A peculiarity shared by South Asian countries, in contrast to those elsewhere, is that schoolteachers are generally not required to undergo professional preparation and acquire professional certification *before* they apply for a teaching job. In South Asia, college graduates are recruited as teachers and then sent to a one- or two-year teacher training course. Teaching in school is usually the last choice as occupation for college graduates in South Asia. As a result, prospective teachers are likely to come from the “bottom of the barrel.” Essential to solving this problem is *the adoption of a teacher preparation model following the “concurrent” approach that combines four years of general college education with teacher preparation.* A longer program of this kind, with students carefully selected at the post-secondary stage, would offer the time and space to orient and motivate future teachers as well as prepare them intellectually and emotionally for the profession. Such a program would be justifiable, given that a large proportion of college graduates are employed in teaching and education-related jobs. Other steps would have to be taken to make it a success – the quality of undergraduate courses would have to be ensured by recruiting a strong teaching faculty and providing adequate basic facilities. Improving the level of teacher remuneration, creating career paths for teachers, and building social esteem for the profession are all important.

There are no across-the-board solutions for addressing the critical concerns in education. The meta-analysis of factors related to school and student performance, cited by the authors, indicates as much. What works is largely context-specific and dependent on how effectively the technical solutions are turned into implementable actions. Governance capacity, rather than the merits of the technical solutions themselves, will be what makes the difference between good and poor results.

The authors admit that they have not delved into various operational and practical topics in terms of ensuring basic education of acceptable quality and efficiency. These topics include curricula and learning content, the fostering of much-discussed twenty-first-century skills (the

so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution), the intricacies of pedagogy and andragogy, and preparation of young people for the world of work. The authors have attempted to outline a framework with broad objectives and indications of needed structural changes.

Indicating a way forward, the authors suggest that the winning combination may be a triad of state governance capacity, active and conscious citizenry, and a thriving private education sector mindful of public goods and compliant to regulatory mechanisms. These elements have to come together so that the commonly envisioned goals can be pursued. This tying of the strands, the authors emphasize, is contingent on the dynamics of political decision-making – the political economy of education reform.

Politics clearly matter. The authors argue that *how* they matter is complex and contextual and thus difficult to capture in a simple theoretical framework. When institutions, various stakeholders such as teachers and parents, professional bodies, and committed leaders come into alignment – itself a political process – the chances of successful reform are greater.

The authors are correct when they state that education stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and young people themselves, are powerful in numbers and can be the upholders and champions of education. They are a formidable force in any society when they are united by a common vision and when they harness their own energy and idealism toward fulfilling a common vision. I share the writers' optimism that the political class will pay heed to the collective voice of concerned and active citizens.

The twenty-first century began with a vision of progress and hope reflected in the Millennium Development Goals for 2015. This optimism was reiterated in the Sustainable Development Goal 2030 agenda – though an alarm bell was sounded about the disastrous consequences of any delay in climate action.

Today, in this era of post-truth and alternative reality, amplified exponentially by social media powered by digital technology algorithms, the idea of progress itself is under challenge. In South Asia and elsewhere, the upsurge of ultra-nationalism, rejection of pluralism and secular humanism, self-serving populism, xenophobic trends, and majoritarian subversion of democratic institutions and values have emerged as new threats to human progress. Education itself is in danger of being misappropriated to serve these retrograde forces. The role of quality education – and of the larger education community, including teachers, parents, and students – in reclaiming the idea of progress itself is more important than ever. The present volume is a contribution to the necessary rethinking of education.

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