The COVID-19 pandemic hit South Asia hard, and the end is far from being in sight. It is unravelling decades of education and health advances for children across the sub-continent.

Even before the pandemic, with the exception of Sri Lanka and the small-population nations of Maldives and Bhutan, the region had not been on track to achieve its education targets for 2030 as set out in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG4). How educational progress in South Asia can get back on track is the paramount question this volume seeks to answer.

Good outcomes from basic education systems (primary plus lower secondary level) lay the foundation for universal access to relevant life skills and human development more generally. From a system perspective, there are serious deficits at present in education inputs, in internal school operations, and in higher-level school administration.

In our efforts to unpack the system problem, we have identified three major elements: severely deficient governance and management of schools and the education workforce; deficiencies in number, capability, performance, and motivation of the teaching force; and, as a consequence, the rapid growth of private and faith-based education. Low-income families resort to “low fee” schools as an alternative to poorly performing government schools, but overall, these alternative schools are not a satisfactory substitute for an equitable, inclusive, and quality public basic education system. While these are not new findings, their significance has yet to be broadly recognized.

The status quo jeopardizes the right to education. No solution can be found to the failures of South Asia’s school system unless a political economy perspective is taken that addresses the counterproductive aspects of present-day political dynamics. Our premise is that the technical solutions for major transformation in the system need to be complemented by a supportive dynamic among political leaders and the general public.

Preface
The key required technical solutions can be quickly summarized:

• **Reimagining the twenty-first-century education workforce.** This requires attracting the “best and the brightest” to the education profession; preparing, supporting, and rewarding them, while setting performance standards; and according social esteem to teachers who perform well in their multifaceted role. It also requires preparing teachers well, and holding them to high standards as the purveyors of ethics and values and as role models for their students. Education workers must become lifelong learners who can adapt to the changing pedagogy, changing learning environments, newer learning objectives, and new learning technologies. Teachers and other education workers are the ties that bind together changes in curriculum, pedagogy, learning assessment, and school/community relations. They can enrich learning environments and co-curricular activities and address objectives beyond cognitive skills. Rethinking the teachers’ role as the pivot of change may be the pragmatic strategy for a wide-ranging transformation of education and perhaps the most feasible. Complexity can overwhelm reform initiatives. An emphasis on teachers may prove to be the best means to initiate reform.

• **Connecting disadvantaged students to the digital resources available to the advantaged.** Internet communication technology (ICT) has opened new frontiers but has also exacerbated social divisions. Children of the privileged and tech-savvy youngsters (a small minority) run with it, leaving the majority far behind. How can schools and education workers be the mediators to connect ordinary students with the digital resources of the advantaged?

• **Addressing special-needs children.** The South Asian school system must devise and apply effective principles and practices for those children who are differently abled as well as who are out-of-school and working. Skilled teachers, in possession above all of empathy and ethical values, are critical to successful interactions with these children and to school–parent relations.

• **Teaching values and ethics.** Most societies expect schools to help young people develop judgment as well as moral and ethical values. A lack of common understanding and consensus about objectives, methods, and practices, and the pull of contradictory forces at the national, community, and family levels, make inculcation of ethics and values among young people an intractable problem. The best answer may involve promoting
teachers as role models for young people and encouraging them to be sensitive to their own values and ethics when guiding students’ moral development and critical judgment.

- **Financing government schools more generously.** Adequate financing is critical, but there is a weak correlation across Asia between national per student expenditures and learning outcomes. In other words, more money without better governance and management will yield disappointing results. The political dynamics of decision making and implementation matter. Increasingly, the financial resources for basic education are coming from private as well as public sources. The International Institute for Education Planning and the UNESCO Institute of Statistics are promoting tools and methods for better tracking and directing financial resources for education.

- **Fostering professional and non-political management of government school systems.** A key element here is “separation of powers” in order to mitigate overlapping institutional responsibilities. This implies separating the functions of semi-autonomous agencies that undertake national education policy-making, as well as the provision of a legal framework for executive functions that provide services and run institutions. The agencies that manage the delivery of education services should ideally be at the district level and enjoy considerable autonomy. There is a need for regulatory regimes that encompass private education but do not unduly restrict non-government schools. There is also a need for non-partisan means to adjudicate the application of regulations. Finally, assessment of student learning and system performance at the national level (or the state/provincial level in India and Pakistan) must be entrusted to semi-autonomous central agencies.

- **Recognizing the state’s role as guarantor of quality education, responsible for fulfilling the right to education and ensuring high-quality, equitable, and inclusive education at all stages.**

We have addressed these issues in varying detail. Our aim has been to provide an evidence-based analytical framework inspired by an appreciation of the political economy of education. Only by confronting political economy issues can operational issues internal to the education system be adequately addressed.

Unfortunately, in much of South Asia, there is rhetorical endorsement of universal basic education but not enough appreciation of what is required to achieve it; little attention is paid to reining in agents of the education system whose activities run counter to improved school
outcomes. Addressing these problems and realizing universal high-quality basic education is a generational challenge.

We have divided this volume into three parts. Part 1 diagnoses the education problem in South Asia. Most readers will intuitively understand the importance of universal basic education; even so, we devote a chapter to providing evidence about the role of education in achieving economic growth, improving public health, and reducing poverty. We do so by providing data from a dozen countries in South, Southeast, and East Asia. Next, we offer a brief history of international education development initiatives over the past three decades. Initiatives such as Education for All and the Millennium Development Goals have influenced national policies and priorities, but with mixed results. We seek clues from these past initiatives to uncover how to realize better outcomes for the SDG 2030 education targets. A third chapter summarizes available evidence in South Asia from national student assessments of the foundational skills, that is, reading and mathematics. The fourth chapter reviews recent academic and policy research that attempts to explain weak school outcomes. Sri Lanka is an outlier among South Asian countries in education performance, and in the final chapter of this part, we explain that country’s relative success – and its continuing challenges.

In Part 2, we analyse the truism, “No system of education can be better than its teachers.” To overcome the persistent quality and inclusion deficits in national education systems, we must work with and through teachers – enhance their professionalism, empower them to do their work, and motivate them to be role models for their students. To realize the ambitious education targets of SDG 2030, the sub-continent will require a near doubling of the teacher workforce, which presently stands at around 15 million (5.7 million primary and 9.4 million secondary teachers). We make the case that effective teachers need a good command of the subjects they teach and a regulatory environment that provides incentives to pursue professional goals. Such an environment would create several career paths, as specialist teachers, as school administrators, or as education researchers. We discuss comparative survey evidence regarding the status of teachers in India and other Asian countries.

Although financial resources will inevitably be less generous than in high-income countries, there are lessons to learn from high-performing systems such as Singapore and Finland. These countries have created a professional preparation model in which teacher training combines a four-year degree with teacher training and learning. Professional teacher development entails optimizing the general intellectual capability of
would-be teachers and promoting a strong social, emotional, and values orientation. Teachers need the skills necessary for leading students to learn; they need to be role models for young people; and they need social and emotional maturity as well as appropriate values and personal qualities. We devote a chapter to teachers’ awareness of their own ethics and values as well as their role in the ethical and moral development of their pupils.

Part 3 is devoted to policy options. We take seriously the political dynamics of policy- and decision-making. The first chapter addresses the growth of “low fee” private schools and appropriate regulations that may advance a complementary, as opposed to adversarial, relationship between government and non-government schools. The second chapter discusses the implications of decentralization and the separation of powers. The final chapter summarizes the present state of academic and policy analysis of the political economy of education in developing countries.

A comprehensive volume treating needed reforms in South Asia should address several issues that we have not. Noteworthy among these are early childhood development; lifelong learning and adult education; and the links between basic, higher secondary, and tertiary education (whether professional or technical/vocational). Also, the public education system is responsible for socializing young people so as to provide them with a national and global identity. Such a book would treat ICT-based self-learning and home schooling. These issues are all likely to be resolved more adequately within the framework of effective and responsive governance and politics that we propose.

This book focuses on the five countries – India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka – which account for almost 98% of the South Asian population. The three other countries of the region, which are not examined, are Afghanistan, Bhutan and Maldives. Besides having small populations, they represent unique circumstances. Afghanistan, unfortunately, has been mired in conflict and civil war for four decades and thus faces very severe education and development challenges. The Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan and the island nation of Maldives have made good progress in education in recent decades, and are on track to achieve the SDG education targets.

We hope this volume will attract a broad and diverse readership – university instructors and graduate students researching international and comparative education and South Asian studies; people working in multilateral and bilateral development agencies, in international and national NGOs; and officials in governments and civil society
organizations throughout South Asia. The content and ideas we present are, we believe, valuable “grist for the mill” of ongoing education and development discourse. As we approach the midpoint of the SDG 2030 timetable, our hope is that public discussion of education targets and their realization will assume a much higher profile than at present.

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