

1 Introduction

We live in a world of unprecedented opulence, of a kind that would have been hard even to imagine a century or two ago. And yet we also live in a world with remarkable deprivation, destitution and oppression. There are many new problems as well as old ones, including persistence of poverty and unfulfilled elementary needs. Overcoming these problems is a central part of the exercise of development (Sen 1999). That children bear the major burden of poverty affecting every aspect of their physical, cognitive, social and emotional development does not need special evidence. Discourses on poverty articulated in the last ten years of the twentieth century have significantly changed the understanding of relationship between education and development. Further, interpretation of poverty in terms of capability deprivation has brought the role of education into sharper focus, not just in its instrumental role in alleviating poverty, but also as a core constituent of development and human well-being.

Simultaneously, basic education received highest levels of attention the world over during the 1990s following the adoption of the Child Rights Convention in 1989 and the first Global Conference on Basic Education in Jomtien in 1990. Until that time, the successes and failures, travails and celebrations in education were treated essentially as domestic affairs. But the 1990s brought basic education under an international scanner. The EFA 2000 Assessment exercise revealed that though progress has been achieved, the disadvantaged children have invariably been left out of the basic education fold. The Framework of Action adopted at the subsequent Conference in Dakar in 2000 emphasised the need to focus on the disadvantaged in every one of the six goals enunciated. It is in this perspective that the Millennium Development Goals firmly place basic education alongside the goal of poverty reduction for concerted action during the years to come. The situation, therefore, calls for ensuring that the actions in the education sector are strategically designed to impact the economic life of the people. What kinds of strategies have worked? How have the basic education programmes influenced the life of the poor? Do the poor themselves value education as a means of improving their lives? How have the governments reacted to the pressure of increased

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demand and constrained resources? Which are the critical factors that need attention of the planners if poverty has to be impacted by education? These are some basic questions addressed in the following. The article is essentially based on the experiences emerging from the Asian region, in particular from South Asia, which carries the largest number of non-literate population in the world and possibly the largest number of out-of-school children.

1.1 Poor people speak: listening to voices from the margin

Historically, countries which have invested in education have benefited in terms of better economic growth and reduced poverty levels. 'Pioneering example of enhancing economic growth through social opportunity, especially basic education, is of course Japan.... The so-called East Asian miracle involving other countries in East Asia was, to a great extent, based on similar causal connections.... These economies went comparatively early for massive expansion of education, and later also of healthcare, and this they did, in many cases, *before* they broke the restraints of general poverty. And they have reaped as they have sown' (Sen 1999). Yet, it is not unusual to find education officials in many developing countries pronouncing that 'poor do not value education'. How do poor themselves perceive the value of education?

Ramakka, a ten-year-old girl-child is looking on with a mixture of pride and envy as her younger brother goes to school even wearing soiled clothes and carrying torn books. Ramakka says: 'I am happy at least my brother is able to go to the school. I wish I could also go. But I cannot blame my parents. They are already sacrificing so much for us, working day and night in spite of poor health'. Ramakka's parents work in a nearby construction site in Karnataka which, growing at a healthy 9 per cent GSDP, is by no standards a poor state. Ramakka ruefully adds, 'I will anyway get married and go away. If my brother studies he could help improve the life of my parents'. (Observation from a District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) field site in India)

Voices of the poor present a mixture of despair and hope. Undoubtedly, the poor view education as the

main instrument of deliverance from the grip of poverty. But a tinge of well-justified anguish is visible in their voice that they are not getting the benefits of development. It should be noted that the poor are not just ethnic groups physically isolated from the larger society. Rather, they live in the midst of rising affluence and display of wealth, for which they directly and indirectly contribute through their largely informal and unrecognised labour. They are landless farmers, rural workers, fisher folk, indigenous people, workers in the informal sector, urban squatters and slum dwellers. The media exposure in the globalised world presents them the contrasting features of life around them and raises the legitimate expectation that the state supports them with improved enabling institutional arrangements.

1.2 Breaking the vicious cycle: what do we need to do?

Poverty assessments show that youths from poorer and less well-educated families are more apt to leave school before or on completing basic education. Their lower levels of human capital can be expected to perpetuate their families' marginal economic status intergenerationally. Intergenerational poverty cycles arise through strong relationships between parental education, household poverty, and children's educational achievements. Because of the relationships between levels of human capital and probabilities of being poor, parents' educational legacies to their children translate into poverty legacies that unless the cycle is interrupted, can persist through several generations (World Bank 2000). The effectiveness of education as a critical instrument of poverty alleviation lies in the fact that it directly impinges on the capability of the individual and interrelates with almost every aspect of life of the individual including the freedom to choose and to exercise his or her basic civic rights. Viewed in the context of this vicious cycle, as a Report of the International Working Group on Education highlights, 'The issue of 'who goes to school' is clearly a central one, for it is always the poorest and most disadvantaged who do not (IIEP 1999).

Recognition of this deeply entrenched cycle of poverty and low education leads to the argument that the more inclusive the reach of basic education and healthcare, the more likely it is that even the potentially poor would have a better chance of

overcoming penury (Sen 1999). Recognising the unavailability of this argument, the last ten years has seen a heightened level of rhetoric worldwide, categorising provision of basic education not only as a means for reducing poverty but as a right of every individual. This change in the frame of reference has placed basic education at a different plane both in its constitutive and instrumental roles for empowering people. In a judgement with far-reaching implications, the Supreme Court of India interpreted that basic education provision has to be read along with the fundamental right to life with dignity and therefore, *ipso facto* education is a fundamental right of every individual in the country.

Based on a review of experiences in developing countries one can draw five different sets of measures addressing the issue. Understanding of poverty in terms of capability deprivation has placed provision of basic education services at the core of the strategy. The second set of measures is designed to ameliorate financial pressures, including the opportunity cost involved, that schooling of children could place on the family. The third set deals with measures that address the question of children entering the labour force, instead of pursuing schooling. The final set, which is apparently outside the purview of primary school education, deals with empowerment strategies focusing the problem of social exclusion compounding the problem of economic marginalisation and leading to disempowerment of the people. A brief account illustrative of using these strategies is presented in the following.

2 Strengthening basic education provision: the constitutive role

The post-Jomtien decade saw a tremendous surge in the enrolment of children in school, though the degree varied from one region to the other. Enrolment in the primary school is perhaps the first step. But mere expansion of schooling facilities and getting the children enrolled is not likely to get the poor out of the poverty trap. If education has to really work for the poor, it is imperative that we address more searching questions: How much individual education can create personal wealth that can offset the disadvantage the child is born to? Further, as inequity of provision can make the poor more deeply entrenched in poverty, it is necessary to deal with the issue: what kinds of provision or education would

take the poor out of their marginalised status – socially and economically? But the actual field reality on how much of learning opportunity is offered to the poor is not uniformly encouraging.

2.1 Improved access itself is an important component: but when can it impact poverty?

The key lies in fairness of provision. As many studies have pointed out, in order to meet the increasing demand for school places, national planners have been resorting to creation of alternate schooling mechanisms under different nomenclatures, such as community schools, satellite schools, non-formal centres, etc. Except for some of the NGO-managed systems, these alternate provisions are invariably small single-teacher schools with very little provision of academic infrastructure. Often, such schools also employ locally available instructors who may be under-qualified and even underpaid.

Who goes to such alternate schools? The answer is quite obvious – it is the children of the poor. In an insightful analysis of the efforts made under a major externally funded project on primary education in India, researchers found that a virtual *hierarchy of access* is emerging in terms of nature of primary school provision corresponding to the marginalised status of the children, in particular affecting the education of the girl-child (European Commission 2002). Children of the poor by definition are handicapped by poor levels of endowment in their homes. *Fairness of provision demands that the poor have access, at the least, to equally endowed schools as provided for the not-poor, and are, perhaps, given even better provisions in order to compensate for the poor endowments at home.*

2.2 Improving quality: what strategies would work?

This apparent unfairness in provision is a more pervasive issue than one would normally assume, directly affecting the quality of basic education – a core component underscoring the Dakar commitment. There is a strong link between educational disadvantage and quality. In Africa, Latin America and South Asia particularly, population increases have put pressure on public financing of education, leading to deterioration in school quality.

Simply to provide yet more of the same will not achieve the desired results. What are required are long-term commitments to improvement lasting a generation, rather than short-term attempts lasting only two–three years at a time.... In the twenty-first century learning will be the key strategic issue for all societies, yet in many places the disadvantaged are largely excluded from effective learning. We need to place the process of learning for all, rather than education for all, at the centre of the agenda, whilst reflecting on what new concepts of learning mean for the classroom, the curriculum and for the quality of education (IIEP 1999).

The main academic resource available in many schools catering to the poor is ‘the teacher’, as the schools possess very little of supportive teaching–learning material. Therefore, the quality of teachers is critical. However, this is the contentious question facing many countries as cost-saving measures have invariably compelled them to reduce expenditure on hiring well-qualified teachers. In many cases, the teacher’s monthly emolument in alternate schools serving the poor is lower than even the minimum wage officially prescribed for skilled workers. This could have dangerous implications in the long run leading to a phenomenon of adverse selection in which wages are too low to retain teachers of quality, thus leaving the field to poor performers. Empirical evidences show that the process is often irreversible and in fact, may be self-perpetuating. As school teachers tend to stay in the occupation until retirement, low-quality teachers adversely affect the learning achievements of several generations of students and therefore, have the potential to create an unending spiral, producing future teachers within the locality with low levels of learning. The issue needs urgent attention as most countries are caught between demands for expansion and real budgetary constraints. Obviously, there can be no external prescription for taking preventive measures or rectifying such situations of unfair provision. The solution has to be carefully worked out in each country in a contextual manner.

There is an obvious need to directly focus on the quality of education provision reaching the poor and the marginalised – small schools, single-teacher schools, schools catering to ethnic or linguistic minorities, schools for urban slum and

street children, and so on. Fairness of action demands special compensatory measures to be designed for dealing with such schools. However, a common tendency observed in many countries, particularly in South Asia, is to spread the meagre public resources for education thin by implementing pan-national programmes which tend to side step reality which is characterised more by disparities than by generalisable conditions. There are no macro-level single-factor solutions to the problem of wide disparities and socio-economic inequalities that are part of the education scene in the developing world. In fact, development programmes, which underscore selective and prioritised action within a contextualised framework, have demonstrated considerable success. The lesson is that instead of searching for the grand formulae to improve quality, one should look for solutions at the local level. There is a great scope for quality-enhancing egalitarian measures at the micro-level – that of schools, clusters, neighbourhoods and communities.

2.3 How much education is adequate as basic if it has to work for the poor?

In traditional economic analysis, educational achievement is measured in terms of years of schooling. But how many years of schooling will constitute basic education? For understandable reasons, answer to this was left flexible in the Jomtien Declaration. However, international literature has begun to consider five years of schooling as adequate to be called basic education. This was implied in the set of indicators used for the EFA 2000 Assessment exercise. This assumption of five-year norm needs a closer examination.

Merely counting the number of years that the name of the child remains on the rolls of the school does not help anyone, and in particular the poor. It is true that we have to be prudent in setting goals, keeping in view the constraints of human and financial resources. However, in view of the fact that improving the overall quality of education is a long project and the efficiency of the schools is not going to improve fast enough, it is time to rethink the five-year norm that has indirectly become the basis for much of the quantitative assessments carried out nationally and internationally. We may, otherwise, end up declaring that the EFA goals have been

achieved, but with very little real value added to the life of the children from disadvantaged sections.

3 Compensatory strategies: economic incentives accompanying education

In principle, most of the countries regard basic education to be free and compulsory. Free education may mean many things. It may simply mean that schools are not supposed to charge tuition fee, if they receive government funding. This in turn may be interpreted as freedom to collect money under other heads. It is widespread practice in several countries, particularly in Africa, to demand contributions for school building from the parents. This invariably affects the poor and leads to children dropping out of school. The ADEA Task Force reported that poverty is the key issue, rather than the supply of classrooms alone. While school fees do not officially exist in Namibia, parents are regularly asked for 'voluntary' contributions to 'school fund fees', which effectively act as a deterrent almost as if they have been designed to exclude the major part of the population. One conclusion of the task force is that marginalised groups are looked down upon and hence pushed out of the system (IIEP 1999). Evidently, costs of schooling is one of the crucial factors that underlie educational deprivation among the poor.

In India, government schools do not charge any fee. Yet it will be wrong to assume that the parents do not incur any expenditure towards schooling. Many state governments do not provide free textbooks to the children. The household costs continue to be a major barrier for education of children from poorer sections of the population (Tilak 1996). Coupled with this is the opportunity cost involved in sending the child to school instead of engaging them in labour. In an economy dominated by struggle for survival, options are limited. Since education does not provide any visible and immediate benefit and often the disadvantaged are compelled by circumstances not to see beyond their present state, the participation of their children in education also becomes limited. Another reason for low participation is that the majority of the non-enrolled children are required to work in the households or on family occupations. Even if the economic contribution of

children is indirect, they certainly facilitate the participation of parents in economic activity (Nambissan and Sedwal 2002). Colclough and Lewin observe that one of the causes of the concentration of low enrolment ratios amongst the poorest countries is that state expenditures upon schooling cannot completely remove the costs of poor households of their children's attendance. Even if fees are not charged, there are usually the costs of some books to meet, and often there are school uniforms to buy. Moreover, the opportunity costs of school attendance are, in practice, a negative function of household income. It is the poor who depend upon the income from child labour. The poorer are the households concerned, and the higher the direct and indirect costs which they would need to meet, the more likely is it that public measures to increase primary provision would fail to elicit the required enrolment (Colclough and Lewin 1993).

Providing incentives to the poor and thereby reducing direct costs of schooling have been considered as important strategies for addressing educational deprivation. A wide range of incentives have been on offer to the poor, though not uniformly to all, in order to improve their participation in schooling. These include free textbooks and stationery, free uniforms, attendance scholarships and food supplements.

Do these incentive strategies make a significant impact on the life of the poor? It is difficult to answer this categorically. However, it could, possibly, make long-term impact on the life of the child. It could influence the family in intergenerational transition to improved quality of life. But this is also contingent on the kind of education received. The incentives, with their impact on child attendance in schooling, could make a lasting contribution if the education received provides the critical value addition required to change the course of life for the family. It is with this hope that many poor families choose to spend on private education for their children, even by sacrificing their basic comforts. One should not wrongly interpret this readiness to sacrifice as an indication of capability to pay. Rather it only reinforces the fact that even the poorest people consider education as the main source for deliverance from poverty.

4 Tackling practices that restrict education access: the problem of child labour

For many of the poor, life-cycle begins and ends, one generation after another, in a small world of debt and servitude. Deprived of basic education and steeped in intergenerational debt traps, there is no escape route available from the miseries of life. Placed in such conditions people tend to react in unusual ways.

The practice of employing children in productive work is fully recognised as one of the main causes holding the children from participating in primary education and thereby perpetuating the cycle of poverty and destitution. But the debate on child labour is usually polarised where education is concerned. Some view compulsory full-time schooling as the most important instrument abolishing child labour and protecting the child's right to education. But, there are those who feel that given the context of poverty, there is need to look for more flexible options where work can be combined with education. Empirical evidences are not unequivocal. However, it is generally agreed that any legislation banning child labour must be linked with an effective anti-poverty plan. At the very least, working children who attend school must be partially compensated for the lost income (Haq and Haq 1998).

It is also argued that child labour prevails due to poor implementation of adult wage labour policies. Perhaps as Bardhan argues,

With the exception of some very abusive or callous parents, most parents even from the poorest families would prefer to withdraw their children from work if they can afford it. So the main approach should be to create such conditions that enable parents to send their children to school. There are many ways of creating such conditions – for example, trying to improve the wages and productivity of adult workers so that they do not have to send their children out to contribute to the family income (Bardhan 2001).

Similarly, in the case of girls looking after siblings, an obvious solution would be to think of day-care centres. Considering that many countries have policies of universal compulsory education and are

signatories to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), it illustrates how economic unfreedom, in the form of extreme poverty, can make a person helpless allowing for violation of other kinds of freedom.

In the midst of this ongoing debate many interesting and successful efforts, particularly through NGOs, can be seen. One such effort has been the programme of 'back-to-school camps'. First tried out in Andhra Pradesh in India the approach has been adopted in many parts of the country both by the government and NGOs. The programme is based on the strong conviction that full-time schooling is the only means of eliminating child labour. For this, out-of-school children involved in work, paid or unpaid labour, are placed in residential camps ranging from six months to one year and provided intensive educational inputs according to their age. Thereafter, they are admitted to mainstream schools in appropriate classes. Though there are variations, most children admitted to mainstream schools have continued their education without dropping out. An important lesson to note is that mere advocacy on banning child labour is not enough. It is essential that we work simultaneously on two fronts. First, it is necessary to design and implement concrete alternate programmes of education, which effectively take children out of work and into the basic education fold. Second, governments have to strengthen implementation of adult wage labour policies, which have direct implications for changing the mindset of the parents and their life style.

5 Attacking the roots of exclusion: social empowerment strategies

But attacking poverty through the issue of social exclusion cannot be a smooth phenomenon of public advocacy and awareness-building campaigns. It is tantamount to unleashing a struggle against discriminatory practices in the existing social order. If one views social exclusion in a broad framework as 'the process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society in which they live', exclusion can affect the economic life of the poor in a variety of ways. As Wagle points out,

While it is true that one's vigorous strength in terms of any one of these aspects – for example,

income – does play a significant part in achieving a higher level of well-being, the process of achieving such well-being is immensely nullified by the lack of other aspects – for example, capability or conducive social order. To provide a concrete example, women, female-headed households, and minorities in general tend to possess low levels of human well-being in today's predominantly patriarchal societies with intense racial and ethnic conflicts not because they lack incomes but because they lack capability and, even more importantly, because they tend to be socially excluded (Wagle 2002).

This also points out that political mobilisation is critical if such efforts have to be sustained, without which changes will be short-lived, pushing the poor back into the traps of discrimination and exclusion.

Recognising the importance of political processes in fighting exclusion and poverty, many developing countries are trying to ensure peoples' participation in decision-making processes through decentralisation. This is important, as changing the political culture in the village gives more voice to the poor and induces them to get involved in local self-governing institutions and management of the local commons – it makes the poor themselves stakeholders in the system, so they take an interest in a system they were formerly excluded from (Bardhan 2001). The value of invoking the people's voice through participation has been particularly critical for making the education sector work for the poor. In a developing economy, where major employment is in the unorganised/informal sector, employers may fail to act as pressure groups – even the users remain voiceless when the education they receive fails to empower them. While there has been enormous literature on the issue of empowerment, very little genuine attention is paid either in formulating the curriculum or in framing the delivery of education goods and services – this has only added to the unfairness of the education provision

While such efforts apparently outside the school education sphere could considerably influence the quality of life of the poor, it is important to ensure that the school education sector itself works in a way that promotes social integration effectively, as faulty institutional arrangements could militate

against integration through discriminatory kinds of educational provision with apparently good intentions of improving access. Perpetuation of such discriminatory institutional arrangements could then be justified for economic reasons. As Rampal says, 'Large disparities in educational opportunities have perpetuated and reinforced other kinds of social inequality based on caste, class and gender' (Rampal 2000). In India, as in many other countries, there is a pervasive phenomenon of establishing schools with so-called community involvement that have everything of a poor quality exclusively for the poor. Interestingly, these are showcased as quality schools and as having improved access to education among the poor. While the latter claim of improved access could be at least partially acceded, the former claim is at best relative only in comparison to poorly functioning full-time schools. Even granting that such arrangements enhance educational access to people living in small habitations and excluded pockets, it neither makes economic sense nor educational sense in multiplying such non-viable schools which can never be fully equipped with adequate educational infrastructure. The solution possibly lies in improving the infrastructure connecting the outlying habitations with the main village. This would help integrate the people with the economic life of the mainstream village, which holds the solution for poverty and exclusion in the long run. In fact, studies have clearly shown that improved infrastructure, in many places built through community involvement, has made a big difference in the participation of the children in schools.

Similar discriminatory practices are also often perpetuated by creating dual institutional arrangements – modern schools for the not-so-poor and traditional religious schools for the poor, the latter offering curriculum that does not equip the poor to make the grade in the larger competitive world. It should be recognised that poverty linked to social exclusion is not merely a historical and cultural phenomenon but is also legitimised by the government of the day in many countries in order to maintain a social-economic status quo. As a recent study in India pointed out creation of such discriminatory arrangements, however well intentioned they might be, leads to a hierarchy of access perpetuating social discrimination practices and consequently affecting the economic

opportunities of the poor. Empirical studies also show that under such arrangements, it is the girl-children who are seriously affected (European Commission 2002).

6 What can national governments do?

Improvement of basic education requires policy makers to face up squarely to their responsibilities. They cannot leave it to market forces or to some kind of self-regulation to put things right when they go wrong (Delors 1996). Markets are not self-regulating. In the absence of rule setting and standard setting by the state, they cannot be counted to supply educational goods and services that respect national interests, and in particular the interests of the poor. It is difficult to prescribe how governments should act in using education as a means of reducing poverty. However, the analysis done above indicates to some broad principles, which could guide governments in dealing with the issue.

- First, while the governments in many countries are likely to face financial constraints, increased investments in education are inevitable if the interests of the poor are to be met. Perhaps, investments have to be made in a more focused manner, benefiting the poor instead of spending on generic programmes spreading the resources thin.
- Second, in creating additional school places, it is necessary to adhere to the principle of fairness, in order that the interests of the disadvantaged are not put in jeopardy. It is essential that policies that are likely to result in discriminatory educational provisions are avoided.
- Third, governance reforms are critical, giving voice to the people in the management of their lives in general, and the educational programmes in particular. This should include facilitating the formation of institutions of accountability critical for improving overall efficiency of the system as well as for ensuring fairness.
- Fourth, the quantity and quality of education available to the poor is streamlined, focusing on actual learning time and outcomes that can add value to their economic life.

- Fifth, as a corollary of the fourth point, the education sector has to look beyond formal schooling of five years if education has to make a difference for the life of the poor. It is urgent that the education of out-of-school children, adolescents, youth and adults receive adequate attention.

The importance of educational finance in following these principles need not be overemphasised. For instance, education finance is a major lever for ensuring fairness. In addition to using financing to mitigate inequitable educational opportunities, one has to consider multisectoral strategies for improving educational access and quality in particular locations, such as rural areas, or for subpopulations, such as minority groups. For instance, the lack of roads means that villages cannot attract and retain qualified teachers, but decisions on roads are not under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education. Causes are not always clear. For instance, low transition from primary to lower secondary education may indicate not a demand problem but a supply problem – the lack of a lower secondary school or the lack of transport to a nearby school. Average data showing disparities may hide diverse conditions. Programmes have to be drawn in a community-specific manner involving the stakeholders (World Bank 2000).

As already mentioned, if the trend during the last ten years of the twentieth century is any indication, constraints of educational finance are likely to continue in most of the developing countries. But countries seem to be reacting to fiscal constraints in ways that threaten educational quality and fairness. Governments often treat fiscal constraints as temporary crises that can be handled by ‘muddling through’. But these are not temporary constraints. Temporary measures that increase the eventual costs of adjustment, undermine educational outcomes and fairness, and only mask fiscal shortfalls. In a few cases, countries have decentralised revenue generation to get fiscal problems off the central books; not because this measure necessarily makes good sense for governance, equity and quality, but because it relieves the central authority of an immediate problem. Since through this process the financing of inputs to education is often *de facto* shifted to private families, it is the poor who will be seriously affected.

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