

Remarks at Launch of Annual Status of Education Report, 2016 held on September 26, 2017

Ladies and Gentlemen and Distinguished Panelists, Assalam-o-alaikum

Why is this gathering so important? Why is education so important? Let me respond to my own question by telling you about something that came my way recently via WhatsApp. I am in several WhatsApp groups and, most of the time, I skip over most of the comments that are posted on one or the other issue of the day on which my fellow citizens feel they have to comment. Recently, however, one item caught my attention. This consisted of three simple posters. The first read: If you are planning for a day, buy some rice. The second read: If you are planning for a year, plant a field. The third read: If you are planning for a hundred years, educate your children!

These three posters convey in a simple yet powerful fashion why education is important. While individuals may plan for a day or a year, countries must plan for a hundred years. And they must give the highest priority to education because therein lies the most assured path to the sustained development of economies and societies.

Let me turn now to the business of the day. We are here to launch the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) for Rural Sindh for the year 2016. This is a powerful report because it is based on a huge amount of rigorously-collected data. It is based on a survey of 14237 households from 718 villages in 25 rural districts of Sindh. It covers 43,488 children. By standard measures, this database has substantial statistical power.

What does this report tell us? The report ranges over many themes such as access, early childhood education, gender, learning levels, parental education, school facilities and so on. In my remarks, I will focus mostly on learning levels or the quality of education.

The report tells us that while there have been modest improvements in access since 2015, there has been a decline in learning levels. Regarding access, it is noted that whereas 24 percent of children between the ages of 6 and 16 were out of school during 2015, only 22 percent were out of school in 2016. I went back and looked at earlier reports and found that the improvement in access is part of a longer trend. Out of school rates were 29 percent in 2013 and 27 percent in 2014.

This is the good news. The bad news is that the quality of learning has not improved over time. Instead, in rural Sindh, it has declined.

The relevant data are as follows: Whereas 55 percent of schoolchildren in grade 5 could not read a story in Urdu or Sindhi in 2015, 63 percent could not do so in 2016. Similarly, the proportion of schoolchildren who could not read a sentence in English rose from 76 percent in 2015 to 81 percent in 2016. And the proportion who could not do a two-digit division problem in arithmetic rose from 65 percent to 76 percent. Once again, I checked earlier reports and found that the 2016 levels of learning represented a decline compared to 2013 and 2014 as well.

What should we make of this outcome? The first point I would make is that this outcome illustrates that it is not enough to promote access and increase the quantity of education alone. Policy makers must also pay attention to the quality of education. We see many examples in developing countries where enrolment rates have been going up over time but learning levels remain low.

The second point I would make is that the declining quality outcome appears to be Sindh-specific. Learning levels have not declined in other major provinces of Pakistan, though one might argue that the levels continue to be low in all provinces. Therefore, one should expect that there are some developments specific to Sindh that account for the decline.

The global literature on the determinants of education quality typically give the highest importance to the quality of the teaching that goes on inside a classroom. Thus, if the teacher is not properly qualified, or not motivated, or not even present in class most of the time, student learning quality will be adversely affected. Other factors also matter, such as the quality of school facilities, whether teaching is done for single or multiple grades, and parent's education level. But teacher quality is paramount. This is where the hunt for a solution to Sindh's declining education quality should begin.