

Panel: Prospects of Regional Cooperation for Quality Education in South Asia

Education is a fundamental right. Transformation of education is a continuous and challenging process. It has been found that along with others, quality of education is actually widening the gap between the developed and developing world in terms of human development and interfaith harmony. Another major challenge in many developing countries is gender-based education.

While there are numerous similarities in the education systems of South Asia, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries, except Sri Lanka, have been facing quality education challenges for many decades. Pakistan and Afghanistan are on the top in such challenges at the basic, secondary and higher education levels. Such discrepancies also lead to skill development problems, intellectual discourse analysis and job opportunities in the open market as per qualification.

South Asia, while home to more than 20 percent of the world's population, the largest youth bulge of under 30s, is quite unfortunate since the region has not been able to transform its entire population into a trained human resource to improve living standards as well as its political economy. Although improving trends in education, especially increased enrollment of girls and women, have been observed over the last few decades, there is still a long way to go to achieve minimum standards of quality education. Investing and focusing on quality of education at all levels, may take about 30 years to become visible in the global education market. According to Halil Dunder from the World Bank, 'The poor quality of education in South Asia is a major obstacle to the region's future economic prospects.'

Quality education systems have also been ignored because of the region's weak economies, high population growth rate, extreme religious trends, multiple education systems and political instability. According to Philippe Le Houérou, South Asia Vice-President at the World Bank, regional governments are now realising that 'Just spending time in school is not enough. There has to be a significant gain in skills that requires an improvement in the quality of education.' This will help countries in the region to reap the full expected returns on their investments and generate gains in productivity and economic growth.

A significant improvement in education has been observed since United Nations agencies and international development institutions, particularly, UNESCO, DFID, USAID, the World Bank and CIDA have been putting in efforts to improve quality of education in South Asia, especially in Pakistan. The panel will explore challenges and opportunities associated with provision of quality education at basic and higher education levels.

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