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The growing neglect of education

By K Jayshankar

One of the sorry outcomes arising from the market collapse of 2008-09 is the impact on the social sector. In particular, healthcare and education have both been impacted in the Western world.

Recent press reports from the United States mention an 'education crisis' in many states, due to the budget cuts proposed by various state governments. Two prominent cases which have been making headlines are the situation in California and New Jersey, two of the leading states.

California, which is the world's eighth largest economy with a Gross State Product of US\$1.3 trillion, has a huge deficit and is now laying off public sector workers, including school teachers. With a budget deficit of US\$20 billion, the state has been compelled to take drastic steps to tighten its belt - and one of the steps proposed is slashing allocations in the state's public education system. This has translated into job layoffs and extended breaks in many school districts, apart from general cutbacks of grants and even course offerings. All this has led to widespread anger, with protestors directing their ire on the government. The California Governor and strongman, Arnold Schwarzenegger, has not had it so tough for a long time.

Quite a similar situation exists in New Jersey - with a whopping state budget deficit of US\$10.7 billion - where the public education system is staring at a reduction in funding to the tune of US\$820 million and aid for colleges and universities by US\$175 million. Some drastic measures have been taken including school districts being reframed, teachers' salaries being frozen and vacancies at schools not being filled, even at leadership levels like school principals.

While state governments have taken these steps in the developed world, picture the situation in the 'other' world of the developing economies. Without extending our imagination much, we know that these nations are the focus of various aid efforts.

In this context, it would be appropriate to turn our attention to the Millennium Development Goals of the UNICEF. This was the outcome of the historical Summit in September 2000 of the largest gathering ever of world leaders in New York. A cold consideration of some stark data made the world leaders sit up. Examine this from their report: "Almost 11 million children, more than 29,000 a day, die before the age of five, mostly from preventable causes.

And, over 140 million children in developing countries - 13 percent of those aged 7 to 18 years - have never attended school. This rate is 32 percent among girls in sub-Saharan Africa, where 27 percent of boys also miss out on schooling, and 33 percent among rural children in the Middle East and North Africa."

Considering this sorry state, for once there was unanimity of views and there was a joint commitment to what was called the Millennium Development Goals. The second of the eight goals was, 'Achieve Universal Primary education by 2015'.

The logic of the Goals is very simple. When you educate a child, it is a long-term benefit for society. And, going further, when you educate a girl child, it is the first step in societal development, as it triggers a process that cascades into providing multiplier benefits.

Universal primary education remains one of the elusive dreams that all societies pursue. But truly, it is not as Utopian as it seems at first glance. Since we recognise that education is the fundamental pillar for social development, we need to ask whether such a task can be left to the State alone to fulfill. Globally innovative steps have been taken to address the needs that arise from the inability of the state to fulfill this fundamental requirement. We are all well aware that a lot can be achieved by not allowing education to be kept solely in the hands of the State. Therefore, private bodies and NGOs have played a big part across the world to help bridge the gap in the State's resources.

While there are many examples of volunteer bodies, a recent and very successful model that is gaining popularity across many nations is the 'Teach for All' Model. With modest beginnings as a project called Teach for America in 1990, founded by Wendy Kopp, the goal they pursue is epitomised by their motto, 'One day, all children in this nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education.'

The organisation's operational model is also very simple: engage recent college graduates and professionals to teach for two years in low-income communities across the United States. While these volunteers need not be qualified teachers, the good work done by this body of dedicated people on a mission has been widely praised and studies have proved their effectiveness.

The success in the United States has encouraged Wendy Kopp to take this model to other parts of the globe. The Teach for India movement was initiated in 2006 and has attracted over 3000 youngsters. The good news is that some business houses have been strong supporters of this movement and have gone to the extent of releasing and 'loaning' some of their bright talent for this programme for the entire duration of two years. Corporate philanthropy of this nature is a powerful combination of volunteer work by dedicated individuals coupled with the active social conscience of a firm. The beneficiary: children from the lowest strata of society who would have normally been deprived of quality inputs at their school and who now find their destiny being shaped under inspirational young teachers.

What started in a small way in the US has now gathered steam, and has taken the form of a global network called 'Teach for All' spread across 13 countries. I can safely predict that this network will grow further and Nigeria too may well join this select band as it is widely recognised that education opens the minds and can change the future of our country.

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