

Concept Note

Background

It is well known that the existing education policy was formulated in 1986 and modified in 1992. Much water has flown under the bridge since then and India is staring at several compelling factors that necessitate a new direction to the education sector in the country. Most notable amongst them is the shift from socialist framework to a more market-based economy and a growing and young demographic profile which has come to challenge the current education system mainly because it has failed to provide quality education.

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) and NCERT figures prove this point beyond doubt. The question of quality is therefore a paramount one and can only be addressed if policy interventions lay equal emphasis on the following two issues, amongst others.

- Better Interlinkages between early childhood care and education with school education
- Create measurable and holistic indicators for quality

The need

The need to factor in early childhood care and education in the quality framework emanates from the fact that the foundations set in the first thousand days of a child's life, from conception to the second birthday, are critical for future wellbeing and cognitive abilities of children¹.

The need to create measurable indicators for quality has emanated because it has been proven that past policy instruments which assumed that universal elementary education would ensure learning outcomes have failed. Moreover, it has been increasingly felt that discussion of measurements must be taken into the policy and resource allocation itself. In other words, it means that an informed discussion needs to be undertaken about what the policy would spell out as indicators. This is important because it is upon those indicators that data would need to be gathered for the purposes of monitoring the policy. The other related question that policy needs to deal with is identification of groups which needs special focus – such as 'out of school children' and the need to define such groups in a way that leaves no room for data inconsistency.

Needless to say therefore that discussion on effective data collection, financing the education data and effective monitoring and evaluation should be an implicit part of the discussion and must be reflected in the policy prescriptions.

An opportunity

In light of the fact that the NDA government has created NITI Aayog which seeks to install the bottom up planning process at the heart of national development there is an unprecedented opportunity in this regard. With MHRD already giving this framework life through incorporating

¹ EFA Global Monitoring report 2003/4

consultations with sub national units in the formulation of new education policy, it is expected that there will be ownership amongst those units towards a shared national policy and hence a desire to effectively monitor and implement them as well.

The other aspect which is likely to have significant bearing on the national education policy and future of education sector in India are the cherished goals of cooperative and competitive federalism. Earlier, the government of India had also shown tangible proof of its seriousness of ushering in the true spirit of cooperative federalism by increasing the devolution to states by 10 percent from the divisible pool. While this was well in line with the recommendation of the 14th Finance Commission, it was also later accompanied with reduction in centrally sponsored schemes on education. For instance, with respect to Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and Mid Day Meal (MDM), the reduction is to the tune of 28.5% and 41% respectively compared to 2014-15 budget estimates. With respect to Rashtriya Madhyamik Sikhsa Abhiyan budget allocation has been reduced by 57%.

This signals that central government increasingly wants states to take ownership of developing education system as per their own needs. In other words this is a step in the direction to foster competitive federalism and enable states to be competitive enough to be able to self-fund their schemes as they deem fit.

Some open questions

While this step is commendable it is fraught with doubts over states' ability to provide for the missing gap in funding. Doubts remain over questions such as whether the additional 10% untied funding will be sufficient to cover this gap, will the states be able to carry forward the achieved EFA gains or will reduction in funding be a set-back to them?

It is believed that if not all, some states would need handholding until they have both financial and technical capacity to run their education sector for themselves. In this context, the role of NITI Aayog will be crucial. Amongst other things it may involve rationalisation of state schemes in consonance with the central schemes while observing fiscal discipline.

And finally, in order to evaluate the National Education Policy, ultimately there will also be a need to compare states on parameters which without undermining states' contextual peculiarities are able to facilitate a comparison along the objectives envisaged in the policy.

In this light, a discussion on parameters of states' comparison assumes special significance. Easier said than done this will entail developing parameters for states which are differently placed in different contexts.

UNESCO's International Standard Classification of Education which is a framework of comparing disparate education systems across different countries can throw much light in this regard and can provide necessary insight into a potential tool that will facilitate competitive federalism.

Objective of the Roundtable and Expected Outcome

In light of the above, the objective of the roundtable will be to provide inputs and recommendations on the following, amongst others:

- India specific indicators for quality
- Way forward for better coordination between early childhood care and education and school education
- Gaps in data collection for quality and how they can be plugged
- Identification of target groups that need special attention and inputs on formulation of definition of target groups to ensure data consistency
- Way forward for better monitoring and evaluation
- Way forward with regards to financing of school education
- Lessons from UNESCO's International Standard Classification of Education framework on comparing states' performance on education sector
- Lessons from international experiences on measuring quality effectively