Education of Children with Disabilities: Counting and Accounting Go Together

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A report by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (2002:5) profiling disability in Pakistan noted ‘persons with disabilities are mostly unseen, unheard and uncounted persons in Pakistan. They are the most marginalised group’. More than a decade later there is no reason to believe that this situation has changed.

The last official census which measured disability prevalence rates was undertaken in 1998, and estimated that 3.3 million people had some form of disability. However, based on global prevalence estimates of 15%, the report states that approximately 27 million people with disabilities in Pakistan.

It is well established that disability is both a cause and a consequence of poverty, and that people with disabilities are over represented amongst the persistently poor, and are less likely than others to be able to move themselves out of poverty. This situation is even more exacerbated in developing economies, such as Pakistan. Thus a commitment to focus on disability in efforts towards poverty reduction both at the individual and the household level is central. It is believed that exclusion of persons with disabilities from active and productive participation is leading to economic losses of as much as US $11.9bn-15.4bn or 4.9-6.3% of Pakistan's GDP. Thus, not only is there a strong economic rationale, but one cannot emphasize enough the importance of upholding human rights- the marker of any progressive society is how it treats citizens who inhabit the margins.

Central to this is the role of education in enabling people with disabilities in accessing the skills- economic and life skills, to engage and participate in mainstream society. However educational participation of children with disabilities has remained very poor. A document noted that only 4% of the total number of school going age (approximately 25,000) children with disabilities are enrolled in various educational settings. This figure was reiterated more recently in 2013 in a newspaper article. The enrolment in special schools, according to the National Education Census (2005) was 13,122 (0.04 percent of the total numbers enrolled). The Census figures also noted a decrease in enrolment numbers from previous years; however, this was not counter balanced by increased enrolments in mainstream schools.

In 2002, the government framed the National Policy for Persons with Disability which called for a rights based approach in meeting the needs of all people with disabilities. It made a specific appeal for education noting that there is a need to “adopt a shift from exclusive system of education to that to inclusive education for children with disabilities” (p. 6). In 2006, the National Plan of Action was developed to operationalize this policy, and 17 critical areas of intervention were identified, which included assessment of children with disabilities and an evaluation of service delivery systems. Unfortunately, the Plan of Action never took root, because soon after it’s drafting the 18th Amendment to the Constitution devolved power from the federal government to the provinces.

However, it would be misleading to assume that education of children with disabilities has never featured on the government agenda. In 1959 the National Commission on Education recommended the provision of vocational education for children and adults with mental retardation, and training of special educators. The Education Policy of 1972 provided funds for special education. Additionally, the 1980s witnessed a significant surge in government involvement through increased budgetary provision for special education. During this period the Sixth Plan (1983-1988), focused on improving existing institutions of special education and social welfare, in both the government and non-governmental sectors. This resulted in the establishment of more than 200 special education centres which enrolled more than 20,000 students. Additionally, a Federal Directorate General of Special Education with provincial counterparts was set up in 1985 and the first National Policy for Rehabilitation of the Disabled was formulated in 1986. While personal concerns of the then President significantly shaped these

1 The classification and terminology used were: Blind, deaf/mute, Crippled, Insane, Mentally retarded, multiple disability and others.
2 This, as the EIU Report (2014) notes, is larger than the total combined resident population of Sweden, Austria and Switzerland.
developments, this period also coincided with the emergence of a strong international movement driven by the UN resulting in the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons (1983–92).

More recent years have not seen the same level of commitment towards education of children with disabilities. Interestingly, the only mention of disability (termed as ‘handicapped’) in the National Education Policy, 2009 is in the aims and objectives where it is noted that: “To equalize access to education through provision of special facilities for girls and boys alike, underprivileged/marginalized groups and handicapped children and adults”. But it remains unclear how this will be achieved. Even though Pakistan ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 2011, little change has happened in relation to updating existing laws and policies and strengthening enforcement mechanisms. All this requires strong political will and commitment from the government and NGOs.

ASER (2013) highlighted the continued exclusion and poor quality of schooling received by many children across Pakistan. These concerns are more magnified in relation to those with disabilities. The small body of classroom based research highlights serious shortcomings in the possibility of schooling becoming a reality for these children. Pasha’s (2012) survey of 300 teachers across 75 public and private primary schools in Lahore noted that schools are currently unprepared to include children with disabilities due to the absence of clear admission policies, lack of knowledge among school administrators regarding how to implement inclusive education, and inaccessible school infrastructure. In another survey, Haider (2008) also noted that mainstream teachers and special educators lacked skills, had limited access to resources and no training in addressing the needs of children with disabilities.

Thus, in a context where this is little knowledge about the prevalence and educational participation of children with disabilities, ASER (2014) has taken a significant step forward. The ASER survey draws on current thinking in the field of disability, and asks questions which do not require a simple ‘yes/no’ answer. The questions included in the survey are underpinned by the WHO’s ICF model where disability is understood as a bio-psycho-social condition, and the focus is on capturing experienced difficulties in basic actions and barriers to participation. Given the complete absence of existing information on disability, and practical limitations of space in the existing ASER survey, which already addresses a range of dimensions, the questions on disability drew on the Washington Group Short Survey Questionnaire, with adaptations in language based on the UNICEF-MICS insights.

The data generated from these questions will not only offer some unique insights into how a sensitive and complex issue, such as disability, needs to be addressed in large scale surveys, but it will also provide a holistic picture of the child with disability. The generation of such statistics on disability plays a crucial role in monitoring equality of opportunity and accounting for achievements at the economic, social, political and cultural level. This information is also vital for identifying areas of intervention and for planning and implementation of policies and programmes which promote and protect the rights of persons with disabilities. Finally, capturing data in relation to persons with disabilities is a powerful way of developing a complete understanding of their status, which can become an advocacy tool and hold systems accountable for addressing the needs of all its citizens, irrespective of their ability status. The time for such action is now!

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\* Over the last few years, in the field of disability it has been firmly established that adopting an impairment-based, medical model approach which primarily focuses on the question (or variation of it): Do you have a disability?, is no longer satisfactory. Such questions result in very low prevalence rates, as ‘disability’ often carries negative connotations and people may feel stigmatised or ashamed to acknowledge their own disability or that of a family member. Also ‘disability’ can be interpreted according to an unspoken cultural standard of what is considered as normal functioning, which varies across cultures and age groups. Finally, ‘disability’ may be understood purely as a diagnosable condition, and knowledge of one’s diagnosis is often be correlated with education, socio-economic status and robustness of the health system.