

Environmental Education: A Glaring Omission in the National Education Policy 2009

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Abstract: The National Education Policy (NEP) of a country provides the foundation upon which the system of its education rests. It is a vision statement for educational reform subsequently leading to social reform. It is also a reflection of the dreams and aspirations of a nation for treading the road to sustainable development.

This paper is a *Qualitative Case Study*. It is a *Content Analysis* of NEP Pakistan 2009, with regards to the means within this document for achieving the goals of sustainability. Furthermore, the analysis seeks to assess the National Education Policy's responsiveness towards the global initiative as espoused in the United Nation's Declaration of 2005-2014 as the Decade for Education for Sustainable Development.

The analysis reveals that the document falls short of its expectations for not only meeting the requirements of Education for Sustainable Development within the country but also addressing environmental issues in the global milieu.

Keywords: sustainability, ESD, environmental issues, environmental education

Introduction

A cursory glance at the National Education Policy (NEP), Pakistan, 2009, may have a reader beguiled into thinking that the policy is a comprehensive document, eliciting and encompassing fine details in all areas of the education sector, respectively. It appears to reflect a faithful portrayal of its shortcomings and failures, successfully identifying major underlying problems, making recommendations, and highlighting the requirement of a paradigm shift in line with a *VISION* for the country's education system in the 21st Century. However, a closer study of the document reveals that the policy is lacking in more than one areas of concern in the given sector. One such glaring omission in the document is lack of attention toward the '*ENVIRONMENT*'.

The United Nations General Assembly has declared 2005-2014 the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD), identifying two goals for the decade:

- To provide an opportunity for refining and promoting the vision of, and transition to, sustainable development – through all forms of education, public awareness and training;
- To give an enhanced profile to the important role of education and learning in sustainable development.

Sustainable Development is defined by The World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) as ‘Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’. Sustainable Development (SD) requires balancing environmental, societal, and economic considerations in the pursuit of development and an improved quality of life. It has been acknowledged that there is no ‘single route’ to sustainable development, and visions for sustainability will be different in different societies. This paradigm shift requires reorientation of education systems. UNESCO (2005) emphasizes the role of education in shaping attitudes, values, and behavior, while developing the capacities, skills, and commitments needed for building a sustainable future.

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is a vision of education that seeks to empower people to assume responsibility for creating a sustainable future. ESD strives for an equal opportunity for all to benefit from education, and learn the values, behaviors, and lifestyles required for a sustainable future and for positive social transformation. The values held in a society help define how personal decisions are made and how national legislation is written (UNESCO, 2005). Various approaches to ESD encourage people to understand the complexities of, and synergies between, the issues threatening planetary sustainability and understand and assess their own values and those of the society to which they belong in the context of sustainability. If ESD is to be an effective tool for a sustainable future, it must address the way we think about sustainable development in particular and about education in general. In this context, dissemination of Environmental Education (EE) is considered the best means for achieving the goal of ESD.

With respect to the aforementioned backdrop of declarations enunciated by the UN/UNESCO, NEP, Pakistan, 2009 fails to not only address but also to redress the issues of ESD in the country’s perspective.

Analysis

The hallmarks of NEP 2009, broadly entailing its salient features chapter-wise along with their analysis are as follows:

- **Introduction.** The document spells out the *purpose* of the Policy (pg. 2, 9) in terms of a National Strategy for guiding education development in the country. It reviews previous performance, eliciting deficiencies and reforms in the domains of curriculum development, textbook/learning materials, and provision of missing facilities. This introductory material makes no specific reference to the absence of the critical component of ‘Environmental Education’ within the overall system of education in the country, nor do the opening paragraphs address the current issue of global concern i.e. ESD in the 21st Century;
- **Ch. I: The state of Pakistan’s education.** A realistic portrayal of the current status of education in Pakistan has been demarked in comparison with other SAARC countries. Equity in Education (pg. 4, 1.2) successfully relates to serious issues of gender, ethnic minorities, provinces, regions, and rural-urban divides. The implications of these issues with regards to ‘Sustainability and Equitable Development’ are recognized. However, this recognition with associated serious implications for sustainability and sustainable economic development is not addressed with reference to ESD. Addressing ESD can help to not only relieve, but also provide holism for redeeming the education system;
- **Ch. 2: Overarching challenges and responses.** While recognizing the fact that no other system in a State, except the National Education System, shares the ideals, objectives, and purpose of a State (pg. 10, 2.3), the document fails to recognize the importance of ESD for meeting these ideals and initiating sustainable progress in the country. Eliciting Government initiatives (pg. 13, 2.7), attention is given to quality education and focus on sustainable economic development in the global competitive milieu. However, quality in education for economic development must take into consideration the environmental aspect, since all economy is environment dependent and social as well as economic progress is unachievable without dissemination of EE for ESD;

- **Ch. 3: Major deficiencies, their causes and the way forward.** Presenting an excellent identification of commitment (pg. 15, 3.1.4) and implementation (pg. 16, 3.1.5) gaps in the education system, this chapter suggests requirement for a paradigm shift. However, this paradigm shift is not goal specific, echoing generalized adaptations and innovation in the education system (pg. 17, 3.2). A paradigm shift addressing the requirements of ‘Sustainable Development’ and hence provision of EE as a step toward achieving sustainability have been completely overlooked;
- **Ch. 4: Filling the commitment gap: system values, priorities and resources.** It is correctly brought to light that an education system cannot remain in isolation in the global context (pg. 18, 4.1). The convincing evidence of education’s contribution to both economic and social development is mentioned (pg. 19, 4.2). The priorities i.e. access and improvement in quality of education, are earmarked for attaining economic and social goals (pg. 20, 4.3). Policy action including, universal and free education, equity/elimination of social exclusion, quality improvement, promotion of innovation in economy, research based education at higher level, and challenges and opportunities related to globalization are enunciated for widening access in the system (pg. 20, 4.3). Once again, the policy document overlooks not only the importance, but also the urgency for incorporating EE into mainstream education programs. EE essentially means quality improvement, since the quality of the environment is equivalent to the quality of life. The policy seems oblivious to the linkage between acquisition of its goals and environmental awareness for capacity building leading to an enhanced quality of life;
- **Ch. 5: Filling the implementation gap: ensuring good governance.** The goals and targets for improvement in the current system of education with various aspects like policy coherence, public/private, structural divides, stakeholder involvement, have been successfully enumerated in this chapter. Comprehensive Human Resource Development keeping market needs in view (pg. 22, 5.1), is seen not to refer to this development with regards to Sustainability. The goals and targets of provision of quality education without

discrimination (pg. 23, 5.3), and bridging the public-private divide (pg. 24, 5.4), are excellent steps for good governance. However, achieving the inclusive targets of equity, quality and coherence may never see light without reference to provision of EE. Policy action, amongst others, seems not to mention EE in overcoming structural divides, nor does it address the urgency for incorporating EE into teacher training programs in policy action for capacity building (pg. 28, 5.6);

- **Ch. 6: Broadening the base and achieving access.** This chapter targets the various stages of education, inclusive of Early Childhood Education (ECE), Elementary, Secondary and Higher Secondary as well as Non-Formal Education. It brings to light the long term positive effects of ECE on employment, labor force participation and earnings (pg. 31, 6.1), with a complete disconnect of the above with the environment, overlooking the importance of interaction with the immediate environment for building an aware and sensitive citizenry. The policy action enumerated for ECE (pg. 32, 6.1) regarding teacher training emphasizes specialized training in dealing with young children. Nowhere does it mention the need for teacher training programs for ESD. ESD for Elementary Education is also not addressed. Likewise, for the Secondary and Higher Secondary levels, the policy document lays stress on preparing the youth for life by providing skills to the labor market (pg. 33, 6.3) completely ignoring the environmental component. The policy action includes introduction of more student-centered pedagogies (pg. 33, 6.3) without specific reference to provision of ESD. Introduction of community service programs (pg. 33, 6.3) as part of policy action, do not make any reference to the importance of ESD. For the sector of Non-Formal education, the document refers to positive relation between literacy and productivity (pg. 34, 6.4), without entailing ESD which is pivotal for green productivity. Lastly, for education in emergencies, promotion of managerial skills in emergencies (pg. 36, 6.5) is mentioned. Education in emergencies and promotion of managerial skills in these conditions is only possible when students are provided information and given first hand experience in the environment for dealing with emergencies;

- **Ch. 7: Raising the quality of education.** Quality improvement in areas of teacher training, curriculum, textbooks, assessment approaches, learning environment and facilities including relevance of education to practical life/labor market have all been mentioned (pg. 37). The vision for the teacher in the policy encompasses student-centered teaching, cross-curricular competencies, modern pedagogical techniques to foster inquiry, interaction and lateral thinking (pg. 38, 7.1). The section on Curricular Reform enlists ‘the variations within the geographical breadth of the country’ and ‘the local context’ (pg. 39, 7.2). Policy action for attaining standards in the learning environment (pg. 42, 7.5) enlists ‘service to the society’. The one and only mention of environmental education within curricular reform is its inclusion as part of Early Education (pg. 40, 7.2). Quality improvement in areas of teacher training, curriculum, textbooks, assessment approaches, learning environment and facilities including relevance of education to practical life/labor market have all been mentioned. Yet, quality in textbooks and learning materials, improving student assessment and attaining standards in the learning environment are sectors completely de-linked with ESD.

The immediate concern for inclusion of environmental element into teacher training programs is gravely missing. The quality of an education system is reflected in the quality of its teachers. The quality of teaching does not mention personal initiative by the teacher vis-à-vis the environment. While the section on Curricular Reform (pg. 39, 7.2) enlists ‘variations within the geographical breadth of the country’ and ‘the local context’, policy action enumerated does not take the two points into account with regards to ESD. The pertinent relationship is not drawn between the local resources and the local environment from which these are made available. While policy action raises a point related to introduction of service to society, it is also one of the core themes of EE i.e. citizenship. However, NEP is oblivious to sensitizing the most important stakeholder i.e. citizenry, toward its local environment;

- **Ch. 8: Strengthening skill development and innovation.** Reorientation and provision of greater facilities for industrial development for meeting the needs

and requirements of a changing economy have been suggested by improving Technical Vocational Education (TVE) in the country (pg. 44, 8.1). An urgent national requirement for TVE is reorientation of the education system with inclusion of ESD for addressing environmental issues, related, from variety in skill training, to green productivity, to tapping traditional knowledge. Ironically, NEP, in this sector, addresses the biggest environmental issue of over population in terms of an 'endowment' in the labor market (pg. 45, 8.1). High population growth cannot be considered an 'endowment' unless there is job specific and market driven human resource development. Policy actions as proposed by NEP with respect to 'local conditions' are not specific with regards to local environmental conditions. All TVE is environment dependent, since it is the environment that dictates the necessity of provision of facility in the face of availability of resource.

- **Ch. 9: Higher education.** NEP relates three functions of higher education i.e. production of skilled labor force, crafting new knowledge through research and service to society alongside their contribution in innovation, economic growth, sustainable development and social cohesion (pg. 48). It fails to link the concepts of 'citizenship' and 'stewardship' integral to sustainability and social service as achievements of higher education. While addressing the current challenges that higher education faces, its 'minimal relevance to national needs' (pg. 49, 9.1) has been taken note of. However, while suggesting steps for Medium Term Development Framework (MTDF), the environmental aspect has been completely overlooked. Alignment of reform initiatives (pg. 50, 9.2) have been mentioned with development objectives rather than SD. Immediate economic relevance to major industry sectors (pg. 50, 9.2) with no specific reference to or direct dependence of the above on the environment have been taken into account. Higher education has been targeted as a major driver for innovation (pg. 50, 9.2). However, this innovation does not address introduction of the environmental component into mainstream education. The vision of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) for Higher education entails a catalytic role of higher learning and research in regional development (pg. 51, 9.2).

However, the policy actions (pg. 52) enunciated appear vague with no citation of particular measures for attaining SED. The surest route for translating this realization into reality is to address the route to sustainability i.e. ESD. The much avowed goals of service to society and sustainability can be achieved only by incorporating EE into the curriculum.

- **Ch. 10: Vision 2030.** The Main theme for VISION 2030 is ‘Accountability of Personnel’ (pg. 55, 10.3). Albeit an excellent vision statement, this vision does not refer to EE. The essential elements earmarked lack any reference to the environmental component. The local resources mentioned (pg. 55, 10.3) do not take into account the environment from which these are made available. The quality of teaching does not mention personal initiative by the teacher vis-à-vis the environment. The vision for the teacher encompasses modern pedagogical techniques to foster inquiry, interaction and lateral thinking without disseminating EE (pg. 57, 10.4). The setting and achieving of objectives is not possible without EE. A high performing system fuelled by data/information that is timely, valid and accurate (pg. 59, 10.5), is impossible to achieve without EE. The vision statement for the future not only ignores education for sustainable development but is also not in line with the global aspirations as enunciated by the United Nation’s Declaration;
- **Ch. 11: Implementation framework.** The NEP analyses problems and issues hampering the development of education in Pakistan, and outlines a wide range of reforms and policy actions to be taken and pursued in a coordinated federal-inter-provincial process (pg. 61, 11.1). It is an excellent declaration of intent. However, education is a living process, so is the environment since it is dynamic and subject to change. The direct relationship between the environment and education require a correlation to be drawn and worked upon, if the system of education in the country is to see dynamism.

Conclusion

Communities are always recreating themselves. In case of Pakistan, a *re-creation* is long over-due. The country lags far behind in providing basic and inclusive education. Education is the only means through which awareness for sustainable

development can be inculcated in the public. Dissemination of environmental education is the key to change and this change is the key to sustainability. Environmental Education can therefore be seen as the cornerstone of sustainable development in all its dimensions. It therefore becomes imperative to address this issue of grave concern on the National level. Since the National Education Policy is the document which can enunciate a change in this direction, it is important to align the policy with the requirements of ESD.

A curricular change can only follow if there is provision present in the policy document for this change. This curricular change can be the vehicle for steering Pakistan on the road to the ultimate goal of sustainable development. For this purpose curricular reform must be undertaken. Principles and concepts related to the environment that are locally relevant and culturally appropriate, must be integrated in the education system for achieving the ultimate goal of sustainable development. Pakistan's only hope to move decisively towards sustainable development at this point of time lies in taking action - action based on knowledge and understanding of the interrelatedness of phenomena occurring in nature. It is never too late to realize, make amends and work toward recreation.

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