Towards Universal Primary Education
Author: One World South Asia
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Mainstreaming ICTs

Education is central to our survival in a globalised world, to be equal and free in competitive markets. Within this proposition, one also finds deep concerns about the denial of minimal opportunities, as is evident from an observation by the Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen who said, "not being able to read or write or count or communicate is a tremendous deprivation". The on ground developmental situation is dismal. The Net Enrolment Ratio in South Asia is still in the order of 80 per cent, with an average drop out rate of 30 per cent. A low public current expenditure on primary education (in the order of USD 15-62 per pupil in the region), coupled with an adverse pupil teacher ratio (41.2:1) leads to poor education quality and low survival rates.

The development of underdeveloped warrants concerted multi-dimensional interventions. At the policy level, it would require changes in the framework to support the universalisation of primary education, adopting a life cycle approach to education, as well as an emphasis on measures for cent-per cent survival rates for all grades in primary school. Merely augmenting financial resources does not appear to be the sole panacea. In fact, substantially upgrading the quality of inputs in terms of education delivery may go a long way in achieving the MDG target for primary education. Strengthening existing structures and ensuring the quality of education for all and a policy to see primary education beyond classrooms requires immediate attention. Simultaneously it would be important to increase the focus on operational and financial inefficiencies by developing ICT based monitoring systems.

Given the resource constraints faced by all developing economies and countries in South Asia in particular, pedagogy for the marginalised would have to seriously consider new support mechanisms. ICT enabled interventions have the potential to extend education delivery to even the most marginalised populations. Isolated experiments in Africa and South Asia have begun to demonstrate the potential of ICTs in education. Initiatives such as the ISRO-Village Resource Centres, run and managed by M S Swaminathan Research Foundation appear to offer a suitable ground to start exploring ICTs in education. We are already witnessing the Mata Amritananda Mayi Institute and the South India based NGO, Myrada, following this model. ICTs can assist not only in making learning easier and accessible, they can also improve the quality of teaching through programmes that are teacher-centric.

While most of these experiments have been carried out hitherto by either the private sector as part of its CSR initiatives or by civil society organisations, there have been encouraging signals from the government recently. The EDUSAT programme of the Indian Space Research Organisation is a big leap that promises to take education to the unreached villages of India. ICT interventions require wide ranging changes in telecom policy and the government has been very positive in this regard too. As demonstrated by some micro experiments, ICTs also offer the opportunity for developing school content in local language to enable enhanced learning outcomes. Several approaches of open and distance learning could be highly useful in reaching the unreached. At a more macro level, the success of the IGNOU model ably demonstrates the use of appropriate ICT mechanisms. Resources would thus require deployment in appropriate ways for investments in ICT-enabled learning. Investment and infrastructural support are important to eliminate inequality in access to education, especially among girls, the disabled and the most vulnerable groups.

These interesting developments have encouraged us at One World South Asia to explore and advocate the advantages of ICTs in primary education through this issue of *Mainstreaming ICTs.* With a view to strengthening research based policy advocacy, an effort is being made from this issue to present an analytical Bottom Line column.

I am sure that this issue will be insightful and raise crucial questions that need to be answered to mainstream ICTs in primary education.