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National Forum on Education for All under the global theme “Education and Disability” - Equal Right, Equal Opportunity calls on the government for undertaking concrete steps for inclusive education for persons with disabilities.

Islamabad, 7 May 2014: UNESCO in collaboration with UNICEF organized a National Forum on EFA here in Islamabad aimed at advocating for EFA by stimulating a debate on Article 25-A of the Constitution and education sector financing in Pakistan.

The event was attended by representative of Government entities, researchers, civil society organizations, academia and educational institutions.

The national forum focused on interactive discussions on the required legislation and implementation under Article 25-A, increase in fiscal space, quality enhancement and developing a thorough monitoring system for education sector in Pakistan.

Speaking in her welcome remarks, Dr. Kozue Kay Nagata, Director UNESCO Islamabad emphasized the realization of education for all particularly for persons with disabilities in Pakistan. She said that an estimated 1.4 million persons with disabilities in Pakistan were the children of school going age, most of whom do not have access to either inclusive or special schools due to limited capacity in existing facilities. She said that Pakistan ratified United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on 5th July 2011 and Pakistan was among those 145 countries which ratified this Convention and thus its implementation was responsibility of the state and development organizations including disabled peoples organizations.

“The promulgation of Article 25 A under the 18th constitutional amendment is a major hallmark. The “act to provide free and compulsory education to all children of age of 5-16,” in Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT), passing of “the Sindh right of children to free and compulsory education act 2013” by the Parliament of Sindh, and passing of a similar bill by the Parliament of Baluchistan are critical steps forward. Coupled with this is the strong Government commitment to enhance education

budget with the GDP share of 4 percent by 2018, which currently stands at about 2 percent”, she added.

Speaking on the occasion, UNICEF Education Specialist, John Ekaju said that EFA was a critical priority and government commitment for increasing the education budget allocation would further improve the education for all including the disable children.

“UNICEF acknowledged the role of civil society organizations for advancing the agenda of education for all and UNICEF is fully committed to promote equity in education for all especially the most vulnerable children to advance the education agenda in Pakistan”, he added.

Mr. Ahmad Ali, Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Social and Policy Science (I-SAPS) made a presentation on legislative framework of Article 25A and education sector financing. Discussing the Government commitment to increase annual allocation from 2.1 percent to 4 percent of GDP by 2018, he highlighted that capacity of the provinces to use the available funding is a major challenge.

Muhammad Ahsan Raja, Secretary Education of Ministry of Education, Trainings and Standards in Higher Education commended UNESCO and UNICEF for jointly hosting the event on EFA with focus on disability. He said that the children with disabilities were important part of the society and it was the national obligation for all of us to take care of them by mainstreaming them through inclusive education. He said that working together with the United Nations and other donor’s agencies, the educational status of the children with disabilities can be improved. He said the teachers were playing an important role for building a knowledge society.

Later on a panel discussion was held on the Education for All – Education and Disability moderated by Dr. Allah Bakhsh Malik (Additional Secretary for Education). During the panel discussion the panelists emphasized the need for incorporating special education policies for the persons with disabilities towards making a social and barrier free accessibility to education for all.

Mr. Atif Sheikh, President, Special Talent Exchange Programme (STEP) highlighted that there were policies but implementation had always been an issue due to the lack of right-based legislative framework. Once we had legal coverage, the government and institutions would be accountable for implementation. He further added that the other institutions beyond Social Services departments must be made responsible for implementation of policies and programmes, so that a comprehensive move could be made towards the advancement of inclusive education in Pakistan.

At the end, the Secretary Education concluded the Forum and thanked the participants.

UNESCO believes that by adopting the following 7 strategies the Government of Pakistan will be able to make an accelerated progress towards ensuring the rights of persons with disabilities:

- Create appropriate legislative frameworks and set out ambitious national plans for inclusion.
- Provide the capacity, resources and leadership to implement ambitious national plans on inclusion.
- Improve EMIS to build accountability for results-oriented actions
- Refurbish existing schools and classrooms to allow barrier free access to students and teachers
- Integrate content and pedagogy related to education of disabled persons in teacher training programmes
- Launch advocacy campaigns to challenge negative perceptions and attitudes which reinforce and sustain discrimination against persons with disabilities
- Create an enabling policy environment for inclusive education, through cross-sectoral interventions

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