COMMENT

Crippling Education

ONE REASON MOST THIRD World countries, not excluding India, spend less and less on basic education is IMF cap on education wage bill. Even where there is no direct ceiling on the education wage bills, its pursuit of single-digit inflation rates and low fiscal deficit levels still effectively limits the size of the education budget. The IMF needs to be challenged but the political left, not to speak of the right, never takes the issue of fighting IMF conditionalities seriously. In a way they have reconciled themselves to live with IMF regime while making occasional noises about IMF harshness. How the IMF has virtually killed basic education in Kenya is a case in point.

When the government of Kenya abolished user fees in primary schools in 2004, more than one million new students enrolled. This should have been matched with the recruitment of many new teachers–but it was not. Indeed, not a single new teacher was recruited. The reason was simple. In 1997, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) forced the Kenyan government to cap the number of teachers it would hire–fixing a limit at 235,000. This cap was still in place when the government decided to implement free primary education –and no effort was made to remove it. As a result, class sizes grew, quality dropped and learning outcomes deteriorated.

The situation in Kenya, and several other countries, has led many organisations to look at the role of the IMF. At least 17 countries with a loan arrangement with the IMF called a Poverty Reduction Growth Facility (PRGF), have an explicit ceiling on their wage bill. Low wage bill ceilings directly affect education and health spending, as teachers, doctors and nurses are the largest groups on most government wage bills. When a cap is imposed by the IMF or Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Education is left powerless - unable to hire all the teachers needed to achieve its goals.

Globally, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) estimates that 18 million teachers are needed for all children to be in school by 2015, in classes of one teacher to 40 children. At least 1.6 million new teachers will be needed in sub-Saharan Africa alone. It is clear that massive new investments need to be made. But it is equally clear that this growth in spending is unlikely to be achieved without some radical changes. 'No' to IMF over-lordism is the only slogan that could save the South from being sliding further into the quagmire of illiteracy. □□□