

## Conclusion

Given the stated national priorities to improve education quality and the massive programs for upgrading curriculum and teacher quality, *Why does quality not improve?* As Box 14 suggests, there are persisting obstacles to improving education quality. However, there is evidence that the quality of education has been improving in DMCs, but unevenly across and within countries. Indeed, many of the education challenges of the next decade have been created by the remarkable successes across Asia during the last two decades. During this period, regional primary education gross enrollment rates grew to over 90 percent, and by the 1990s several countries had primary education net enrollment rates above 90 percent. Education expansion and an extended period of economic growth (and recent economic decline), and evolving patterns of education decentralization have brought issues of education quality and relevance to the forefront and complicated the search for solutions.

The problem of low-quality education in some Asian countries was not created suddenly nor will it be resolved quickly. Five challenges lie ahead:

### Box 14: Why Does the Quality of Education Not Improve?

The problems facing education systems in South and Southeast Asian countries often appear to be alike, for example, poorly trained teachers, inadequate supplies of textbooks, weak management, little or no instructional supervision, and poor facilities. Yet such conditions exist despite elaborate bureaucracies to address such problems and a claim by every country that it has a high priority for quality improvement. *So, why does quality not improve?*

- (i) High quality is an elusive target. Advocating higher education quality tends to be a popular cause. For the same reason, improving school quality is a safe goal in that it is never satisfied.
- (ii) The desire for high quality is, in practice, “capped” by a competition for resources. Governments and communities claim they want high quality but always mean they want as much as they can get for the amount of money they want to spend. The search for quality is constrained by the willingness to pay the price.
- (iii) Raising quality has its enemies. Related to (ii) above, raising quality involves tradeoffs. Quality interventions usually require additional resources. Those who lose in the transaction may see quality improvement as secondary to what they value.

- (i) Education decentralization is shifting increased responsibility for quality improvement to educators lower in the system and to communities. Thus, new demands emerge for leadership at each level of government. Improving education quality while maintaining the integrity of the national system of education and attaining equity goals creates a challenge much greater than administering expansion of enrollments. Two key questions of the next decade will be: (a) "How can central government influence instructional and learning activities at the school and classroom level?"; and (b) "How will local community and school officials learn about, and respond to, the range of options available to them for raising school quality?"
- (ii) In the competition for funds, quality may have to compete with access. Though both have political appeal, expanding access is more politically saleable than raising quality. Increasing access conveys an egalitarian value while raising quality may appear to be exclusionary. Consequently, maintaining the commitment to quality improvement may be difficult, particularly during times of economic uncertainty. The challenge is how to keep education quality high on policy agendas and a public concern. The role of ADB and other bodies can be highly significant in encouraging attention to education quality through dissemination of information on its priorities, through dialogue with DMCs, and in assisting development of more effective national policy environments.
- (iii) The information explosion of the last 20 years is putting new pressure on schools to keep up. The widespread availability of computers and various communication technologies raises anew the issue of how governments can utilize low-cost and higher-cost technology to improve the quality of instruction. One fear is that the differential availability of technology across countries in the region will lead to even greater differences in the quality of instruction.
- (iv) Within countries, does the call for higher education quality include equitable distribution of school quality across geographic areas and sub-populations? Low quality is often due to the convergence of disadvantage. Raising school quality in those circumstances can be expensive and complicated because it requires attention to an interwoven web of problems, often for groups that have relatively little political power.
- (v) Regional cooperation in raising education quality makes great education and economic sense but often is constrained by political sensitivities and mired in minor differences between national systems. Countries' sensitivities about their own curricula sometimes preclude effective cooperation. One of the challenges of the next decade is identifying constructive and cost-effective ways in which countries can work together to improve teaching and learning.

Research and experience indicate that much remains to be learned about factors contributing to the several meanings of education quality and about the processes of improving education quality. Although a large body of research knowledge exists on learning, teaching, and organizational change, extant knowledge, even ignoring the normative and political nature of education

decisions, is incomplete and insufficient to address the complex, messy problems of education. At the same time, our insights are well ahead of common practice. These concurrent conditions suggest that policymakers and practitioners should envisage a two-pronged approach to strategies for improving education quality. The first assumes moderate risk and suggests that more resources and energies should be devoted to implementing those education changes which research and experience suggest – through a measure of credible evidence – are frequently successful in contributing to improving quality. The second recognizes that many education problems cannot be treated as technical problems and are not readily amenable to technical solutions.

The question, “What works?” has little meaning unless it is followed by “When?”, “Where?”, and “For whom?” There are rarely single answers to the causes of education problems as confronted by policymakers. Sustaining a process of improving education quality may require the substitution of dialogue and continued inquiry for the comfort of certainty.