

Achieving Millennium Goal 2: The Challenge of Reaching the Disadvantaged in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Education disadvantaged refers to an adverse situation experienced by a particular group of people in society whereby their access, survival, output and outcomes of schooling are affected in a negative way due to socio-economic, cultural and situational characteristics such as poverty, gender, ethnicity, occupational status, geographical location, war and natural disasters.

In Sri Lanka after four centuries of colonial rule many groups in society were deprived and disadvantaged with the colonial powers controlling all resources for the use of the metropolis.

Several progressive welfare and legislative measures, such as free and compulsory education, coeducational schools, and free textbooks and meals, implemented from the 1940s have resulted in an improvement of literacy, and the level of education of larger masses, yet have not reached the disadvantaged as expected.

This paper will address the major concerns related to the school system, medium of instruction and school curriculum to analyze the disadvantageous structures that prevent the disadvantaged from achieving their right to education, particularly in a context where the national vision has shifted from constructing a socially just and equitable society to a vision of an economically competitive society.

Introduction

World leaders from countries rich and poor adopted the UN Millennium Declaration in September 2000 and its Goal 2 is to achieve universal primary education ensuring that by 2015 children, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling. Lack of education robs a nation a full life for its people, a foundation for sustainable development because education is critical to improving productivity of a nation. The education goal is central to achieving the other goals of eradicating poverty and hunger, improving health, ensuring environmental sustainability and developing global partnership for development (UNDP, 2003). The global community led by United Nations has set many development goals since the first Development Decade of 1960s and has a record of failures. Yet the Millennium Goals have been widely acclaimed, inspiring new energy for development. An attempt is made in this paper to look at achieving Goal 2 in Sri Lanka, as the goal can be achieved only if efforts are nationally owned and country driven.

Background

Education in Sri Lanka has flourished from 300 B.C. and it was shaped over the centuries by Buddhist traditions and ideology. Buddhist religious institutions developed into centres of oriental learning which fostered secular learning as well as the impartation of the Buddhist doctrine. This system of education lost patronage during the Western dominance which lasted for more than 400 years up to 1948, the year in Sri Lanka gained independence. The roots of the present day education in Sri Lanka lie in the colonial education system that the country inherited from the British. The British developed a system to meet two major needs of colonial rule, the creation of a Western elite with Christian ethos patterned on the metropolitan model and preparation of personnel to develop the infrastructure of colonial administration (Gunawardena, 1991).

Partial responsible government and universal franchise in 1931 permitted the laying of a foundation of a national educational policy. A national policy formulated by mid-1940s attempted to democratize education and also to improve relevance and quality in education which resulted in a number of notable achievements. The most significant are free education from kindergarten to University, the use of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction at all levels and a unified national system of schools. An effective network of schools at primary level to ensure access to children in all parts of the country has been put in place. A number of welfare measures such as free textbooks, subsidized transport, free school meals, free school uniforms and scholarships for the needy and the able have been provided. The special thrust on educational opportunity for all resulted in a spectacular quantitative growth in terms of literacy, school, teachers and students in the formal system (Gunawardena, 2003).

However by early 1970s the policy makers diagnosed the prime need to be the qualitative improvement of education by increasing its relevance and to be responsive to emerging human resource needs of the developing economy. In implementing change towards quality improvement, high priority was given to increase curriculum relevance, improving efficiency and accountability in management, minimizing the mismatch between education and employment and effective allocation and utilization of existing resources.

Sri Lanka a plural society, multi ethnic, multi-religious and multilingual has a population of 19.3 million. Although its per capita income is low, only US \$1200, its achievements in the field of social development are significant. Sri Lanka has a literacy rate of 92% and life expectancy of 74. The population growth rate has declined to about 1.7 per cent. Net enrolment in Grade 1 is about 97% for both girls and boys and nearly all complete the primary cycle. But Sri Lanka has not yet achieved universal compulsory education as 18% of the children fail to complete the nine years of compulsory schooling. This is the product of an equity issue that exists as the children of disadvantaged groups have failed to participate in education. As a result of four centuries of colonial rule, many groups in Sri Lankan society were deprived and disadvantaged. Colonial powers controlled all resources for use of the metropolitan and people became deprived, impoverished incapable of contributing to the development of the motherland and these people became to be the disadvantaged.

Education Disadvantaged

Education disadvantaged refers to an adverse situation experienced by a particular group of people in society when their access, survival output and outcome of schooling is affected in a negative way by socioeconomic, cultural and situational characteristics such as their poverty, gender, ethnicity, occupational status, geographical location, war and natural disaster.

There are several groups in Sri Lanka who are disadvantaged. But they are not discrete or separate. The groups are:

(1) Poor, the low income group in rural and urban and mostly in rural areas. Most of them are illiterate, fatalistic and of poor health. Though most of them value education, they are forced to engage children in income generation activities or child labour. Most poor parents find difficult to provide school requirements even when education is free in state schools which are available to many at a short distance. Also the guarantee that opportunities are available for all does not ensure equity unless the opportunities themselves are of equal quality.

(2) An ethnic minority group, Indian Tamils working in plantations is considered as disadvantaged in economic levels, literacy rates, health and housing facilities (Sandrasegaram and Gunawardena, 1997). The minority group with a distinct religious and language tradition has been prevented from integrating into the mainstream culture. A UNESCO study (1990) reports that not only are they illiterate, but that their conditions of deprivation and uncertainty in which they live has made a marginalized segment in the country. The management of plantations who were responsible for the education of the children of plantation workers for nearly a century up to 1976 did not

encourage schooling and the primary schools they managed had crowded classes with untrained teachers and opportunities for secondary or university education were very low and even the few who sat for GCE (O.L) or (A.L) examinations had low performance compared to the performance level of children from other communities.

(3) School Census 2003 reports that there are 58,626 students with disabilities and only 12,407 are provided with access to schooling. The drop out rate of those who enter schools is very high (56%) and this high drop out rate is a reflection of the inadequate support for education that the disabled children receive. The reforms of 1997 call for child-centered methodologies, but the teachers yet do not as yet appear to have adequate professional development facilities to cope with the needs of children with various forms of disability.

(4) Another disadvantaged group is the displaced and refugee children caught in the situations of war and conflict, natural disasters (for example Tsunami) and living on street as a result of homelessness.

Poverty is a major factor related to all these groups and the most disadvantaged are the poor. Poverty means some type of deprivation with effects on individuals and groups. Material deprivation affects and hinders not only physical development of children but also psychological maturity and stability. One of the core issues in the debate on the right to education thus is whether poverty hinders a child's education. Children of poor families bear the burden of poverty in spite of six decades of developmental efforts to eradicate poverty and reform education to ensure Education for All.

Levels of Disadvantage

Equal educational opportunity is often explained at four levels: (1) Access, (2) Survival or participation, (3) Output or Results and (4) Outcomes.

Access

Articles 28 and 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child enjoin the states to provide free primary compulsory education to all and access to various forms of secondary education. Availability of educational services includes not only the provision of schools but teachers, textbooks and other educational inputs. Sri Lanka's education system ensures that most of the above requirements are provided as pointed out earlier. However, in spite of these ancillary services, a considerable percentage of children, nearly 14 per cent of the school going age, were not attending school. In 1997 Compulsory Education regulations were approved by the Parliament to ensure that such children would get an access to education. However studies have shown that these Regulations are not being effectively implemented or monitored (National Education Commission, 2003).

Survival and Participation

The measures taken by the state discussed above had led to an increase in the participation rates at school level. The Demographic Survey of 1994 indicated that 10.6 per cent of boys and 10.5 per cent of girls in the 5-14 age group were not enrolled in school. Retention rates in 2001 were 97.6 per cent at the end of junior school. Several studies have shown that the major reasons for not attending school are mainly poverty, distance to school, the inefficiency of the bureaucracy, and the poor quality of teaching in schools in low income neighbourhoods (Jayaweera and Gunawardena, 2004).

Results or Outputs

Output is usually looked at from the point of view of educational achievement and attainment of children who complete primary and secondary levels of the school. Even though literacy rates have risen over the years, Gunawardena et al (1995) found that in disadvantaged communities actual literacy levels were lower than the claimed literacy levels and that equal educational opportunity had not reached the disadvantaged groups. A number of postgraduate studies have shown that parents'

socio-economic background continues to determine the achievement levels of children. The achievement of children from deprived schools at all public examinations – the Scholarships Examination, GCE (O.L.) and (A.L.) examination are lower when compared with students' performance from more privileged schools.

Outcomes

Final benefits of education are reflected in the jobs, occupations, salaries and status in society that a person gets as an outcome of educational achievements or qualifications. Gunawardena (1980, 1982, 1997) and National Education Commission (1992) pointed out that the opportunity to obtain employment, periods of unemployment, the social status of those educated was closely linked to the socio-economic background of students. A strong belief is that those who qualify from foreign institutions with qualifications in English medium obtain better jobs or employment particularly in the private sector or foreign employment which is more lucrative.

Reaching the Educationally Disadvantaged

Ensuring education at primary level to all school-going age children was an explicit goal in all the educational reforms introduced in Sri Lanka. But the welfare measures did not reach the disadvantaged and particularly the poor. Here it is pertinent to look at Gudmund Hernes' reference about disadvantaged structures rather than disadvantaged groups. Three major concerns with a focus on structures that hamper the disadvantaged are the school system, the medium of instruction and the school curriculum.

With regard to the school system, action taken in 1960s to have a national system of education has not been sustained in the recent decades. Even at present there are four types of schools – 1AB, IC, 2 and 3. The first two types of schools provide an education up to GCE (A.L), the first in all streams and the second only in the Arts stream. It is relevant to note that the larger majority of these schools are concentrated in the urban areas and cater to the more privileged sections of the population. Not only are the schools with classes only up to GCE (O.L) (Type 2) and up to Grade 5 (Type 3) located mostly in rural and disadvantaged areas, they are poorly resourced with few facilities and lower qualified teachers. In 2002, 352 such schools with low enrolment were closed down (National Education Commission, 2003) as being uneconomical due to reduced funding on state enterprises and on the dictates of a market economy.

A second major concern is the medium of instruction. Since independence, mother tongue has been gradually implemented as the medium of instruction from primary to university level, but again during recent decades, criticism of the quality of output from secondary and university levels of education has led to an emphasis on the English being introduced as the medium at secondary and university levels. This has been aggravated by the establishment of 'international' providing education in English. Without sufficient inputs to train teachers who can teach in English it is likely that the children from rural and disadvantaged backgrounds will face greater difficulties achieving outcomes of education.

The third concern is with the curriculum. A national Curriculum was introduced from 1972 and with this the issue related to duality in curriculum was overcome. However, the disparity in the school system prevented the schools in disadvantaged areas to enjoy the benefits of the common curriculum.

To enable everyone to enjoy the right to education, the priority task for the future is to rectify the disparities that exist in the disadvantaged structures in the school system, medium of instruction and curriculum that hamper the disadvantaged children from access, survival, output and outcomes in education.

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