

CEF COUNTRY PRESENTATION SRI LANKA

Introduction

Sri Lanka is an island off the Indian sub-continent with a land area of 64,470 square kilometres and a population of around 19.7 million people. The population growth rate is 0.83%. The ethnic composition comprises 74% Sinhalese, 18% Tamil, 7% Moor, and 1% Burgher, Malay, and Vedda (the indigenous community). The two-decade long armed conflict between the majority Sinhala community and the minority Tamil community has disrupted social and economic stability to a significant extent. However, the most enduring of all the peace processes in the history of the conflict, now claiming a two-year old ceasefire agreement, is currently underway.

Primary Education

Primary education in Sri Lanka is provided mostly by the state, but a number of private schools, pirivena schools and international schools also exist.

According to the Central Bank report of 2002, of a total of 10,615 schools in Sri Lanka, 9891 are government schools run by the nine Provincial Ministries, 317 are national schools run by the Central Government, and 78 are private schools, both fee-levying and non fee-levying¹, managed privately. Other than this, there are 583 pirivena schools that cater to the education of lay people and young Buddhist monks between the ages of 5-9 years. There are 24 special schools run by the private sector and registered with the Ministry of education.

There are also an increasing number of international schools serving local students. International schools are registered under the Board of Investment and are run as business establishments. The government has no control over their management and curriculum. These schools prepare more privileged, English educated students for foreign examinations with a view to entry into foreign universities.

Sri Lanka does not have parallel education systems run by NGOs catering to disadvantaged communities.

All government and pirivena schools are non-fee-levying. However, the cost of education to parents is considerable².

¹ In non-fee levying private schools, fees are paid by the government even though the school is managed privately.

² Activity-based learning, school functions etc.

History of Sri Lanka's Education System

Sri Lanka provides a free education from primary to university education and the main languages of instruction are Sinhala and Tamil, the two national languages.

The earliest significant changes in the history of the education system occurred in the mid-1940s during the time of CWW Kannangara, an innovative education minister who democratized the system considerably. Through these innovations, free education from kindergarten to university level was legalized in 1945, three years prior to Sri Lanka's independence from colonial rule.

In the spirit of national autonomy that pervaded the political atmosphere of the time, free education regulations were followed by the adoption of the local languages, Sinhala and Tamil, as the medium of instruction, which replaced English which had formerly been used in schools in urban centres and universities.

From these initiatives sprang perhaps some of the most significant achievements in the education system. A new concept in schools, called Central Schools, distributed all over the island, were set up by Kannangara to provide access to quality secondary education to rural youth.

These initiatives resulted in a considerable leveling of education opportunities. Rural speakers of Sinhala and Tamil got opportunities for academic advancement and to enjoy leadership posts in Sri Lanka's civil service and other sectors.

Since then, various educational reforms have been adapted and abandoned, often according to the whims and fancies of the ruling political parties. For example, the 1972 educational reforms, seen as a remarkable exercise in curriculum reform, scrapped the GCE Ordinary Level and Advanced Level, to be replaced by National Certificates in Education. This was meant to devalue the heavy exam orientation of the school system.

However, when the government changed in 1977, (also the juncture at which a free-market system was fully embraced by Sri Lanka) the GCE O/L and A/L were reintroduced. This move exemplifies a trend in Sri Lanka of political interference gaining precedence over specialist decisions and hampering any genuine attempts at actualizing a long-term, yet flexible, vision for education.

Examples of this nature abound in Sri Lanka's education history³. Pressure against progressive educational change have often come from politicians, Teacher Trade Unions, and the general public due either to misconceptions, lack of confidence in school management, or, in the case of teachers' unions, fear of "more work" if changes are made.

³ Such as the school cluster system, continuous assessment, and school development boards.

A major impact was made on the education system through the 13th amendment to Sri Lanka's constitution in 1987, which was partly a response to the ethnic crisis in the country, which had reached a peak by that time. The constitutional amendment led to a countrywide devolution of political and administrative functions.

Education was one of the subjects devolved to the provinces in a bid to give local communities more decision-making powers on education issues, as in several other areas of governance⁴.

The next significant change was the 1997 Education Reforms, seen as the most path-breaking of recent educational innovations. The Reforms promoted child-centred learning, project work, and the need for quality as much as access, and recognized all officials down to the principal as "policy makers". The Reforms also recognized the need for special efforts to address the educational needs of children with disabilities.

During this time, compulsory education laws for the 5-14 year age group was also established under the Education Ordinance of Sri Lanka.

The State of Primary Education in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka has some of the highest official rates of attainment in primary education in Asia. The rate of literacy is 91%. The rate of participation in primary education, which in reality refers to rates of enrollment, was 97% in 2002, and the teacher-pupil ration was 22:1 according to the Central Bank report of 2002. There is also a higher rate of girls' school attendance in comparison to boys. The education system provides free text-books to all students and free school uniform material, which are two incentives that keep significant numbers of children in school. Other than this, various initiatives have been taken by the Ministry to improve specific sectors of education.

Reality, however, belie the impressive statistics indicated above. To begin with, the measurement of literacy is itself questioned. What's more, statistics from the war-affected North and East, where literacy rates are lower, are not taken into account in calculating data, but the data is still publicized as "national" data. Moreover, there are vast disparities in participation in education, particularly in pockets of marginalized communities, and teacher deployment is inequitable and susceptible to political patronage. As a result, there is an excess of teachers in

⁴ Powers that were devolved included teacher appointments to non-national school, implementation of Non Formal Education programmes, construction and maintenance of buildings, libraries playgrounds, procurement and distribution of resources through the Finance Ministry, etc.

urban centres, and a dearth in rural areas, and small urban schools, particularly in hardship, or difficult areas.

50,000 teachers, or close to 27% of the total cadre are untrained, and it is the untrained teachers who are primarily assigned to the marginalized rural and urban areas⁵. There are also 3000 volunteer teachers on record who are not paid by the government and whose official recognition becomes problematic due to their lack of formal qualifications. According to a recent newspaper article in the Sinhala press, there is a dearth of 30 school principals in the Western Province, the most advantaged province in the country and 3000 schools in the country have principals without proper qualifications⁶.

The participation and teacher/student ratio figures also do not take into consideration the long-term impact of the two-decade old war in the country that has now been contained through an ongoing peace process. According to a UNICEF Rapid Needs Assessment Survey of January 2003, at least 65,000 children in the North and East are not attending school, and the official drop out rate is 15.8% as compared to 3.9% in the rest of the country⁷. More than 300,000 children are internally displaced, and 50,000 live in welfare centres. 29% of all children between the ages of 1-13 are from the North and East. Psychosocial problems found in the rest of the country are more intense due to war-related trauma and there is a severe need of psychosocial counseling services in the North and East.

While nationally, there is a drop in school-going age population partly due to falling birth rates, the advantages of these trends rarely accrue to marginalized schools which are still left without teachers and proper facilities. The relevance of the education imparted in schools is also being questioned by students and it is a common observation that the quality of education is deteriorating rapidly.

Challenges Facing Primary Education and the Wider Education Sector in the Country

As a public institution, the educational system in the country suffers from the same factors as other public sectors due to macro-economic initiatives that pressurize cutting down on public expenditure. One of the most visible impacts of these cutbacks have been the closing down of small schools. According to a recently released National Education Commission study on the rationalization of schools, around 400 schools have been closed down through these moves⁸. While professional groups have pressured for and succeeded in getting a

⁵ Regaining Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka's National Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, p. 74.

⁶ (Lakbima, 11th October 2003)

⁷ Rapid Needs Assessment Survey: Education of Children in Conflict Affected Areas of the Island (National Institute of Education in collaboration with the NIE – January 2003)

⁸ National Education Commission Study on the Rationalization of Schools, 2002 (Unpublished)

government directive issued to discontinue closures, the general low quality of schools have meant that schools are automatically being closed down.

The actual functioning of decentralized authority at local levels in the education sector has also left much to be desired. The decentralized system has defeated its purpose because of duplication of work, lack of work ethics and lack of management skills of local government officials⁹. Other than this, political patronage, lack of real authority to schools and layers closest to schools, the lack of consensus on issues affecting the provision of education for all, and also the lack of civil society participation in demanding meaningful devolution of power have undermined the positive potential of decentralization.

Moreover, decentralization has also been seen in more administrative terms, rather than as a meaningful empowerment of local communities¹⁰. Additionally, the strength of teacher trade unions with a limited vision, and political influence disrupt even the changes that would otherwise have been possible, thus exacerbating and reinforcing educational disparities among privileged and vulnerable groups.

A major challenge to the education system has been the lack of resources for the effective teaching of English which is seen as one of the greatest social dividers. The lack of proficiency in English is seen as a significant obstacle to educational and social advancement in Sri Lanka. However, there is little scope for learning functional English in schools, and even some of the bigger schools in the country cannot claim a cadre of skilled, trained teachers. This is largely due to the availability of higher paying professional opportunities in other sectors for those proficient in English and the limited use of the English language in schools since language policies were changed within the education system.

The intense competitiveness of the exam-oriented system that has made an industry out of private tuition has also become a cause for concern. Other challenges include introducing a meaningful peace education component in school curricula that is acceptable to authorities, and consolidating psychosocial counseling services at various levels.

Government Education Policy

The 1997 Education Reforms are seen as the most far-reaching attempt at transforming the education system in recent years. The reforms reinforce the need for child-centred teaching, activity based learning, and a new curriculum

⁹ For example, out of the 94 Zonal education officers, who are in charge of ensuring education quality in the zones, as many as 37 are unqualified for their posts.

¹⁰ Idea expressed in "Decentralization in Education: The Sri Lanka experience", Wilfred J Perera, in *Decentralization of Education Management, Experiences from South Asia* ()

designed to enhance learning competencies of children¹¹. The reforms are in place throughout the country, but the successful implementation of the reforms yet remains a question, as the philosophy behind it has not been complemented by commensurate development of skills, motivation and adequate resources in vulnerable communities.

Other than this, the main government primary education development plan is the Five Year Plan for Primary Education for the period 2000 – 2004. This has, as some of its major objectives, increasing the Net Initial Intake Rate (NIIRI) from 96.7% 1998 – 100% by 2004 and increasing the 5-9 year old Net Enrollment Ratio (NER) from 96.5% in 1998 to 100% by 2004. Official statistics indicate that enrollment rates had, by 2002 increased to 97%.

Inclusive education has been introduced as a policy priority to enhance learning capacities of children with special needs, and the annual school census reveal that significant numbers attend government schools and mainstream classrooms. However, attitudinal problems persist, and both private and government schools lack the expertise to deal with children with more severe degrees of multiple disability and intellectual disability.

Resource Allocation

Resource allocation to improve education standards is increasingly becoming an issue in Sri Lanka. In 2002, total expenditure on education was Rs 37209 million, a 32% increase over the previous year¹². Yet, the total expenditure as a percentage of GDP is still 2.4%, a far cry from the 5% recommended by the World Bank, and is one of the lowest expenditure on education in South Asia. The spending has drastically changed from the 1960s when around 4-5% of the GNP was spent on education.

Education plans are increasingly linking education initiatives to wider development measure in the country. The 1997 reforms recognize the importance of English and the general modernization of the education system.

The education component of Sri Lanka's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), *Regaining Sri Lanka* sees education as investing in people, and acknowledges, like the education reform document, the need for linking education priorities with the development needs of the country. The Action Plan matrix for Education in Sri Lanka's PRSP, for example, sets out objectives of equipping all students with the necessary knowledge and skills to better suit the employment market through improving basic education, modernizing secondary

¹¹ The Education Reforms Document stresses, "we cannot find solutions by confining ourselves to formal instruction in schools, but most be far more concerned about a total approach. If education reforms are identified in terms of development of people and of localities, then many reforms would be seen as acceptable and affordable". (p.2)

¹² Sri Lanka Central Bank Report, 2002.

education, and through creating a generation of tolerant young people through education in social harmony, conflict resolution and democratic living.

The draft report of the national plan of action and the EFA national plan similarly link education to development including highlighting the need for English and computer literacy. Once more, it remains to be seen how these acknowledgements on paper are translated into practice.

There have also been questions, however, as to whether national development policies reflect the needs of Sri Lanka's sustainable development. The PRSP in its entirety has been targeted for criticism by civil society groups because of the lack of consultation in the policy making process, as well as the manner in which the documents favour private sector investment over social welfare and the development of local agricultural and industrial structures¹³. These trends are also evident in the wording of the targets and objectives of the education sub-sector in the document.

Role of the International Community in the Education Sector

The international community has been supporting government in several teacher training and curriculum development programmes. Around 10% of the funding of activities at the Ministry are funded by the international community, a significant increase from a low of around 2% several years ago. Some of the major funders are the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, GTZ, and DFID. INGOs are also involved in service delivery at micro-level.

Civil Society

NGOs are generally perceived as service providers, and often link to the grassroots through interaction with CBO partners and have gained credibility through these activities.

Increasingly, however, NGOs are entering the policy arena in more systematic ways. Particularly on issues of good governance, peace and conflict resolution, gender issues, environment and sustainable development, NGOs have played a major role in attempting to influence policy decisions and have supported public awareness creation measures around these issues. State structures, however, see NGOs as both an ideological and physical threat to their own legitimacy, even as NGO support is sought in various government projects.

However, in all sectors, there is hardly any sustained mechanism to feed grassroots input into policy and practice decisions at the top and civil society participation in decisions of policy and practice still remain elitist to a large extent.

¹³ Christian Aid Newsletter, July 03rd 2003.

In education, civil society has seen no cause to galvanize around issues because of the history of excellence, and because of the misleading figures publicized by the government.

The corporate sector works on education issues with specific agendas of creating an educated work force and on moves to establish private educational institutions, particularly at tertiary level.

CEF in Sri Lanka

CEF Sri Lanka Objectives:

1. Civil society participation in reaching EFA goals will be strengthened;
2. Equity in resource allocation in public spending on education, funding of provincial education, resource allocation within provinces, and resource distribution between primary and secondary education will be demonstrated;
3. Policy and practice will reflect quality education for all children between 5-14, particularly for those belonging to vulnerable and marginalized groups
4. Reduced gender imbalances in primary and secondary education.

CEF Sri Lanka Structure

CEF Sri Lanka consists of the Management Committee, the CEF Coordinator and the CEF Working Group facilitated by the CEF Field Coordinator. (Please see attached TORs). The Management Committee gives overall direction to the project and approves the general CEF activity plans. The primary responsibility of planning and overseeing implementation of CEF-supported programmes lies with the Working Group which is a group of education experts and civil society activists. The Working Group and the CEF Coordinator reviews and approves the specific proposals submitted to CEF. The CEF Coordinator facilitates programme implementation, dissemination of information and establishing links between community groups.

CEF Sri Lanka Process

The Commonwealth Education Fund (CEF) in Sri Lanka addresses issues related to the 5-14 age group, and thus goes beyond primary education in its ambit. The nature of the CEF programme in Sri Lanka was in response to the prevailing climate of education activism as indicated above. There were no civil society coalitions operating in the education arena and policy advocacy issues were not being articulated clearly. A gradual development towards this stage is reflected in the CEF Sri Lanka plan.

The last year in which CEF has been active in the country has been spent in establishing a working group to carry forward CEF plans, in identifying competent

partners, and in establishing countrywide structures for education advocacy. Various stakeholder meetings have been conducted in all of the eight provinces in the country to create provincial advocacy plans. Participating stakeholders have included community groups, religious leaders, children, government officials and other interested parties. In a context where sustained civil society work in primary education was not visible, CEF has supported a significant move to highlight the emerging crises in Sri Lanka's education system, and in mobilizing community groups to work together to create civil society plans for intervention on these issues.

Four provincial plans have been approved so far (please see attached summaries).

Main Programme

The Working Group understanding was that CEF should include a substantial component of on-the-ground projects, programmes and initiatives that will serve as pilots of good practice that will reward and encourage local innovations and serve as models for the future. These projects are selected by transparent and open processes as part of provincial plans and cover the different sectors, special concerns and key problem areas.

The approved plans include work on strengthening community ownership of schools, encouraging community and school-centred concepts such as school development boards which are to be reintroduced in Sri Lanka, and reviving school based management. Concepts such as school-based assessment will also be widely publicized, where possible, through our project areas to parents, teachers, principals and other interested parties. Also, areas of the education reforms that need highlighting will be addressed at community meetings and in dialogue with teachers and principals in project areas.

The CEF strategy is to work collaboratively with government in improving the education system. A cross-cutting activity in all approved Provincial Plans is the engagement of CEF-supported groups with government EFA Committees/Government education authorities at Divisional, Zonal and Provincial level. It is hoped that these activities will promote community engagement in education planning, and that groups will, through practice, become more conversant with the roles of different levels of education authority and their roles and responsibilities in ensuring quality education for all. In the Uva and Central Provinces of Sri Lanka, substantial engagement with education authorities have already commenced and is proving to be an effective channel for raising community concerns. With CEF support, community groups in both the provinces have been successful in reviving the dormant structures of EFA Committees at Provincial and Zonal levels, one of the significant achievements of programmes supported by CEF in Sri Lanka so far.

It is a condition of CEF funding that these project activities be linked to the identification of issues and the development of strategies towards national/provincial/ zonal level advocacy to change policy and practice in the longer term. Working on sustained policy advocacy is something that will emerge from the fieldwork, and through gradual capacity building.

We see the process supported by CEF in Sri Lanka as a long-term one and hope this initial work will lead finally to groups of people who can lobby for change in education policy and practice in an informed and organized manner at community, provincial and national levels.

Regular national forums have been scheduled for provincial partners to discuss common issues, and for coming up with common recommendations for changing policy and practice at the national and provincial levels. This work urgently requires comprehensive training programmes in policy analysis, knowledge of worldwide best practices in state education provision and the ability to formulate meaningful and realistic policy recommendations. This requirement of training applies to both CEF Coordinators in Sri Lanka as well as CEF's provincial partners.

Information Sharing

Information is shared regularly with funded partners on the official education process, relevant government circulars, brief articles on progressive concepts in education etc. Translations are done regularly to make sure that funded partners keep abreast of education issues as discussed both nationally and internationally.

Media Campaign

The CEF media campaign is currently being produced by a consultant with a good track record in social advocacy through media. The campaign will focus on the initiatives of children, teachers, school authorities and communities taken to ensure quality "Education for All" in their regions. It will deliver the message that citizens, as players in a democracy, have a role to play in advocating to improve the government's delivery of education. That community experiences with education services can provide compelling insights to strengthen educational reforms.

In delivering this message, the campaign will highlight best practices undertaken by civil society groups to further the goal of children's rights as well as access and participation in quality education for all children in Sri Lanka.

Objectives:

- Persuade children to speak out on issues affecting their education;

- Persuade communities, including children, to participate in ensuring quality education for all in the 5-14 age group within their capacities;
- Persuade policymakers, school authorities, the private sector and other influentials to change their policies and practices governing access to quality primary and lower secondary education in Sri Lanka;
- Formation of a media core group of senior journalists, features- and news-editors as well as journalists to ensure that there is a long-term commitment on the part of media personnel to engage with issues related to quality education for all in the 5-14 age group and to ensure their participation in Sri Lanka's education coalition.

The campaign has taken on a participatory approach from the beginning itself, and will involve community groups, including children, in the design of the message, and in determining the mediums used for disseminating the message. It will be conducted in two phases as follows:

1. A campaign to highlight the need for community involvement in education planning and to propagate the CEF philosophy (2nd year).
2. A campaign to highlight the issues prioritized by Sri Lanka's emerging coalition (3rd Year).

Action Research

A study is currently underway to highlight community concerns and recommendations in relation to gaps in providing education for the 5-14 age group in Sri Lanka. It is being conducted in 22 of the 25 districts of Sri Lanka in collaboration with community-based organisations in each district that participate in the CEF programme. The questionnaire as well as the research process was formulated in close consultation with the CBOs involved in CEF programmes.

The study, unlike existing national surveys and micro studies, encompasses considerably diverse population segments with out of school children and captures the perceptions of the most important stake holders - families and communities - through the use of participatory research methodologies. The survey will be carried out in CEF programme areas where CEF provincial groups are engaged in pilot projects to facilitate advocacy for EFA. This would ensure a link between the findings of the study, pilot project activities and lobbying and advocacy work with government, school authorities and other stakeholders supported by CEF.

The study is being conducted by three leading education professionals in the country.

[Strategy up to 2005 to be reviewed on the basis of the current process]