



## Sri Lanka

### *Country Context*

The right of all children to education was recognised in Sri Lanka in the 1940s. Free primary, secondary and university education was introduced in 1945. The stated objectives of this policy were to ensure the democratic right to education and to provide opportunities for upward socio-economic mobility through education to all strata of the population. Free mid-day meals were provided in different phases of education policy as well as subsidised transport. These incentives were recently increased with the provision of free textbooks from Grade 1 to 11 in 1980 and provision of school uniform material for each child in 1993. The mother tongue was enforced as a medium of instruction in the primary schools in 1945 and progressively in the secondary school from 1953 to 1959, in an effort to eliminate privilege through language.

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 refers to rates of enrolment, was 97% in 2003, and the teacher-pupil ratio was 22:1 (Central Bank report 2003). Primary education in Sri Lanka is provided mostly by the state. The system includes number of private schools and *privena* schools. There are also international schools that are set up under the Company's Act. According to the Central Bank report of 2002, there were 9829 government schools, of which 9,509 were Provincial schools, while 320 were National Schools (NCE 2003; MOE 2004).

However, the profile of high educational attainments in this sector has been changing. The process of expansion has created a highly competitive exam-oriented system, which has undermined quality and relevance and thereby the educational experience and foundation for the future. Reality belies the impressive statistics indicated above. To begin with, the measurement of literacy is itself questioned. 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 urban centres, and a dearth in rural areas and small urban schools in particularly difficult areas. Education reforms were introduced in 1997 to provide children with knowledge and skills to meet future challenges and to contribute to the country's development needs. Despite free education and the range of incentives, parents in low-income communities are unable to bear the costs of other necessities such as exercise books, stationary and shoes.

The ceasefire agreement between Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) created a favourable environment in the 20-year ethnic conflict. This situation increased the number of families returning from displaced locations to their original places for resettlement.

Student population in the North Eastern area and bordering villages has increased due to increasing population of returnees.

NGOs are generally perceived as service providers, often linked to the grassroots through interaction with CBO partners, and have gained credibility through these activities. Increasingly, however, NGOs are entering the policy area in more systematic ways. Particularly on issues on 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.

### ***Key Achievements***

- ❑ Supporting work on building community support for education planning
- ❑ Supporting increasing capacity for community advocacy through the revival of EFA committees in the various Provinces
- ❑ Strengthening community ownership of schools, through encouraging setting up of School Development Societies.
- ❑ Supporting EFA committee structures, complementing School Development Societies.
- ❑ Encouraging CSO networks for the first time to engage in the Global Week of Action campaigns.

### ***Breakdown by Criteria***

#### **CRITERION 1**

Work by network members has been focused on building community support for education planning and increasing capacity for community advocacy through the revival of EFA committees in the various Provinces. Substantial engagement with education authorities has already proven to be an effective channel for raising community concerns. Community ownership of schools has been strengthened, through concepts such as School Development Societies. EFA committee structures are now complementing School Development Societies in some 50 schools around the country. Provincial educational networks have been engaged in planning and implementing a number of field level advocacy-based initiatives, in relation to community involvement, eradicating child labour, support of slow learners, and support of urban slum and street children. A national coalition was launched in March 2005. CEF-supported partners participated in the Education Ministry national workshop on drafting an Action Plan for Inclusive Education, making strong interventions in bringing forward issues of marginalized groups. The media campaign of the CEF, launched in conjunction with the Global Action Week, contributed to district level and provincial level lobbying on the issue by civil society organizations.

The infancy of the coalition means there is little work in Criteria two or three to date.

***Case Study: Community involvement to improve school attendance***

The Polonnaruwa District in the North Central Province is affected by ethnic conflict and highly vulnerable to frequent natural disasters such as drought and flooding. In the Central Province the Ministry of Education directly manages 'National schools' and the remaining 774 schools are under the guidance of the provincial authorities. In Polonnaruwa there are just 4 'National Schools' and the provincial authorities manage 230. Thirty-seven schools have been closed down in the North Central Province due to a 'rationalization program' and the war; eleven of these are in Polonnaruwa. There is considerable inequality in terms of resources and budget allocation.

With financial and technical support from CEF, communities have been involved in identifying non-school going children and encouraging school attendance. There has been increased children's involvement in EFA issues through children's clubs and community involvement in identifying and assisting in upgrading schools under threat of closure. The programme only started in January 2004 but already steps are being taken to replicate the model practiced in the North Central Province. Government authorities have pledged to replicate the 'good practice' in 21 schools in the selected education division through government funding.