

The role of Education in ensuring peace and stability-A strategy for South Asia

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Abstract

This paper surveys the engagement of civil society and government towards peace and stability in South Asia, specifically focusing on initiatives in the classroom. The main objective of the study was to identify the key players engaged in the field of education and describe the nature of their interventions, thereby beginning to construct the story of peace and stability through education in the region.

Key words: Education, Peace, Stability, South Asia, SAARC.

Introduction

South Asia, also known as Southern Asia, is the southern region of the Asian continent, which comprises the sub-Himalayan countries. Topographically, it is dominated by the Indian Plate, which rises above sea level as the Indian subcontinent south of the Himalayas and the Hindu Kush. South Asia is surrounded (clockwise, from west) by Western Asia, Central Asia, Eastern Asia, Southeastern Asia and the Indian Ocean. Southern Asia comprises the countries of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Maldives, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. By other definitions and interpretations Burma and Tibet are also sometimes included in the region of South Asia.

South Asia is home to well over one fifth of the world's population, making it both the most populous and most densely populated geographical region in the world. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation is an economic cooperation organization in the region.

SOUTH ASIA



Since 1947, most South Asian countries have achieved tremendous progress in all spheres. Most notable achievements are in the fields of education; industry; health care; information technology and other services based on its applications; research in the fields of cutting edge sciences and technologies; defence related self-reliance projects; international/global trade and business enterprises and outsourcing of human resources. Areas

of difficulty remain, however, including religious extremism, high levels of corruption, disagreements on political boundaries, and inequitable distribution of wealth.

Regardless all those differences, these south Asian countries share a similar emphasis on human resource development as a key in developing the whole nation to enter the knowledge-based economy and global environment. It is realized that we are moving fast forward the situation in which all nations operate in a global market environment. No country can grow in isolation. We are facing unprecedented challenges, brought by the convergent impacts of globalization, the increasing importance of knowledge as a principal driver of growth and the ICT revolution. Education, as a fundamental human right, is considered very important and strategic for developing their human resources. The right to education imposes an obligation upon countries to ensure that all children and citizens have opportunities to meet their basic learning needs. Promoting Quality and Equity Education is a common policy for countries in South Asian region regardless their different levels of development.

Every country considers human resource development as a key element in developing the whole nation and education plays a pivotal role in developing their human resources. It is not surprising that all governments commit themselves to provide equal access to high quality education and learning to all their children and people. However, opening access to quality education and learning opportunity to all children and people is not always easy as there are a number of constraints. The basic challenge is how to meet these two conflicting requirements: on the one hand the demand for rapid expansion of the scale of provision and on the other hand the requirement to improve the quality of provision. There is a tendency that quality is not adequately addressed (being sacrificed) due to the fast expansion of learning opportunity.

Educational Programmes

Nepal's story resembles that of Bangladesh, in that there are several organisations, both local and international NGOs, working on issues related to peace and conflict (Care Nepal 2007). Programmes in Pakistan look to address both the contents of the present school syllabi, as well as how this syllabus is actually taught. In the past, education for diversity and co-existence has been largely ignored, despite the presence of religious minorities within Pakistan (Ahmed 2007). Today, there are resolute efforts, fledgling and few, to bring about a change in the state of education. There are several NGOs that have introduced peace or human rights education programmes in different parts of the country, including Oxfam, Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK), Bangladesh Inter-religious Council for Peace and Justice (BICPAJ), Working for Better Life (WBL), Bangladesh Rural Action Committee (BRAC), Madaripur Legal Aid Association (MLAA) and Mennonite Central Committee. In 1999, value education was introduced in Bhutanese schools, with an aim to educate students mostly about the moral values of life (Wangyal 2001). More recently, the Scouting programme, under the Department of Youth and Sports (DYS) of the Ministry of Education has resolved to introduce Life Skills education for all the scout clubs. In India it is important to recognise the efforts of the National Council of Education Research and Training (NCERT) that has actively spearheaded a campaign to introduce peace and stability education in schools across the country. The NCERT's two main priorities have been teacher training, to equip teachers with the requisite skills and attitudes; and curriculum development.

Additionally, the NCERT has plans to work with other SAARC countries to introduce peace education throughout the region. Another report by the Human Rights Commission of the Maldives dated October 2006 lists several indicative activities as part of a long term programme for the Commission. This list makes mention of plans to implement a human rights education programme for different sections of Maldivian society, and raise awareness about the Commission's own work. In addition, the Commission intended to work closely with the Ministry of Education to extend the teaching of human rights to all education institutions across the country. However, it has not been possible to verify if these plans were in fact carried out. Nepal's story resembles that of Bangladesh, in that there are several organisations, both local and international NGOs, working on issues related to peace and conflict (Care Nepal 2007). In addition, Nepal's Ministry of Education and Sports has developed human rights education curriculum for secondary school students, with the aid of the Curriculum Development Center (CDC) (Pyakurel, no date). However, once again, there do not appear to be any full-fledged peace education programmes in the country. Moreover, the Sri Lankan education system, unlike that of India or Pakistan, is almost entirely in the public sector, with few private schools and universities. According to a 2006 report, 9,709 of the 10,455 schools are public schools (cited in Fernando, no date). This means that cooperation between government and civil society is even more crucial, but this has not always happened. Nevertheless, there are a handful of organisations and individuals have persisted with their peace efforts despite the extenuating circumstances and their work merits attention.

Problem of Equity in Education

Inequalities in the region exist not only between rural - urban areas and public – private education institutions or among provinces within the countries. There are also genders and socio-economic conditions that result to disparities in the delivery of quality learning opportunities especially if we talk about access to ICT. In India, for example, educational disparities can be seen across geographical areas, urban and rural, between western and eastern part of India and among groups of people with varying income and gender.

The rate of female enrolments into upper secondary education schools in Pakistan, for example, is much lower than that of male enrolments. Ethnic minority school girls are the most disadvantaged in upper secondary education. Only 4 % out of the total number of disabled children are in both special and integrated education. In Bangladesh, gaps in achievement are a main focus of programmes undertaken by the **Ministry** of Education. The programmes such as for English, Science, Mathematics and ICT all emphasize the need to bridge gaps between urban and rural children.

The following factors contribute to inequality of education and learning opportunity:

- a) Lack of available school building and classroom with all required facilities.

This might not apply to countries like Nepal and Bangladesh but most of the countries in this region are still facing this problem.

b) Shortage of teachers, especially in remote areas; That is one of the reason in countries like India and Pakistan there are multi grade teachers where one teacher teaches more than one grades of primary school.

c) Uneven spread of population, which also creates serious disparities in educational opportunity; especially in a big country like Afghanistan. Due to uneven spread of population and the inaccessible nature of much of the country, about 4,000 villages lack of primary schools.

d) Lack of good textbooks and other learning materials. Due to financial and geographical reason this problem can easily be found in remote schools.

e) Geographical location.

There are still many students living in remote areas where it is difficult to reach them or ask them to go to the school due to lack of adequate transportation system or schools. In some places, number of students is so small so that it will be very expensive to build a school building to serve their needs. On the other hand teacher: students ratio usually bigger in urban areas in compare to the remote ones. It is not unusual to see 60 or even more students in a class with one teacher in some of the countries.

f) Student's and parents low appreciation toward education.

They don't see the benefit of going to or sending their children to school. This is magnified by the fact that many school or even university graduates cannot get any job and remain unemployed. In some countries community belief, tradition and value limit girls' opportunity to go to school or continue their study to a higher level.

g) Level of socio-economic condition of the family.

About one third of the population in South Asian, at the average, lives below the poverty line. For poor families education is not an urgent need. Due to economic reason students have to work for helping their parents or for their family and do not have time to attend the conventional education and training system.

In the Pakistan and Bangladesh there is an increasing demand for children to assist their parents in providing for the family's day-to-day needs. Access and equity for the poor become the major issue in financing education in this country. The pressures of family survival combined with the parent's own attitude toward education ultimately determine whether or not a child will be able to stay in school despite the limited financial resources of family.

h) Lack of budget for building more schools, classrooms, learning facilities.

Funding is always an issue in promoting education opportunity as we are dealing with so big number of children and people in a wide geographic area. Many governments have focused their efforts on the easy to reach for social, economic or geographic reasons.

Problem of Quality Education

To understand the issue of quality in education it will be easier for us if we look at education as a system with all its interdependent components: inputs, process, outputs and feedback. Under the inputs we have students as raw inputs and curriculum, learning materials, teachers, principals and other educational resource persons, learning facilities and environment as instrumental inputs. The second component, process, is where all inputs interact in the process of teaching-learning to reach educational goals and objectives. The third component, output, is the product of the interaction among the inputs, which can be seen from the student's improved performances in terms of cognitive, affective, psychomotor domain. Feedback mechanism is another important component of the education system that will give us information on how the system succeeds or fails in achieving goals and objectives.

Quality in education cannot be seen from the output or student learning achievement only, but from other components as well. If we follow the Dakar's Framework of Action, then the definition of quality is no longer focused only on teaching learning and the classroom. A good quality education requires:

- - Healthy, well nourished and motivated students,
- - Well motivated and professionally competent teacher,
- - Active learning techniques,
- - A relevant curriculum,
- - Adequate, environmentally friendly and easily accessible facilities,
- - Healthy, safe and protective learning environments,
- - A clear definition and accurate assessment of learning outcomes, including knowledge, skills, attitude and values,
- - Participatory governance and management, and
- - Respect for and engagement with local communities and cultures. (World Education Forum Drafting Committee, 2000).

We cannot expect to have good quality education if the students are not healthy, malnourished, going to school with empty stomachs. Their basic need for food will decrease their attention and motivation from learning. The significant number of people living below the poverty line in the region needs real actions if we really want to improve the quality of education. The economic downturn since 1997 increased the number of poor people. The World Bank has described the reversal in Pakistan's fortune as "the most dramatic economic collapse anywhere in 50 years". Teachers are essential players in promoting quality education. Well trained, highly motivated, dedicated and professionally competent teachers are very important. This is strongly related to the financial reward they get from their profession as teachers. What is important in improving the quality of education is not only having enough number of teachers in school and class, but enough number of good quality teachers which are highly motivated and dedicated to their jobs. This region has a shortage of teachers both in number and quality. In most of the countries, teaching is not an attractive profession financially.

India has made significant progress in expanding access to primary and secondary schooling in the past ten years. In contrast to access gains, quality improvement has been broadly disappointing. In particular, there appear to be serious urban-rural quality gaps. Roughly one-half of primary school teachers have had little professional training; only two-thirds have completed lower secondary schooling.

The teaching learning process should put the students as subject not as an object. Students must be active in learning and they should not only learn about subject matters but also to learn how to learn. Teachers should play their new role in preparing students for an emerging knowledge-based and technology-driven economy. It is unrealistic to expect the low quality and less dedicated teachers to perform this new role. A relevant curriculum, which addresses the need of students, community and work place, should be used in good quality education. In most of the countries it is considered that curriculum is overloaded and should be reformed. Mismatching between what students learn at school and what the community or world of work demands is also an issue to address. This is the irrelevant curriculum and teaching learning process that contribute to the widening gap between education institutions and world of work, and finally contributes to increasing unemployment rate.

In majority of the countries we are still lacking learning facilities such as textbooks, libraries, laboratory, and other learning materials both in number and quality. In India, for example, most schools in the more developed rural areas lack of the teaching equipment required by standardization of the Ministry of Education and Training. Libraries remain poorly stocked and out of date. Many schools are yet to get a science laboratory. The same picture can also be found in countries like Nepal, Bangladesh and even Pakistan. Not all schools and classrooms in our education institutions are healthy and conducive enough to promote excellence in learning. We need a better governance of education systems that is efficient, accountable, transparent and flexible so that they can respond more effectively to the diverse and continually changing needs of learners and community.

Conclusion

The main findings of the study are:

- There are different stages of educational programmes in the region: many in number and diverse in character. The numbers inevitably vary from one country to another, with relatively more programmes in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, virtually none in Bhutan and the Maldives, and a paucity of information on any possible programmes in Bangladesh and Nepal.
- There are many types of educational projects across the region: individual schools with curricula that reflect an overall ethos of peace; NGOs that either work in classrooms themselves or train teachers to apply their peace education curricula; or peace organisations that have built and support a network of schools to incorporate specific projects in their classrooms.
- Educational programmes for Peace were initiated for several reasons but primarily in response to specific phases of violence.
- Curriculum development and teacher training are the two main activities for the majority of programmes.
- The content of educational programmes have expanded to include issues of social security as well as traditional conflict resolution themes.
- Each country faces its own unique challenges: in Bhutan and the Maldives, the perception that education for peace is not necessary; in Sri Lanka, the lack of opportunity and freedom

for civil society to operate; in Pakistan, the need to find ways to introduce peace education into public schools and madrasas; and in India, making peace education accessible to young people of all ages and backgrounds and drawing together the many dimensions of peace and human rights education into a cohesive movement of sorts.

- Across the region, sustainability is a major concern, primarily because of the difficulties of finding long-term funding for educational programme for peace.

This paper is an attempt to bring together some strands of these educational programmes for peace narratives; but it must be acknowledged that the story of peace and stability in South Asia has still not been fully told. We have much more to learn from and share with each other, of both our successes and failures. Until then, chances are that we will continue to reinvent the wheel every time for peace and stability through educational programme is launched.

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