

EDUCATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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INTRODUCTION

Education system plays a very crucial role in any country towards achieving sustainable development and strengthening social, economic, cultural, and integral development, and is often called as the backbone of the society. Realizing the importance of education, successive governments that came to power since independence, have taken a keen interest in developing and improving the education system in Sri Lanka. However, as the introduction to the ongoing development of a National Education Policy Framework for Sri Lanka indicates, still there is no coherent and long-term National Policy on Education for Sri Lanka, according to the National Education Policy Framework (NEPF) for Sri Lanka (2023-2033)(p.10).

The education sector in Sri Lanka has been severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and the subsequent economic crisis. Hence the objective of this paper is to recommend some concrete policy initiatives to relevant stakeholders to address the problems identified.

However, to pursue a vision of a holistic education for Sri Lanka, it is necessary to examine the issues relevant to all the sub sectors of education. Yet in this paper only issues related to general education are examined as it is the general education that provides the basis for the other subsectors such as Technical, Vocational, Higher education and Early Childhood Education.

A brief situation analysis of the past initiatives was undertaken to provide a backdrop for the recommended policy initiatives in this paper.

SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

In this section, policy proposals pertaining to education from pre-independent Sri Lanka up to the present were briefly reviewed. One of the main features of pre- independence education system in the country was its dual structure with a minority of English medium fee-levying schools for the elite and free vernacular schools, in Sinhala and Tamil for the masses.

The Kannangara Report (SP XXIV of 1943) projected a vision of social change from the inequalities created by colonial education policy. Some of the reforms proposed were the establishment of 54 Central Schools to extend modern secondary education, hitherto confined to urban centers to rural areas, a scheme of Grade 5 scholarship to enable talented students in rural primary schools to have access to the Central Schools, the provision of free primary, secondary, and tertiary education, the change of medium of instruction to mother tongue in all primary schools, and English language to be taught in all schools as a second language.

The new orientation in education policy was also accompanied by a “social policy package” of free education, free health services, free mid-day meals and free textbooks.

Through these reforms, education was expected to contribute to the promotion of social equity, economic efficiency, national harmony, personality development, and character building, in a context of holistic development (NEC, 2003).

The commitment to the extension of educational opportunities declined in the late 1960s. The high unemployment rate due to falling commodity prices and decline in economic growth rates resulted in a shift in priorities. Enrolment and literacy rates stagnated with reduction in social sector expenditure as a percentage of GDP from 4.7% in the late 1960s to just about 2% of GDP. Government allocation declined further in recent years to about 1.5% of the GDP.

From the late 1960s up to the present, several policy proposals pertaining to education have been proposed by successive governments to restructure the education system in the country. Yet, they have failed. As the National Education Policy Framework (NEPF) for Sri Lanka (2023-2033)(p.10) claims, Sri Lanka needs to transform its curriculum, teaching, and evaluation methods to foster holistic and lifelong learning.

Based on the brief overview, it can be discerned that certain challenges run through all policy proposals:

- Lack of a long term National Policy on Education
- Inequalities in educational opportunities-access and equity
- Inadequate public financing of education
- Issues related to curriculum renewal, quality and relevance
- Medium of instruction and teaching of languages
- Recruitment, deployment and promotion of teachers and principals
- Education governance and management

ROOT CAUSE ANALYSIS

Against the above background, a range of issues can be identified that militate against the prospects of achieving widely shared objectives of education in the country.

As the situational analysis indicates, since the 1940s, there had been policy proposals but they have never become a long term national policy sustained over an extended period. The absence of such national regulatory framework has resulted in certain persisting issues over the years that have remained unresolved.

General education is presently governed by the provision of the Education Ordinance No. 39 of 1939 as well as certain other laws enacted thereafter. Many of these laws are now out dated(NEC,2003).

The quantitative expansion of the education system was accompanied only with a few qualitative improvements. This resulted in a decline in educational standards and widening disparities in the performance of schools and the achievement levels of the students.

Inadequate public financing for education is a major bottleneck for expanding quality educational services in the country. Government expenditure on education, as a percentage of GDP was reported at 1.52 % in 2022.

Curriculum reforms so far introduced have failed in varying degrees to transform learning-teaching methodologies, so that learning nurtures human values and becomes a creative process that stimulates the development of generic skills and contribute to holistic human development. At present, school curriculum is heavily content based encouraging rote learning and competition due to the high reliance on examinations.

A perennial problem in Sri Lanka has been the recruitment and distribution of teachers to meet the needs of schools and the promotion of teachers without political bias. This issue is of critical importance as it affects the quality of education.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. A clear National Policy encompassing all aspects of Education should be developed.
2. Formulation and enactment of a new Education Act.
3. Effective measures should be implemented to reduce inequalities in access to educational opportunities to ensure equity and excellence. Priority should be given to increase the number of schools in districts in which GCE A/L science stream is not available, regularize monitoring and supervision of private/ international school education, and minimize the Digital Divide in order for the entire student population in the country to reap the benefits of Information Technology.

4. A significant increase in public financing is recommended over a reasonable period of time.

Further, in the allocation of resources, properly computed unit costs should be employed for each category of school.

5. Formulating a national policy on teaching of languages including the mother tongue, English, and second national language is recommended.

English was supposed to have been taught in all schools as a second language for over seven decades. Yet, the expected “English for all” has still not been achieved. Therefore, identifying the root causes for the inability to achieve the objective of “English for All” and formulating a well-structured teaching programme based on a language policy is essential. Priority should be given to teaching of English before changing the medium of instruction to English. Further, in raising the standard of English competency, the teaching of the mother tongue, and the teaching of the second national language –Sinhala to Tamil speakers and Tamil to Sinhala speakers should also be promoted.

6. In view of the need to make education holistic, it is recommended to review and renew the school curriculum and improve its quality and relevance.
7. Rationalize and streamline the processes of recruitment, deployment, and promotion of teachers and principals.
8. Improve governance and management of education by developing and institutionalizing a well-structured supervision and monitoring system at national and provincial levels.

This paper highlighted the fact that most of the issues in the education sector in Sri Lanka are recurrent problems for which root causes have not been identified and addressed. Hence, the proposed policy proposals are meant to initiate a wider discussion involving diverse stakeholders and provide guidance to relevant authorities to formulate appropriate interventions for each of the policy proposals, considering the underlying root causes of the problems identified.