

## 1. Introduction

Sri Lanka enjoys a remarkable progress in terms of its basic education indicators, compared to many other developing countries in the world. By 2006, it had a literacy rate of about 95.8 per cent for the 15-24 year olds and a net primary enrolment ratio of 97.5 per cent. The primary completion ratio is 99.6 per cent. Moreover, Sri Lanka has achieved significant progress in gender equality in education. The literacy rate of 15-24 years old females is 96.6 while the figure for males is 94.8. Moreover, the ratio of literate women to men is 101.8 for 2006. In addition, net primary enrolment ratio for females is 97.4 per cent and is at the same level as that for male students.<sup>1</sup>

Sri Lanka's achievement in terms of these basic education indicators is largely a result of strategic public policy decisions, over several decades, to invest resources in education and other social services. Human capital development has been recognized as a priority by the governments since the 1930s. The Universal Free Education Policy (UFEP) introduced in 1945 is the most far-reaching measure in education taken by the government. The UFEP was designed to provide educational facilities, free-of-charge, to all students from the Kindergarten level to the University education level. Moreover, establishment of Central Schools<sup>2</sup> to provide quality education, introduction of national languages (e.g., Sinhala and Tamil) as the medium of instruction in primary schools and provision of free mid-day meals to school children are some other complementary and mutually reinforcing policies initiated during the 1940s that have helped to improve school enrolment particularly among children from poor families. Such important actions/policy measures taken by the then governments have largely contributed towards Sri Lanka's current achievements with regard to education indicators.

The commitment of successive governments to improve educational facilities gained further momentum after independence in 1948 until the mid-1960s. The government was able to back up its political commitment with adequate resources for education owing to favourable economic conditions during this period. The government could spend around 4 per cent of GDP on education. Consequently, the literacy and school enrolments both among males and females improved significantly by 1960.

Nevertheless, the weak economic conditions since the late 1960s<sup>3</sup> strained the government's capacity to sustain and strengthen its commitment to education. The allocation for education fell below 3 per cent of GDP in the 1970s. The curtailed expenditure on education was only adequate to meet the essential recurrent expenditure such as teachers' salaries and the cost of expansion of schools necessitated by the increased school enrolment. Consequently, there was a set-back to the quality of education. Moreover, the Structural Adjustment Policies pursued by the government since 1977, led to the further curtailment of education expenditure to less than 2 per cent of GDP during 1981-85. This situation contributed to the

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<sup>1</sup> Figures used here were obtained from the Central Bank of Sri Lanka Annual Report, 2007 and Department of Census and Statistics data.

<sup>2</sup> Central Schools are government run (free) schools established to provide high quality comprehensive education facilities that are equivalent to the best fee-levying schools at the time. Originally, 50 Central Schools were established- one for each electorate in the State Council.

<sup>3</sup> Declining terms of trade due to depressed prices for Sri Lanka's commodity exports in 1960s and the unfavourable global economic conditions particularly the two oil shocks and the international food crises, as well as drought conditions in the country were the main factors that affected the economy during this period.

deterioration in the quality of education, increase in regional disparities in education and slowing down of further attainment in literacy and education.<sup>4</sup>

The successive governments in the 1980s and 1990s took several policy measures and introduced a number of programmes to enhance the quality of education and improve the school enrolment and completion rate, particularly at primary and secondary levels. Provision of free school textbooks to students from Grade 1-11 initiated in 1980, is an important government policy aimed at enhancing the quality of education and improving learning outcomes. Currently, around 4 million students in approximately 10,000 schools are benefited from this programme. Moreover, education incentive programmes such as the free school uniform programme, Grade-five scholarship programme and subsidized public transport for students were introduced by the government with the objective of improving the school enrolment and attendance among the poor children and thereby enhancing equity in education.<sup>5</sup> By 2003, the expenditure on these student welfare programmes amounted to Rs. 1,820 million, accounting for about 4.7 per cent of the total public expenditure on education.

In addition, the education sector has undergone several waves of reforms during the last couple of decades. The most recent reforms implemented in the late 1990s were aimed at transforming and modernizing Sri Lanka's education system to suit the rapid changes occurring in the socio-economic and global landscape of the 21st century. These reforms which were based on the recommendations of the National Education Commission (NEC) focused on two main policy initiatives: (i) improving the quality of education, and (ii) provision of education for all. To improve the quality of education, the Ministry implemented the recommendations of the NEC, covering the span of education from early childhood to collegiate level. To ensure education for all, the reforms proposed strict adherence and enforcement of laws for sending children of 5-14 years age to school. Furthermore, a number of other important initiatives in the areas of teacher training and development, enhancing education in Information Technology (IT) and English Language have also been included in these reforms.

Linked to the national reforms in the education sector, the Government has also implemented the General Education Project-2 (GEP2), funded by the International Development Assistance Programme (IDA) and the World Bank in 1998. The GEP2 included a number of components such as curriculum development for grades 1 - 9, publishing of school text books and other related publications, rationalization of school facilities, supply of quality inputs and school library development.<sup>6</sup>

Despite such policies/programmes by successive governments over the decades to improve the education sector, and the success that has been achieved at the aggregate level, the education sector currently experiences a number of problems. Some such problems include the low participation in education and high

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<sup>4</sup> See Sandaratna, N. (2000), "Economic Growth and Social Transformations: Five Lectures on Sri Lanka" for further details.

<sup>5</sup> A more detailed analysis on some of these programmes like the school text-book programme and uniform programme is provided in section 4 of the report.

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Education and Higher Education website (<http://www.moe.lk>).

drop out rates and low attendance particularly at secondary and tertiary levels. According to the Department of Education, in 2001, 6.19 per cent of children in the 6-14 age categories do not participate in educational institutions. For the 15-16 year group, the non-participation rate is as high as 22.13 per cent.<sup>7</sup> In addition, according to the World Bank (2005), Sri Lanka is far from achieving its universal compulsory education;<sup>8</sup> at present, there are about 18 per cent of children who fail to complete the compulsory education up to Grade 9.<sup>9</sup> Evidence from the literature suggests a number of reasons for the non-attendance of school which include lack of food and clothing, need for the child's earnings for the family, distance to school and inadequate transport, difficult terrain and frequent illness. Furthermore, quality of education, availability of teachers and opportunity cost of schooling are also important factors determining school attendance.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, there are considerable disparities in education facilities and the quality of education provided, among different schools and across regions. *The Regaining Sri Lanka : Vision and Strategy for Accelerated Development* document<sup>11</sup> highlights that about 2000 schools, most of which are in remote rural areas, lack basic facilities such as buildings, desks, chairs and blackboards. Moreover, The World Bank (2005) also shows that the 18 per cent of students who fail to complete Grade 9 are mostly from poor homes and economically disadvantaged regions, rural areas, conflict affected and estate areas. Furthermore, schools in remote areas often lack trained teachers, necessary books and library facilities, etc., which in turn affects the quality of education provided in these schools. Therefore, improving schooling facilities in such disadvantaged areas and enhancing the quality of education provided by all the schools is essential for reducing disparities and improving the overall performance of the education sector of the country.

There is a large volume of literature on the education sector in Sri Lanka published in recent decades. However, only a limited number of studies have attempted to provide a picture at a more disaggregated level. As emphasized earlier, despite Sri Lanka's significant performance in education indicators at the aggregate level, there exist considerable disparities across the regions and among different schools, with regard to facilities/resources as well as the quality of education. Nevertheless, adequate studies have not been carried out to capture such ground realities.

In this context, this study will attempt to analyze the availability of resources/facilities of schools and assess the extent of disparity in resources/facilities across districts, and within districts among different types of schools. Moreover, it will examine the effectiveness of various educational welfare programmes, such as the free school textbook programme and the uniform programme to find out whether the benefits of these programmes are equitably received by students of all schools. The study will attempt to bring together the views, opinions and suggestions of various stakeholders in the education sector (Government

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<sup>7</sup> Percentage of Non-Participation in Educational Institutions, Ministry of Education.

<sup>8</sup> By Law, all children in the age group 6-14 should attend school and should be provided with 9 years of schooling (from Grade 1-9).

<sup>9</sup> World Bank (2005), "Treasures of the Education System in Sri Lanka: Restoring Performance, Expanding Opportunities and Enhancing Prospects", The World Bank Colombo Office, Sri Lanka.

<sup>10</sup> See Aturupane, H. (1998) and Arunatilake, N., (2004).

<sup>11</sup> Government of Sri Lanka, (2003), *Regaining Sri Lanka: Regaining Sri Lanka: Vision And Strategy For Accelerated Development*, Government of Sri Lanka, Colombo.

officials, principals and teachers, students and parents) on resources/ facilities in schools and the effectiveness of education welfare programmes to find out ways to improve the facilities and the quality of education in Sri Lanka, particularly those received by the poor students.

In order to meet the above objectives the study uses both qualitative and quantitative techniques. It uses various (secondary) data sources including the School Census (2004) of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, to examine the extent of disparity in resources (both human and physical) across districts (inter regional disparities). This is complemented by a sample survey of schools conducted in four selected districts that is used to analyze the extent of disparity within the districts (intra-regional disparities). This micro-level survey was carried out using Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) methods and Focus Group Discussions (with teachers, students and parents) of selected schools and Key Informant Interviews (with school Principals, Zonal education authorities and officials from the Ministry of Education and Higher Education). Information was obtained on the resources/facilities available in the schools, on various welfare programmes in operation (namely the free text book programme, uniform programme and the mid-day meal programme) and through the discussions and interviews an attempt was made to bring together the views of the stakeholders of the education sector. As such, this study attempted to analyze the above mentioned issues by looking beyond 'what we see' to see 'what they have to say'.

The structure of the report is as follows: Chapter 2 provides a detailed analysis of the availability of various resources (both physical and human) by district to look at the extent of the inter-regional disparities. Chapter 3 examines the intra-regional disparities based on the sample survey of schools and the results of the PRA , FGD techniques. The effectiveness of the student welfare programmes such as the free-text book program and the uniform programme are analyzed in Chapter 4, while Chapter 5 provides some concluding remarks.