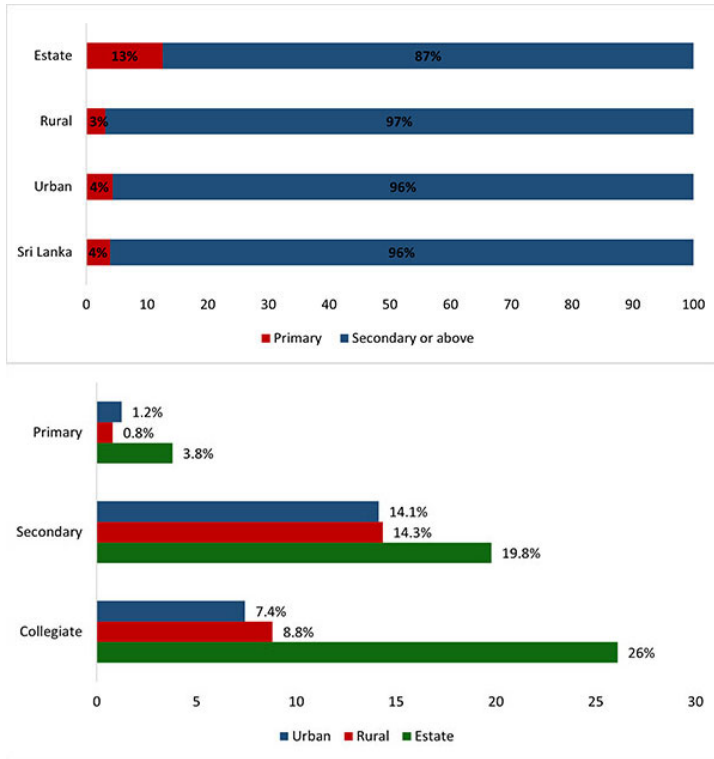


BUSINESS

Rising School Dropouts: The Plight of Estate Children in Sri Lanka

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By Himani Vithanage

Although Sri Lanka has performed well in basic education indicators such as a high literacy rate and near-universal participation in primary and secondary schooling, there are striking disparities across regions in the country. Specifically, the education performance of the estate sector consisting of plantation communities is dismal, with a high level of school dropouts. Based on a study carried out by the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS), this blog discusses the issue of school dropouts in the estate sector and how prolonged school closures following the COVID-19 outbreak and the ongoing economic crisis have increased school dropouts in estate regions.

School Dropouts in the Estate Sector

A sector-wise comparison of school dropouts prior to the COVID-19 outbreak reveals the estate sector to have the highest percentage of dropouts in all three levels of education – primary, secondary and collegiate – with the percentage rising as the level of education advances from primary to the collegiate level, as observable from figure 1. As such, approximately 4% of primary, 20% of secondary, and 26% of collegiate students had dropped out of school in the estate sector. In contrast, the corresponding rates in urban and rural sectors are much lower, reflecting the disparity across sectors.

Although Sri Lanka’s primary education is almost universalised, the estate sector is lagging. Around 13% of all school dropouts in the estate sector are from primary grades, suggesting that a considerable proportion of dropouts in the region may not even have completed their primary level of education, which is an issue of concern. The high percentage of dropouts beyond primary level could be attributed mainly to the fact that many schools in estates are Type 3 schools with only primary grades, which discourages many estate children from advancing into lower secondary grades as they have to enrol into schools far away from the estates. For instance, in Nuwara Eliya district, which has one of the largest estate sectors in

the country, 50.2% of schools are Type 3 schools (School Census, 2020), which influences many children to drop out of school after completing their primary education due to the lack of

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