

Panel Discussion on 'Non-State Actors in Sri Lanka's Education Sector'

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On the International Day of Education, the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS) together with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) organised a panel discussion on 'Non-State Actors in Sri Lanka's Education Sector' at the Dr. Saman Kelegama Auditorium, IPS. The event focused on disseminating the findings of the '[Global Education Monitoring Report 2022, South Asia](#)' which draws on the global comparative research by the [Global Education Monitoring \(GEM\) Report at UNESCO](#). The IPS was one of the six regional partners that contributed to the report on the experiences in Sri Lanka.

Dr. Priyadarshani Joshi, Senior Project Officer (Research), GEM Report, UNESCO, contributed virtually to the event. She noted that the main motivation to focus on South Asia was the region's highest share of private institutions in total enrolment worldwide. The 2022 GEM report demonstrates inadequate public provision in South Asia and discusses the different contributions to education made by the region's diverse non-State providers. To strengthen South Asia's education sector, Dr. Joshi suggested bringing all actors under one umbrella to work towards achieving educational goals by creating an enabling policy and regulatory environment, built on standards, information, incentives and accountability.

Dr. Nisha Arunatilake, Director of Research, IPS highlighted the findings of [a country case study of non-State actors of education in Sri Lanka](#), a paper commissioned for the '2021 Global Education

Monitoring Report, South Asia – Non-State Actors in Education’. She noted that despite Sri Lanka’s free education policy and the expansion of State activities in education, public spending on education has historically declined. Further, the Government expenditure on education is low compared to regional peers such as Nepal, India and Malaysia. The report found that non-State actors’ engagement is growing in Sri Lanka, evident from the rising participation in non-State pre-schools, schools and higher education institutions. Dr. Arunatilake made several recommendations to address the challenges faced by Sri Lanka’s non-State education sector, encouraging non-State sector participation in education services and expanding on successful collaborative initiatives to improve services, efficiency and quality, but under regulation and with attention given to ensuring equity.

Strengthening collaboration between State and non-State actors was reiterated by the panellists who participated in the discussion. Prof. Harischandra Abeygunawardena, Chairman, National Education Commission acknowledged the significant role of non-State actors in the education sector and outlined the way forward for State and non-State partnership to bridge the gaps in the education sector. Dr. Harsha Alles, Chairman, Gateway Group drew attention to the pros and cons of running non-State sector schools and higher education institutions in Sri Lanka. He emphasised the importance of separating barriers between State and Private education and encouraging collaboration between the two sectors. Asith de Silva, Senior Manager – Social Innovations, Dialog Axiata PLC noted that educators’ and parents’ suspicious attitude towards technology is harmful to introducing innovative technology to Sri Lanka’s education sector. He discussed how his organisation navigated these challenges while implementing the Nenasa programme. Dr. Madura Wehella, former Additional Secretary (Policy, Planning and Review), Ministry of Education discussed the gaps in existing regulations, particularly the 1961 Education Act, which does not recognise non-State actors in the education sector. She elaborated on how State and non-State actors can collectively overcome regulatory constraints and strengthen the education sector holistically. For example, she suggested that the Public and Private sectors collaborate on innovation and teacher training.

The panel discussion was followed by an interactive Q&A session with the audience. Apart from disseminating the findings of the ‘GEM 2022: South Asia’ report, the event aimed to bring together policymakers, professionals, and non-State actors involved in Sri Lanka’s education sector to discuss their perspectives on the role of non-State actors in the education sector.

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