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Public spending on education in SL declining but non-state actor participation in sector up: IPS

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L-R Dr Madura Wehella, former Additional Secretary (Policy, Planning and Review), Ministry of Education; Prof Harischandra Abeygunawardena, Chairman, National Education Commission; Dr Nisha Arunatilake, Director of Research, IPS; Asith de Silva, Senior Manager - Social Innovations, Dialog Axiata PLC and Dr Harsha Alles, Chairman, Gateway Group



By Lynn Ockersz



‘Despite Sri Lanka’s free education policy and expansion of state activities in education, public spending on education has historically declined. Government expenditure on education is low compared to Nepal, India and Malaysia, for example, although research indications are that non-state actor participation in the sector is growing, Director of Research at the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka Dr. Nisha Arunatilaka said.



‘Encouraging non-state sector participation in education services and expanding on successful collaborative initiatives between the state and non-state sectors to improve services, efficiency and quality, though under regulation and with attention to ensuring equity, are some



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measures that could be taken to address the challenges faced by Sri Lanka's non-state education sector, Dr. Arunatilaka added. She was addressing an IPS and UNESCO-initiated panel discussion titled, 'Non-State Actors in Sri Lanka's Education Sector', on January 24, at the IPS's Dr. Saman Kelegama auditorium, to mark International Day of Education.

The event was aimed at raising public awareness on 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 is one of six regional partners who contributed to the report on the basis of Sri Lanka's experiences in the relevant areas of interest, IPS sources said.

Earlier, addressing the audience online, Senior Project Officer (Research), Global Education Monitoring Report, UNESCO, Dr. Priyadarshani Joshi said: '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, we suggest 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.'

The IPS-UNESCO panel brought together some key figures in Sri Lanka's educational sphere from the state and non-state sectors. Following their presentations a Q&A session with the audience followed.

Chairman, National Education Commission Professor Harishchandra Abeygunawardena said in his presentation and in response to issues raised by the audience: 'There is certainly a role for non-state actors in Sri Lanka's education sector. We need to improve non-state access to the lower levels of education and to the tertiary level of the structure. Currently, resource constraints face the government. Here's where the private sector could come in and help meet this shortfall in resource-allocation. In these efforts we need to keep in mind the primary aims in education: Providing universal access to education, irrespective of creed, ethnicity, language and other differences and bringing out good citizens. The promotion of patriotism among students is important.'

'However, there is no accountability on the part of some private schools. Many private schools do not get registered with the authorities. The impression that one gets with regard to many institutions in this sector is that 'education is up for sale'. The number of students "passing out" with "top degrees" is astounding. The quality of teaching and the educational qualifications of many teachers leave much to be desired.'

Chairman, Gateway Group, Dr. Harsha Alles said: 'There is no support for the private sector in education. There are no loans for us free of charge but we have to pay all taxes without fail. Currently, there are 140,000 students in private schools. However, there are some 1,500 state schools with less than 50 students.'

'But private educational institutions could do things differently. For example, through the use of modern technology in teaching. The public and private sectors have to work together. But the monitoring of private schools is important. The entirety of the latter institutions need to register with the authorities but this has not happened. We need to work out the cost per student. When this is done it will be found that the cost per private sector student is lower than that of his counterparts in the public sector.'

Senior Manager, Social Innovations, Dialog Axiata PLC, Asith de Silva stressed the need for upskilling teachers. They need to acquire the ability to teach with the aid of modern technology. At present there is a lack of awareness among many teachers on the need for such abilities. They and the general public should be made aware of the importance of IT technology, if not

such technology would be a like a new car that has been for bought for running but left completely unused. It is unfortunate that some school administrators and teachers have a misleading view on IT technology. Prejudices to the effect that the use of IT in teaching could lead to harmful consequences need to be dispelled.

Outlining some ways in which Dialog is helping in achieving educational goals, De Silva said that under its 'Nenasa' program eight channels are dedicated to teaching students from Years 1 to 13. There are four such dedicated channels in Tamil.

Former Additional Secretary (Policy, Planning and Review), Ministry of Education Dr. Madura M. Wehella focusing on existing gaps in educational regulations drew attention in particular to the 1961 Education Act which does not recognize non-state actors in local education. She said, among other things, that 'state and non-state actors could collectively overcome regulatory constraints and strengthen the education system holistically'. For example, the two actors could collaborate in introducing innovations in the area of teacher training.

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