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Education in Asia: some current issues, concerns and prospects

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OPEN FILE: EDUCATION IN ASIA

**SOME CURRENT ISSUES,
CONCERNS AND PROSPECTS**

Victor Ordoñez and Rupert Maclean

Introduction

The region of Asia, which is home to almost 60% of the world's population, is outstanding for the vast range of diversities that encompass almost all aspects of life, whether geographical, socio-economic, cultural, political or developmental.

In the region there are countries of vast landmasses (China, India and Australia) and also island countries lying in expansive ocean areas (the Maldives). Countries with the largest populations (China—almost 1.3 billion; India—1 billion) and the most rapidly growing mega-cities are to be found in the region, as are countries with relatively small populations (Bhutan, 600,000). The levels of economic development also vary widely, with some of the richest countries (such as Japan) and some of the poorest countries on Earth (such as Bangladesh)

Some of the major education problems currently facing mankind are evident in the region. For instance, there are estimated to be 625 million illiterates in Asia: 71% of the world's total, of whom 64% are women and girls.

A few of the disparities that exist in Asia are particularly disturbing. For example, in South Asia the literacy rate is 42% compared to 72% in East and South-East Asia; in South Asia, life expectancy is ten years lower than for those living in East and South-East Asia.

In Asia, some 74 million of the world's total 132 million children (or 56% of the school-age population, 6–11 years old) are not enrolled in primary education. Of those who enrol, at least one-third abandon or drop out before completing the primary cycle. The reasons are compelling and well known: poverty, social exclusion, socio-economic gaps, urban-rural disparities, rampant mismanagement and lack of adequate education programmes. Moreover, gender disparities make the picture look bleaker: of the out-of-school children in the region, some 46 million (62%) are girls, concentrated especially in South Asia.

In spite of such challenges and diversity there is a common thread in that all countries in Asia and the Pacific believe that in order to achieve poverty eradication, sustainable human development, justice and equity in all respects, there is a need to make greater efforts to improve the quality, effectiveness and relevance of education and schooling. The reform and re-engineering of education and schooling is receiving increasing attention from governments in the region, particularly in the less developed countries.

Some key educational issues in the region

The rate and nature of educational development varies significantly in the different Asian countries, the challenge being for countries to formulate realistic priorities and address specific concerns that are most relevant to their needs and their pace of development.

At the second meeting of the Intergovernmental Regional Committee on Education in Asia and the Pacific (organized by UNESCO Bangkok, 8–10 November 1998), countries indicated that the most pressing areas for action are:

- the provision of basic education services with particular reference to the needs of marginalized and under-served groups, such as girls, women, minorities, refugees, the disadvantaged and learners with special needs;
- enhancement of community participation, including the ownership of schools and training institutions;
- development of effective education strategies and schemes for poverty reduction;
- improvement of education quality and learning achievements while at the same time expansion of access to education;

- promotion of greater attention to the pivotal role of teachers as agents for educational progress and social change;
- utilization and dissemination of the new information and communication technologies, including the production and use of indigenous software, and expanding access to the Internet;
- greater attention to the needs of youth with particular regard to meeting their educational needs in terms of providing a high quality, relevant and diverse secondary education, since this is a key factor for social and economic development;
- support for the moral curriculum including international and values education; and
- expansion of higher education, because although for many countries in the region the major challenge remains increasing access and participation in basic education, for more advanced countries continued productivity improvements and technological progress demand increasingly sophisticated education and training, including at the tertiary level.

The emphasis which particular countries place on these matters depends upon their level of development and the particular priorities of government. In addition even when countries achieve some progress in strengthening and upgrading their education systems in areas such as those referred to here, it remains to be determined whether progress is broad enough in scope and depth to be sustainable.

While all of these areas of education are important (to varying degrees) to countries in Asia, the area that is drawing special attention at the current time is Education for All (EFA). This is reflected by the fact that over the past two years, in collaboration with the various United Nations agencies, forty-four countries from Asia and the Pacific have worked to put together comprehensive national assessment reports on the progress and state of education in the region. And the results emerging from the EFA 2000 Assessment, as it is called, are mixed, showing both positive and negative trends on the region's education front.

Ever since the historic World Conference on Education for All at Jomtien, Thailand in March 1990, basic education has been back on the priority lists of governments and in the minds of the general public. This advocacy has led to a proliferation of legislation, programmes and projects, and in the early 1990s to even an increase in the levels of resource allocation.

But all the awareness and goodwill, and all the projects, resources and activities that followed it, were not fully rewarded with the desired results. The literacy rates in some countries of the region remain amongst the highest in the world. But universal primary

education continues to remain elusive even in countries with high participation rates. The gap between girls' and boys' education, between male and female literacy, remains a huge problem; unlocking additional resources to cope with the inevitable increase in demand remains a challenge.

Data from the Asian countries in the first half of the decade showed almost exclusive focus on the formal primary system. But in the last five years the expanded vision of EFA, propagated by the Jomtien Conference, is finally taking hold.

In almost all countries, even where access remains a serious problem, there is a major shift in focus from schooling to learning. There is a growing realization that Enrolment for All is not the same as Education for All. This has two significant consequences.

First, it means that mainstream education cannot hope to address all learning needs and must be accompanied by alternative, tailor-made, non-formal learning methods. As a result of this understanding nations like Indonesia, the Philippines and India are experimenting with systems in which participants of non-formal programmes are allowed to cross laterally into the formal system. And as the non-formal sector becomes more formalized, as it were, conversely the formal sector is becoming more informal or less rigid, adopting mother tongues in the first few years or incorporating an eight-week pre-school package at the start of the primary cycle, as in the Philippines.

Second, it means that inscribing children in a formal system does not guarantee that their learning needs will be met. Recent achievement test results show an alarming percentage of pupils who have been in the school system three years or more who still have not mastered the basic skills of reading and writing.

Policy-makers are also slowly getting over the—sometimes false—dichotomy of quantity versus quality. Under this dichotomy, when budgets are limited, one must often choose between more textbooks and facilities for those already in school (quality) or additional buildings and teachers for those not yet in the system (quantity). The drive towards universal primary education in Asia has tended to favour quantity or expanded access. But several countries in South Asia, for example, have reported that more schools do not necessarily translate into more educated students. This is because there is low participation and attendance when the school is perceived to be of little relevance or quality. Paradoxically, paying attention to quality enhances quantity; providing trained and motivated teachers, adequate learning materials, and most of all curricular content that meets the needs and aspirations of the local communities is the best way to guarantee expanded and sustained school attendance.

When listing impediments to progress, almost every country mentions financial resource constraints. Yet there is a change of focus here that was not evident a decade ago. Whereas the emphasis used to be the push for more money to do basically more of the same, it seems to have shifted to how to make better use of the money already available.

Some of the factors impelling or impeding progress towards the goal of education for all also have socio-cultural roots. On the negative side, misguided or unenlightened interpretations of an aspect of a specific sub-culture sometimes hampers the push for girls' education and the efforts to provide education to ethnic and religious minorities.

On the positive side, the fundamental value given to education, to respect for elders, sages and teachers, the central role of the family, and the implicit faith in the importance of educating the next generation are common across the great cultures of Asia. This accounts for the continuing high levels of participation in East Asia in spite of the economic crisis, and in Central Asia in spite of the government setbacks in the course of its transformation to a market economy. Plotting a strategy of action for the next ten years must take into account these socio-cultural factors.

The data emerging from the assessment of education in Asia and the Pacific shows that if the goal of universal primary education is to be met, national budgets must introduce dramatic, quantum leaps in allocation to primary education, doubling or tripling this allocation over a few years; the responsibility for financing primary education must shift, with all its pitfalls, to communities, the private sector, religious groups, NGOs or parents; non-formal education programmes will have to be designed to assume a greater and more integral role in the public education system; a breakthrough in the design of primary school delivery systems must take place that effectively brings the cost per student down to a fraction of its current cost.

Ten years ago, the Jomtien Conference declared to the world that EFA is necessary—as a fundamental human right, as an essential building block to development and peace. The past decade has proven to the world, through glimpses of success in different countries, that EFA is indeed possible. The exciting decade ahead, with all its complexities, makes EFA more important than ever, and because of this it is time to tell the world that it is not only necessary and possible, it is also urgent and achievable.

Open File on 'Education in Asia'

The articles which appear in this Open File on 'Education in Asia' deal with some of the key issues and concerns referred to here. These are currently being addressed by governments, education policy-makers and practitioners as they seek to re-engineer their education systems to achieve sustainable human development, poverty eradication and equity in all respects, through improving the quality, relevance and effectiveness of schooling.

In his paper on basic education in South Asia, Jim Irvine, the UNICEF Regional Education Adviser for East Asia and the Pacific, examines the recent shifts in UNICEF's strategic perspective with regard to achieving basic education for all. As previously noted, South Asia has the lowest literacy rates and life expectancy in Asia, and the majority of the region's poor live in this sub-region. In terms of inequalities in access to basic education, South Asia faces special problems: there are relatively low levels of resource allocation in support of basic education, and other problems (compounded by legacies of feudal, fundamentalist and colonial traditions that foster discrimination, corruption, exploitation and patriarchy) act to retard achieving the realization of women's and children's rights. As Irving clearly shows, such problems have contributed to a major rethinking of the UNICEF strategy with regard to achieving EFA.

The matter of achieving gender equity is of special importance throughout the region since women and girls are the single most disadvantaged group when it comes to lack of access to high quality and adequate resources in the areas of education and social welfare. Even when education facilities are available, marginalized women and girls are often provided with a type of education which de-motivates them. It also does not benefit them in any sense to obtain the knowledge, skills and understandings necessary for them to achieve a real change in their economic and social status. In his paper, Anil Bordia reviews the complexities of gender equity and examines the major hurdles that currently exist in India and which make gender equity a difficult matter to achieve. A major breakthrough in this regard has been made by the Lok Jumbish Project in Rajasthan, which has been successful in promoting functional literacy amongst adolescent girls from poor agricultural communities. As such, this project has been effective in initiating measures for mobilizing the masses, particularly women, in order that they are able to reflect upon and analyse their current predicament and in so doing move in an organized and effective way to achieve

empowerment through education. The case study provided by Bordia demonstrates that women's empowerment and effective moves to achieve gender equity through education is possible and can be sustainable in a cost-effective way.

One of the key concerns of governments as they examine the expansion of formal education to provide universal access and the provision of high quality education is that of finance. Many less developed countries in Asia are struggling with an enormous burden of debt and the great demands placed on their limited income to improve the social and economic welfare of their people. The problem of 'limited income' but 'unlimited economic wants', along with the priorities of governments, is a reality which often results in insufficient funds being allocated to expand education facilities. It is because of such financial pressures that the financing of education has become a matter of considerable debate throughout the Asian region, with particular reference to such matters as private versus public funding of education.

Mark Bray examines the matter of financing education in Asia with regard to higher education. It is interesting that as countries in the region seek to achieve universal literacy, the universalization of primary education and EFA, many are at the same time also trying to expand access to, and achieve quality assurance regarding, their systems of higher education. This is not surprising since both the first and third levels of education are of considerable importance with regard to the ongoing economic and social development of countries.

There is considerable diversity in the region with regard to the coverage of higher education. As countries in the region which have relatively low participation rates in post-secondary education seek to achieve expanded access (while at the same time maintaining or improving quality assurance) there has often been an expansion in the non-governmental financing of higher education. Bray examines the different schemes being used to finance higher education in various countries in the region, and the implications for the numerous vested interest groups.

The papers by Roger Holdsworth and by Shradha Chowdhury examine the important matter of the education of youth, but from two very different perspectives. Holdsworth argues that as young people stay in school for longer and longer periods of time, most of the activities in which they are engaged place them in passive roles, removed from the 'real world'. The outcomes of these activities are increasingly deferred, with regard to getting a job in the future or else being prepared for citizenship. While for some young people these deferred outcomes will be delivered, for many others a changed youth labour market means that distant outcomes are seen to be illusory. As a result, increasing numbers of students are

becoming cynical and restless: their schools do not recognize that students have views and roles of value, and the message conveyed to students is that they cannot make a difference to their world. Holdsworth's paper addresses these issues by drawing on practical examples from Australian (and other) schools in which attempts are being made to create roles of real value for young people—roles that link them to their communities. These examples, in primary and secondary schools, place students in partnership roles as decision-makers about their own and others' education, and have both governance and curriculum implications.

The paper by Shradha Chowdhury from India is included here to provide a 'voice of youth' regarding education in the twenty-first century. It is different from the other papers in that it is not based on a range of research or reference materials but instead provides the authentic perspective of one youth regarding current developments in education and schooling. Chowdhury particularly refers to the ideas and vision contained in the Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the 21st Century—The Delors Report (J. Delors et al., *Learning the treasure within*, Paris, UNESCO, 1996).

The final paper by Kamal Malhotra examines the challenges posed for education during a time of globalization, and the development and increasing utilization of the new information and communication technologies (ITCs). He argues that the ITCs that have swept through Asia over the past decade have brought benefits but have also contributed to widening the gap between the rich and the poor, those who are empowered and those who are marginalized, both within and between countries in the region. Malhotra encourages us to rethink the relationship between the new information technologies and education in order to ensure that ICTs are most effectively harnessed to help achieve sustainable development, poverty eradication and equity in all respects through improving the quality, relevance and effectiveness of education and schooling.

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The Asian region is large and diverse and so there are a multitude of educational issues that are of importance and concern to the millions of individuals, thousands of communities and dozens of countries in the region. It is not possible in this short Open File to deal with the myriad of matters that are attracting the attention of such individuals and groups throughout the region. However, we have sought to identify some matters which are of special importance at the current time, in order to convey the essential flavour of issues and concerns regarding 'Education in Asia'.