

Asia

The State Of Education

—Suchin Preecha

BNAGKOK—Government allocation for education in Asia and the Pacific fell—in some cases, drastically—between the mid-1970s and the early 1980s.

The drop, says the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), has adversely affected the human resources development programmes of many nations of which education is vital. One of these is the campaign to eliminate adult illiteracy.

Another is the provision of primary education to all children. As a result, this "remains a distant goal in several developing countries of the region", notes ESCAP sadly.

Of the 17 selected Asia-Pacific countries, the proportion of education allocation declined in 11 and remained stable in only one—South Korea. Among five countries where the proportion increased, the jump was substantial only in Iran, Nepal and Thailand.

In Iran, the increase was from less than 9 per cent in 1970 to about 15 per cent in 1983; Nepal, from 6 per cent in 1970 to 10 per cent in 1982; and Thailand, from 18 per cent in 1970 to more than 20 per cent in 1982.

In Pakistan and Papua New Guinea, the increase was a measly 1 per cent. "There are only few countries which spent more than 15 per cent of government expenditure on education in the early 1980s", according to ESCAP.

A major 'casualty' is children who are denied access to the long-dreamed-of universal primary education. Another is adult illiteracy. Asia accounts for two-thirds or 640 million of the estimated 857 adult illiterates in the world.

Among the countries whose education budgets fell drastically were Bangladesh, from 14 per cent in 1975 to about 9 per cent in 1983; Hongkong, from 22 per cent in 1970 to 15 per cent in 1982; Sri Lanka, from 15 per cent in 1970 to 7 per cent in 1983; and Philippines from 24 per cent in 1970 to 16 per cent in 1982.

A major "casualty" from these reductions is the long-dreamed-of universal education of children at the primary school level. All developing countries in the region have assigned high priority toward achieving universal primary education by specified dates. However, many of them are yet far from the goal, reports ESCAP matter-of-factly.

Low enrolment at the primary level remains a major problem in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan and Papua New Guinea. Even in India where the enrolment ratio is relatively high (85 per cent in 1982), the budgetary outlay to achieve universal education is enormous.

This can be gleaned from the target set in the Seventh Plan ending 1990 for the 6-10 age group. Estimates are that 50 million additional Indian children will have to be enrolled by 1990 to achieve this goal.

The failure to attain universal education, early dropouts and the past backlog have led, in turn, to the emergence of a gigantic problem—adult illiteracy. Although literacy rates have risen substantially, the number of adult illiterates (aged 15 and above) increased by about 80 million, notes ESCAP.

Of the estimated 857 million adult illiterates in the world in 1985, Asia-Pacific accounted for three-fourths, over 640 million. "An enormous mass of humanity in the region thus remains unexposed to the world of learning", it says. "Of these 640 million, 410 million were women".

South Asia has the largest number of adult illiterates, 368 million. India alone accounts for 264 million. Among East and Southeast Asian countries containing 721 million illiterates, the highest concentration is in China with 229 million.

In this light, the challenge to reduce adult illiteracy is daunting. Most nations have adult illiteracy programmes but many problems in their implementation persist. ESCAP lists some of them;

i) Because of social, cultural and other factors, there is a serious lack of motivation among women. This ham-

pers their successful participation in these programmes.

ii) There is a dearth of people's participation and inadequate mobilisation of community resources for the planning and implementation of literacy programmes.

iii) In many cases, literacy programme are not linked with socio-economic development activities; and most often, cooperation and coordination between the agencies engaged in such campaigns and those handling other development tasks are lacking.

iv) Literacy programmes in many countries don't receive adequate financial and manpower support. Also lacking are experts to plan, manage, train, monitor, evaluate and do research work.

v) Post-literacy and continuing education are not properly formed and developed.

ESCAP stresses the need of people's participation in these programmes. Governments have to sustain and encourage people's interest and participation, it says.

"Successful literacy programmes mobilises the population and create a vast network of learning centres, using people's homes, factories farms, clubs and other indigenous institutions", it adds. Also crucial to their success are efficient planning, management, training curriculum and materials development.

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