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Together For Children Basic Education

THE 1990 World Declaration on Education for All defines basic learning needs as comprising both essential learning tools (such as literacy, oral expression, numeracy, and problem solving) and the basic learning content (such as knowledge, skills, values and attitudes) required by human beings to be able to survive, to develop their full capacities to live and work in dignity, to participate fully in development, to improve the quality of their lives, to make informed decisions and to continue learning. Article 3 of the Declaration states that Basic education should be provided to all children, youth and adults and that the most urgent priority is to ensure access to and improve the quality of education for girls and women.

All South Asian countries are committed to the goals of the World Education declaration. The Delhi Declaration 1990 and Colombo Resolution on Children 1992, called for access to basic education for all and enrolment in primary education for at least 80 per cent of boys and 75 per cent of girls; and completion of primary education by at least 50 per cent of girls as well as boys by 1995.

Current situation

Perhaps the most significant feature of South Asia in recent years is the realisation by the national governments that education is the key to development efforts. This has been translated into new commitments and initiatives improving the status of the basic education, greater budget allocations, and legislation in some countries to make primary education compulsory.

Nevertheless this does not change the fact that educational data on key indicators in South Asia is mostly based on estimates. The reason is the lack of information output and inconsistent use or definitions of indicators. For example, the most commonly used enrolment indicators, Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), can be misleading since it includes under and over-age students, and increases when students repeat grades. Therefore a high GER can (i) mask the fact

that not all children of the relevant age are attending schools; and (ii) reflect low quality teaching and learning which lead to high failure rates.

The Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) may be a more appropriate statistic but is not available for some countries or is reported as a general estimate. Literacy rates are unreliable because of different definitions and self-reporting.

Issues and Concerns

1. Disparities within countries: National level data frequently masks significant variations within states, regions and districts. Some recent data from India and Bangladesh, for instance, show that some states and

for girls; gender bias in school environment; and few community female teachers who could act as role models.

Another significant reason is the fact that a very large number of primary school age children continue to work and hence drop out of schools. Two third of them are female.

3. Weakness in learning structure: Recent national studies have revealed a disturbing weakness in basic literacy, numeracy and life skills of many children who have been in schools for five years. They have remained passive in learning mainly because the curriculum did not meet their needs and was not culturally consonant or because traditional

The key to ensuring primary education is to go for devolution and decentralisation of resources and responsibilities which can best be done by making a strategic departure from conventional pathways towards a community based approach. SAARC consultations of experts and development professionals have emphasised that the goals for children cannot be reached, much less sustained, except in a new mode of creative partnership between a strong representative local government and the community. The government system has to be restructured at village level to respond to people's needs. A new dimension of support is needed, specifically for social organisation, in addition to technical and financial support.

districts encompass a range on enrolment indicators which is as great as that for the country over all. Consequently, the average can be misleading.

2. Underlying cultural factors: A large number of primary age students, particularly girls receive little or no school education. There are frequent discrepancies in enrolment throughout much of South Asia. Differences are slight in Sri Lanka, Maldives and Bhutan; highly variable in India and Bangladesh and substantial in Pakistan and Nepal. The underlying factors are preference for a boy child, relative discrimination against girls with respect to access to health care and schooling; domestic work and early marriages

teaching methods and corporal punishment discouraged them to carry on.

4. Non-formal education: Although such initiatives have been increasingly recognised by national governments, their success is variable. Some continue to rely heavily on external funding while others involve community workers and members. Moreover full time schooling for boys and part-time non-formal education for girls does not speak well for gender equality.

Planning for the future

There are four basic areas of concern: enrolment of children, quality of education imparted to them, retention of the children in schools and

decentralisation of education. While the focus areas of innovation are diverse, there are consistent themes in the more promising developments:

★ moving to a decentralised service delivery and management;

★ recognising that there are multiple pathways to acceptable outcomes;

★ providing support and giving confidence to teachers and the community that they can make a difference;

★ acknowledging the right of children not only to access but to a relevant and healthy learning environment;

★ moving from one-shot innovations to integrated and sustainable programmes;

★ Within schooling there is a need to move from exam culture to monitoring culture based on deviation from traditional teaching methods and greater involvement of children in learning process.

Weakness in monitoring and evaluation continue to seriously compromise the capacity to tell whether and to what extent, initiatives have made a difference. Much of the information on educational progress in South Asia is based on estimates because of the non-availability of accurate age-specific population figures, reliance on self-reporting in deriving estimates of literacy, and inflated and potentially misleading enrolment ratios. There is need for conceptual frame work for education indicators which can help in moving beyond description of analysis, explanation and development of strategy. Connection and linkages among indicators need to be more explicit and well justified. Moreover, in the South Asian context, priority must be given to disaggregated reporting and mapping procedures. Identifying what works and why, documenting it and making it available for others is the first step for reaching collective goals for education in the region.

— UNICEF