The Constitution of Nepal has paved the way for the country's multidimensional development, with its focus on promoting socio-economic development through federalisation. Educational development is one of the core provisions enshrined in the Constitution and in the SDGs. The constitutional spirit clearly promotes good governance, gender equality, social justice, economic equality, and peace and prosperity. ‘Prosperous Nepal, Happy Nepali’ were the buzz words proclaimed by the latest government, indicating efforts to promote the well-being and prosperity of the people. However, the changes have not been realised visibly at the practical level. For example, the state seems less successful in creating employment opportunities in the country as the annual out-migration of youth ages 18 to 35 is still 236, 208 in 2019. This number peaked at 519, 638 in 2014. Out of the youth population going abroad for employment, 93.2 per cent are male and the rest are female. Most youth are from marginalised and deprived communities and are working abroad as wage labourers, particularly in Malaysia and gulf countries.

About 60 years of planned development processes brought significant changes in social security, inclusion, and environmental protection, but the changes are not as desired in other aspects. For example, there is a large number of people who (18.7% in 2019) live in poverty, earning less than US$ 1.25 per day. Seventeen per cent of female-headed households are in the richest quintile, compared with 22 per cent of male-headed households. More than one-quarter of total national GDP has been contributed by the remittance of migrant workers. The average annual growth rate of the last three years is 6.9 per cent, but Nepal still faces a huge trade deficit and industries contribute less in the annual growth. However, according to the estimates of the World Health Organization (WHO), Asian Development Bank (ADB), and Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) Nepal, the country’s growth rate will drop to 1.5 to 2.7 per cent in the post COVID-19 context. A large number of migrant workers are returning to the country, threatening to increase the unemployment rates and worsen poverty.

REFERENCES:

COUNTRY FACTS AND FIGURES

| Population: | 29.136 million (UN, 2020) |
| 2020 Global Index Score: | 65.93/100 (SDR 2020) |
| 2020 Global Index Rank: | 96/193 (SDR 2020) |
| SDG 4 Dashboard: | Challenges remain (SDR 2020) |
| SDG 4 Trend: | Challenges remain (SDR 2020) |
| SDG 10 Dashboard: | Challenges remain (SDR 2020) |
| 2019 HDI Value/Rank: | 0.602, 142 out of 189 (HDRO, 2020) |
| GINI Index: | 34.62 (Statista, 2020) |
| GNI per capita PPP$: | USD 3,457 (HDRO, 2020) |
| Income Group: | Lower Middle Income Status (WB, 2020) |
| Education Expenditure: | 5.16% of the GDP (UNESCO, 2018) 11.6% of the total government expenditure (MoF, 2020) |
The recent budget of FY 2020/21 has placed more focus on agriculture, education, and health and allocated a significantly enhanced amount. It remains difficult to deny the impact on health on which Nepal succeeded to reduce the prevalence of malnutrition (27.3% in 2019 which was 36.1% in 2015)\(^6\) and maternal mortality ratio (125 in 2019, which was 258 in 2015 per 100,000 live births).\(^7\) Seventeen per cent (17%) of women of ages 15 to 49 are underweight (BMI < 18.5) and 30 per cent of this are adolescent girls ages 15 to 19 years. More than half of Nepali women report having problems accessing health care because of financial problems or the long distance to the health care facility. About two-thirds of women report a reluctance to go alone to a health facility and raise the issue of the lack of female health service providers.\(^8\) While many are gradually accessing the resources for improving their well-being and capabilities, there remains a large number of marginalised and deprived communities, including women, girls, and adults, who face economic and health adversities that could be further exacerbated due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is troubling to note that the crisis will also worsen the already limited access to equitable quality education of children.

**SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL 4 (QUALITY EDUCATION) AND LINKAGES TO OTHER SDGS**

Nepal has achieved remarkable progress in promoting equitable access to education in terms of gender and disability, as well as reaching out to the marginalised communities. The Net Enrollment Rate (NER) at primary level education is closer to the 2019 target (98.5%), but at 92.7 per cent,\(^9\) the gap remains significant. It was claimed that gender parity has been achieved (0.9999 or 1). However, there is growing concern of student retention in schools of which about one million children are enrolled in Grade 1 and only one third of the children remain in Grade 10.\(^10\) Further, the primary education completion rate is 90.7 per cent\(^11\) and the proportion of children enrolled in Grade 1 who reach Grade 8 is 81.5 per cent in 2019.\(^12\) The Government’s annual school enrolment campaign is less effective in enabling children from poor families (18.7%) to enter and stay (18.7%) in school.

The literacy rate of those above six years of age is 87 per cent, 92 per cent for ages 15-24 years, and 75 per cent for those above 15 years of age.\(^13\) This shows that the campaign to reduce adult illiteracy in the country has a decades long history and has not succeeded yet.\(^14\) However, the male and female literacy rates stand at 71.6 per cent and 44.5 per cent respectively, pointing to a huge disparity between the two.\(^15\) Nepal has an adult literacy rate of 56.6 per cent. Literacy and poverty are interrelated as only 12 per cent of children of the poorest quintile are attending primary school.\(^16\) There remains a large number of marginalised and deprived communities access to quality education. Scholarships are available and name a few. The multiple exclusions faced by children, youth, and adults and the efforts in improving literacy in the country through adult and women literacy programmes in order to contribute to the quality of lives of people seem less effective.

Quality education as an elusive concept is another key concern and providing it to all remains a significant challenge. The Education Review Office (2019) highlights that the overwhelming majority (72%) of Grade 5 children are unable to achieve the mathematical knowledge and skills as aimed by the curriculum. Similarly, a majority (55%) of grade five children do not have adequate language skills. The knowledge and skills that are gained in formal education do not always meet the demands of the labour market nor can these be used to generate employment and achieve well-being with the aim of reducing poverty. Poverty and multiple forms of violence are among the key factors that hamper the achievement of quality education in Nepal’s education system.\(^17\)

There are other several associated factors that hinder progress towards equitable and inclusive quality education for all. The health and nutrition of mothers affect the physical and mental growth of children and nutritional deficiencies in children can directly affect the educational attainment.\(^18\) The National Campaign for Education (2019) notes with concern that there are many underweight children, particularly in rural areas, which makes poor nutrition a cause of concern. The problems are more severe in marginalised and deprived communities, such as Dalits, Janajatis, and others who are living in poverty. Furthermore, problems of alcohol dependence, non-communicable diseases, sexually transmitted diseases, and susceptibility to new diseases loom large among students as there is a lack of awareness about communicable diseases and the absence of sex and reproductive health education. The government finds it difficult to overcome these structural barriers and provide children from marginalised and deprived communities access to quality education.

**STRATEGIES TO ACHIEVE EQUITY AND INCLUSION IN EDUCATION**

The constitutional delegation of power (Annex 8 of the Constitution of Nepal 2015 has allocated 22 rights to the local government) to local governments as an absolute right to manage school education is one landmark departure for exercising the autonomy of the local people. The Local Government Operation Act 2017 has further defined and clarified the 23 education-related responsibilities for the local government under its jurisdiction to oversee the primary and secondary level education, but it has curtailed the specific rights related to the educational curriculum and teacher management.\(^19\) The Act Relating to Compulsory and Free Education 2018\(^20\) stipulates that access to free and compulsory education up to the basic level is a constitutional right and local governments should work towards providing free mid-day meals, tuition fees, stationery, and textbooks up to basic level and secondary level. However, public schools, in one or another, still collect fees from the parents. The Act, on the other hand, attempts to make private schools service-oriented with reservation to provide free education to 10 to 15 per cent seats of students. Unfortunately, the provision has not been implemented in practice.

The local governments have several initiatives to ensure equitable quality education. Scholarships are available and

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17. NCE-Nepal (2019)
18. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/252059240_What_is_the_relationship_between_child_nutrition_and_school_outcomes](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/252059240_What_is_the_relationship_between_child_nutrition_and_school_outcomes)
provide support to many girls and children from marginalised and deprived communities in public schools, but in many cases, the amount does not always benefit the learners. Day meal in 48 districts, which was proposed to be provided in all the districts by the budget of 2020/21, along with health care facilities in schools, female teachers, sanitary pads, and the annual allocation of budget in developing learning materials (e.g., braille) for children with disabilities are some of the key examples of equity measures. There are also a number of context-specific programmes initiated by the local governments to promote gender equality, such as the campaign to Beti Padhao Beti Bachao Abhiyan (Educate Daughter, Save Daughter) and the distribution of free cycle to the girls to motivate them to come to school. In addition, Province no. 5 has also managed to provide transportation facilities and other infrastructure facilities to children who have a hearing impairment.

The government introduced the Equity Strategy and Equity Index that identified gender inequality, socio-cultural stereotypes, language, child labour, poverty, geographical locations, health and nutrition, caste/ethnicity, and disability as key equity barriers in education. While the mother tongue language policy was also introduced, it seems less effective due to lack of trained teachers and resources. The Inclusive Policy, National Education Policy 2019, and School Sector Development Plan (2015-2023) articulated the need to ensure equitable and inclusive quality education for all. The plan focuses on encouraging parents and the community to engage in schools in order to enrol their children in basic education. The education policies and programmes developed by local governments intend to promote equitable and inclusive education, however, translating these policies to reality and implementing them effectively remain difficult due to the complexities of social, economic, geographical, and political barriers, such as the dispute in the responsibility between three-tiered governments.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created new and exacerbated existing challenges in maintaining equity in education. The government has started to provide education through Virtual and Online and Distance Learning (ODL) mode, which widens the digital divide as only 46 per cent of the population, this rather more in rural areas, have access to the internet and digital connectivity.

**KEY EXAMPLE/CASE OF INTER-SECTORAL LINKAGES AND INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS**

Education for children with disabilities can be a specific case/example as many of them have still no access to quality education. In the urban context, access to education is 96.6 per cent for boys and 95.3 per cent for girls without disabilities; 90 per cent for boys and 84.6 per cent for girls with disabilities. In the rural context, access to education is 94.1 per cent for boys and 93.1 per cent for girls without disabilities; 79.7 per cent for boys and 69.1 per cent for girls with disabilities.

It is estimated that about 15,000 to 56,000 children with disabilities (out of at least 207,000) of ages 5 to 12 years are out of school. School-going children with disabilities face living and learning adversities. Based on the provision of special education of Disabled Protection and Welfare Act 1982, there are only a few schools or 380 schools out of 30,000 public schools that have resource classes where people with a visual impairment or people with intellectual disability remain for many years, although some of them are included in mainstream classrooms in higher grades.

The government has a guideline for providing necessary learning and living (hostel) facilities in the schools and provides an

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21 Consolidated Equity Strategies, Department of Education, Nepal
22 Nepal Living Standard Survey 2011
Commitment at the national and international forums. At least 20 per cent of the national budget and 6 per cent of the GDP should be allocated to education.

4. It is important to promote institutional partnerships, especially with civil society organisations (CSOs), that can help in achieving gender equality and empowering women and marginalised and deprived communities in order to eradicate poverty and unleash children from domestic work burdens, enabling them to access quality. It is also essential to build stronger ties with other education actors, which will be instrumental in generating more positive outcomes for the sector.

5. Inter-governmental and inter-ministerial collaboration should also be promoted and collective efforts to achieve equitable and inclusive quality education (SDG4) must be scaled up in considering the interconnectedness of all 17 SDGs.

6. SDG 4 should be visualised in a holistic way rather than a solitary goal as many targets of other SDGs, particularly those under the promotion of human capabilities and well-being, are linked with this goal. Integrated approaches should be used in development activities, with the consideration of educational access at its core.

7. Steps must be taken to eliminate all forms of violence, including physical and emotional abuse and gender-based violence, against children and youth. This will help create conducive learning environments in schools, homes, and communities.

8. Education in the post-COVID-19 world seems more vulnerable due to economic decline and pervasive unemployment. Education financing should be significantly increased to meet the educational needs of the children, both girls and boys equally, especially those from underprivileged groups. This will entail identifying their needs through comprehensive assessments.

9. It is recommended to gather adequate and reliable data that is disaggregated by socioeconomic status, gender, and disability, among other dimensions, to identify the situation and the learning needs of children with disabilities. The data can then be used to inform the development of effective programmes and plans for ensuring gender equity and equality as well as addressing their learning needs with adequate support of trained teachers for promoting shared learning with children without disabilities.

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From a study on the status of resource classes in Nuwakot, Dolakha, and Lalitpur with special focus on children with disabilities in earthquake-affected districts. The research was conducted by NCE-Nepal (2017).

26 National Campaign for Education (NCE)-Nepal (2019)

27 https://www.unicef.org/disabilities/index_65711.html

28 Education Act 1971

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The different tiers of the government must work in close collaboration, focusing on empowering local governments and identifying contextual equity barriers. Effective programmes, plans, and strategies should be formulated and put in place to overcome new and existing barriers in the post-COVID-19 context.

2. The National Education Act is yet to be prepared at the federal level. Most of the local governments are waiting for this. It is urgently needed to promulgate this Act to improve the education sector from the local to the federal level.

3. The government should increase the financing of education, especially basic and secondary education, as per the

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NCE Nepal is a national network of 409 member organisations including CBOs, I/NGOs, teachers, education journalists working for equitable, inclusive, quality and lifelong learning opportunities for all in Nepal. Its members include (I)NGOs, teacher organisations, education journalists, and community-based organisations. It was established as the national chapter of the Global Campaign for Education in 2003 and was GCE Nepal and it then registered as National Campaign for Education Nepal (NCE-Nepal) in 2009. It focuses on evidence-based policy advocacy to ensure free, equitable, inclusive and quality public education for all children. NCE Nepal is a member organisation of ASPBAE.