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**Improving educational access and quality for all children?
Reimagining the role of an International NGO in Nepal**

Mariko Shiohata*
Save the Children, Nepal

I. Introduction

This paper presents a critical reflection on the changing roles of an International NGO (INGO) in contributing to the provision of basic education services in Nepal. The traditional boundary between the government and NGOs is becoming increasingly blurred, with the expanding contribution to education being made by them and by the private sector.

The approaches to meeting the needs of school-going children taken by the government, NGOs, and the private sector are inherently different from one another. However, there is also overlap. For instance, the government and NGOs share a common concern for achieving the MDG and EFA goals by 2015. The role of the NGOs is often seen as being to fill the gap in state provision by reaching out to the poor who are most vulnerable to market forces such as the privatisation of education (Bano 2008).

Although NGOs are sometimes criticised for lack of accountability and for prioritising their own agendas (or donors' agendas, more precisely, these days), expectations of them to be innovative and to 'remain true to the micro-level environment' (Jowett & Dyer 2012, 734) are high.

This paper begins by discussing the roles of NGOs as education providers focusing on the Nepal context. It then presents Nepal's enrolment trends over recent years, showing striking gains in girls' participation rates, but continuing problems with dropout and repetition, especially in the lower grades. It also discusses the implications of the growing number of enrolments in private institutions. Finally, the paper explores ways in which NGO education provision might be made more meaningful for its intended beneficiaries in the rapidly changing political, social, and economic context.

*mariko.shiohata@savethechildren.org

Views expressed in this paper are the author's and do not necessarily reflect those of Save the Children.

II. NGO roles as education providers

Recent literature describes how NGOs have been shifting their focus in education from the non-formal sector to more formal, mainstream education (Bano 2008, Batley & Rose 2010, DeStefano et al. 2007, Rose 2009, Rose 2010). Whereas once NGOs focussed mainly on offering ‘alternative’ forms of education, they are increasingly associated with ‘complementary’ programmes, converging towards government formal approaches (Rose 2009, 221). The main driving force for ‘partnership’ and ‘collaboration’ between governments and NGOs derives from their shared objective: achieving universal provision of basic education (Batley & Rose 2010). In recent years, the greater part of donor support for the education sector has been concerned with the MDG and EFA goals.

In Nepal, NGOs are largely viewed as a distinct category from the state and the private sector. Their role is traditionally perceived to provide alternative development by promoting governance, empowerment and participation, thereby mobilising and empowering people to demand their rights from the state.

Save the Children (SC), the largest International NGO (INGO) in Nepal, is not an exception in that it has been strengthening its relationship with the central and local government departments in its education service provision. Since the early 2000s, SC’s priorities have gradually shifted from the provision of non-formal, alternative education to programmes within formal government schools. Nevertheless, the organisation still provides education opportunities for those children who have dropped out from the formal system. As of 2011, education programmes implemented by SC reached around 475,000 children in 33 of the 75 districts in the country¹.

NGO education provision in Nepal, including that of SC, is characterised by direct involvement with government schools, and aims at making the schools more effective agents for benefitting marginalised people. In contrast to policy in some other countries, NGOs in Nepal usually do not adopt a ‘go-it-alone’ approach. The rationale for this strategy is that addressing issues and problems concerning government schools is more likely to bring about reforms in the country’s education sector as a whole, while at the same time avoiding fragmentation of service delivery, and helping to ensure sustainability.

Save the Children in Nepal currently focuses on two major fields of education: early childhood development (ECD) and basic education. In its project schools, it usually provides support in the areas of school management, learning environment, and teacher training in active-learning and child-centred pedagogy. The project activities are carried

¹ Save the Children Annual Report 2011 Nepal & Bhutan

out by local, partner NGOs, often in collaboration with District Education Offices (DEOs). This working approach is shared with other organisations. Avoiding geographic duplications, INGOs' project core activities have commonalities.

Despite strengthening partnerships between the government and NGOs, national policy regarding roles of NGOs remains somewhat ambiguous. The current School Sector Reform Plan (SSRP), developed by the government in consultation with donors, does not place particular emphasis on NGOs, whereas it recognises roles to be played by the private sector. The SSRP clearly states that local governments have authority to work together with private education providers, in particular in secondary education (p. 18, p.23). By contrast, the NGOs' roles appear to be more limited. The document notes:

I/NGO contribution will be utilised for specific development activities such as literacy/neo-literacy, ECED, multilingual education, special needs education, advocacy, and capacity development... I/NGOs will be encouraged to focus their support in non-recurrent type and one-time development activities. Those that are currently providing recurrent type support in education sector will be gradually reduced. (P. 58)

Despite such statements, the tie between the government and the INGOs has, in reality, been strengthening.² In recent years, the focus of education planning and programme development has increasingly been placed on promoting decentralisation, and on delegating greater decision making powers to local government and to communities. School management, classroom construction, teacher recruitment, and school audit are largely responsibilities assigned to schools and communities.

Central to the working model of all SC's education programmes is community participation, especially among marginalised groups. This matches with the government's decentralisation policy, especially in enhancing community capacity. However, there is a subtle difference between the two in their ultimate missions in education delivery. For example, both the government and the NGO are committed to initiatives directed towards bringing out-of-school children into school. The government's main concern is to achieve international goals such as MDGs and EFAs. Whilst the NGO values these goals, its belief is in children's' rights to education. Provision of education falls in the duty-bearer's remit, and the NGO provides necessary support in achieving it. Nevertheless, the congruence between the government and the NGO in approach has provided a framework, and an incentive, for cooperative action.

² Especially after the peace agreement was signed between the government and the Maoist group in 2006, the NGO started to work more extensively and closely than before with the government and within government schools.

III. Nepal's enrolments between 2000 and 2011

In this section, I look into changes in enrolment over the last decade, the impact made by the expanding private sector, and the issues of access and gender.

1. The survival of pupils through the 10-year schooling cycle

The curves in Figure 1 show the survival of students through the ten years of the Nepal formal education system, for each Grade 1 intake between 2000-01 and 2011-12³. The curves are constructed by linking the Grade 1 enrolment in each year with the Grade 2 enrolment for the following year, and so on through to Grade 10. Pupils who started their formal education in recent years are of course still at school, so the curves for these intakes are incomplete⁴.

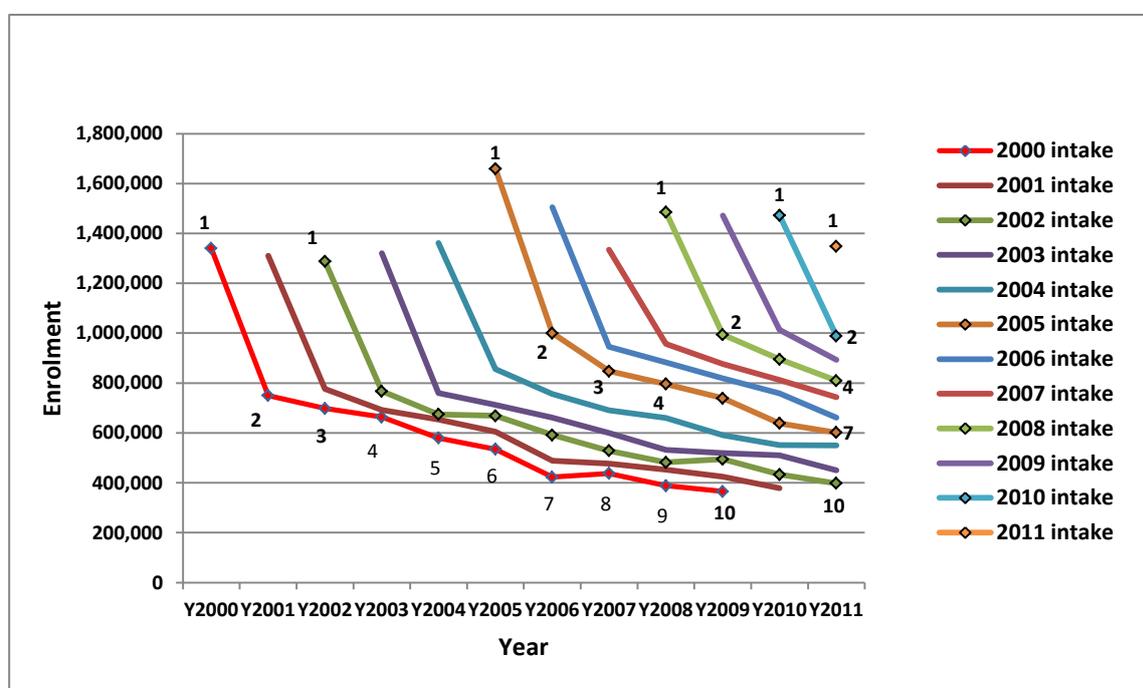


Figure 1: Cohort survival curves between 2000 and 2011, Grade 1 intakes

Notes: EMIS data for 2000 and 2001 were not available; the Grade 1 intakes for these two years and Grade 2 enrolments of the 2000 intake are based on estimation.

³ Primary education in Nepal, starting from at age 5, is a five-year cycle (Grade 1 to 5), followed by lower secondary education (Grade 6 to 8), secondary education (Grade 9 and 10), and higher secondary education (Grade 11 and 12). In this paper, data for Grade 1 to 10 are analysed.

⁴ This analysis method follows the lead of Somerset's (2009) study of Kenyan enrolments from 1963 to 2006. Analysing cohort survival curves is a useful way of examining student enrolment trend at the national level or even at the district level. However, it is impossible to draw 'true' cohort survival curves from cross-sectional data. The curves in Figure 1 are shaped not only by dropout, but also by repetition, and also by children resuming their education after a period away from school (Somerset 2009).

A number of clear-cut trends can be seen from the figure:

(1) Unchanged Grade 1 intake

Between 2000 and 2011, the Grade 1 intake amounted to between 1.3 and 1.6 million each year. It reached 1.6 million in 2005, the year Government launched an enrolment campaign, but dropped back again in subsequent years. The country was in conflict in the decade leading up to 2006, when a peace agreement between the government and the Maoist leadership was signed. However it appears that the civil war had little effect on the Grade 1 intake, nor on overall enrolment⁵.

(2) Low survival rates

Each curve slopes downward, enrolments being much higher in the earlier grades than in the later grades. Over the full ten-year cycle from primary to secondary education, the total enrolment drops to only about one-third of its original level in Grade 1. For example there were 1.28 million pupils in Grade 1 in 2002, but by 2011 the surviving Grade 10 group numbered only 398,000 – just 31% of the original enrolment.

(3) High dropout/repetition from Grade 1 to 2

The enrolment drop between Grade 1 and Grade 2 is much steeper than the drop at any point later in the schooling sequence. For example, there were 1.28 million pupils enrolled in Grade 1 in 2002, but only 767,000 in Grade 2 the following year – giving an apparent transition rate of just 60%.

(4) Relatively low dropout rate in the secondary cycle

It seems that once students reach secondary level, their prospects of completing the full schooling cycle improve considerably. In 2007, for example, the Grade 6 cohort numbered 529,000; of these, as many as 398,000 (75%) survived to Grade 10 in 2011.

The downward slope of these curves results mainly, of course, from drop-out. However, the drop between Grade 1 and Grade 2 is especially sharp. Contributing factors are likely to include:

- *Data collection problems*

In a number of districts, schools tend to over-report their Grade 1 enrolment in the EMIS data-gathering process. A substantial part of the government subsidy to each school, including teachers' salaries, is based on the Grade 1 count, thus creating an incentive to over-report. Pupils attending ECD classes are sometimes included in

⁵ However, the education sector was particular focus of attack by the Maoists. They viewed schools not only as a place for gaining support but also as a legitimate target of insurgency activities as a symbol of the state (Caddell 2006).

the Grade 1 count. The over-reporting of student numbers is highlighted now and then by the media⁶. However, it is impossible to work out from the available data how much the large apparent loss from Grade 1 to Grade 2 can be attributed to such inflation.

- *Pedagogical problems in Grade 1*

The government has been promoting liberal promotion since 2006 to increase ‘internal efficiency’. But for the lower grades, schools and teachers maintain their discretion to decide each child’s eligibility for promotion. Where teaching quality is problematic, teachers’ and students’ attendance rates are low, and classrooms are overcrowded, it is unlikely that all Grade 1 children can acquire even basic literacy skills in a single year. Furthermore, even though the transition rate from Grade 1 to Grade 2 is low, there is no guarantee that those who are promoted to Grade 2 have viable literacy skills.

Interestingly, although some analysts have argued that the over-reporting of student numbers is a recent phenomenon; a consequence of the introduction of the Per Child Fund (PCF) system by the World Bank in 2008, there is no visible change in the Grade 1 intake for that year, or for subsequent years.

In fact, high repetition and dropout among Grade1 students was an issue even in the 1980s, leading to a substantial inflation of Grade 1 enrolments. A survey conducted by New Era between the late 1970s and 1980s shows that among 2,057 boys and 657 girls in grade 1 in 1978 in 33 sampled schools across the country, 46.2% of boys and 48.6% of girls were in the same grade in the following year (New Era 1982). Repetition was the commonest outcome for both boys and girls at the end of the Grade1 year.

Current socio-economic circumstances are of course vastly different from those of the 1970s and 1980s. Updated enquiry into this issue is needed: a longitudinal study similar to that carried out by New Era would be invaluable. But it is already clear that there are substantial barriers preventing many children successfully completing the first primary-school grade, and continuing to the second grade.

2. The growth of private schooling

As in many if not most other low-income countries, private schools in Nepal have been playing an increasing – although still minor – role in the provision of formal education

⁶ See for example, Republica, 20 September 2010, “Government to miss MDGs’ school enrolment target”.

in recent years⁷. According to the EMIS statistics, private schools accounted for 11.34% of total enrolments in 2007-08; four years later, in 2011-12, this proportion had risen to 12.78%.

However, as Figure 2 shows, these privately-educated pupils are not distributed evenly over all ten grades. In the most recent year (2011-12) only about 10% of Grade 1 pupils are enrolled in private schools; but this proportion jumps to nearly 13% in Grade 2, after which it rises more gradually to between 15% and 16% in Grade 10.

Although the data are for a single year rather than a longitudinal cohort, the trend suggests that considerable numbers of parents enrol their children initially in public schools, but then move them to private schools during the course of their education. These transfers seem to be most frequent between Grade 1 and Grade 2⁸, as well as between Grade 8 and Grade 10.

As for the increased proportions of private-school pupils at the upper secondary level, there are two possible explanations. One is that dropout rates in private schools are lower than those of government schools between Grade 8 and Grade 10. The second explanation is that parents shift their children from government to private schools before the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) examination, which takes place at the end of Grade 10. The SLC has always, of course, carried high stakes for the students sitting it.

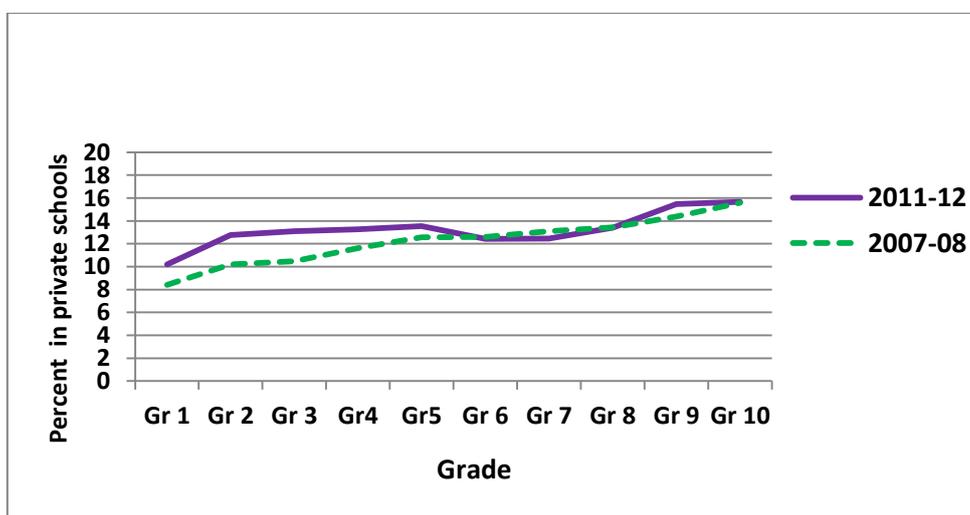


Figure 2: Percentage of students in private schools: 2007/08 and 2011/12

⁷ Caddell (2006) provides an account for private education during the conflict era.

⁸ However, if, as earlier suggested, Grade 1 enrolments in Government schools are over-reported, these trends should be treated with caution: it may well be that the true proportion of Grade 1 pupils in private schools is higher than 10%.

It would be interesting and useful to investigate how private school pupils are promoted during the primary and secondary education cycle. With the available EMIS data, however, this is not possible as the private school cohort figures include those students who transfer from government schools.

3. Gender and access

The rapid progress towards gender equity in school enrolments achieved over the last decade is clearly evident from Figure 3. As recently as 2003-04, the Gender Parity Index (GPI) for the early primary grades was around 85: for every 100 boys enrolled, there were only about 85 girls. Furthermore, it seems that girls tended to leave school in larger numbers than boys as they progressed through the primary and secondary cycles: at every level between Grade 6 and Grade 10, there were fewer than 80 girls for every 100 boys.

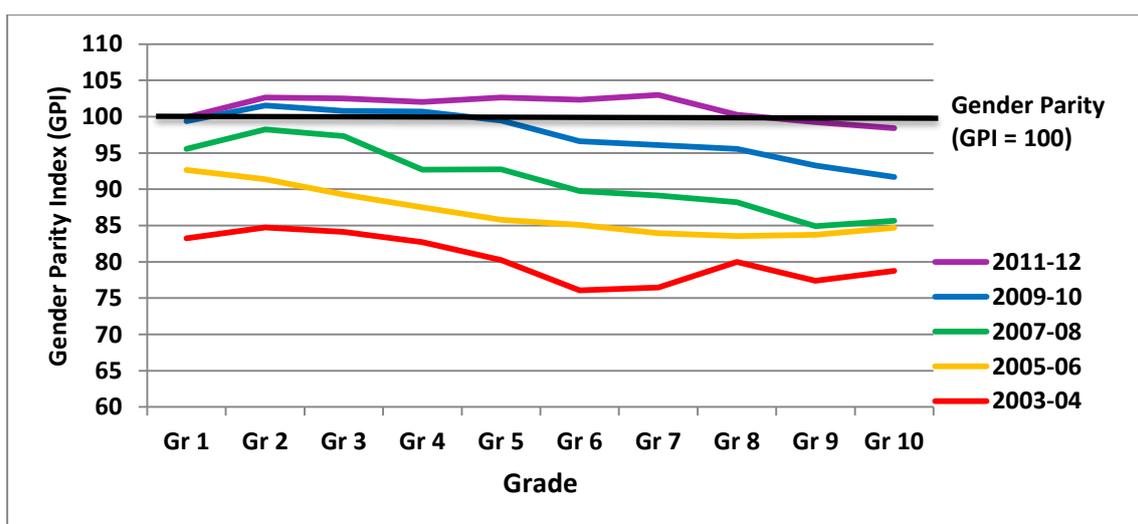


Figure 3: Progress towards gender parity in school enrolments since 2003-04: Gender Parity Index: All schools, Public and Private

Since then, however, the situation has changed dramatically. In the current year (2011-12), girls are enrolled in equal or near-equal numbers with boys at every level of the school system, from Grade 1 (GPI 99.9) to Grade 10 (GPI 98.4). This trend suggests that the more recent government’s interventions, such as Education for All Program (2004 to 2009) and the on-going school Sector Reform Program (2009 to 2015), has had a far larger impact on girls’ enrolment than previous reforms⁹. Given that until recently participation in formal schooling beyond the primary stages was overwhelming a male

⁹ The Basic and Primary Education Project (BPEP), financed by the World Bank and other donors, was implemented from 1992 to 2003, in two phases.

entitlement, this is a great achievement¹⁰.

However, when these patterns are analysed separately for the public and private schools, major gender differences emerge. Figure 4 compares Gender Parity Indices in the public and private schools, for 2007-08 and 2011-12. It will be seen that at all grades, GPIs were much higher in the public schools than in the private schools; and furthermore that the gap widened between 2007-08 and 2011-12. By 2011-12 there were substantially more girls than boys at every grade level of the public school system. GPIs were highest in Grade 2 to Grade 7 (GPIs around 108); lowest in Grade 1 and Grade 10 (GPI 103 at both levels).

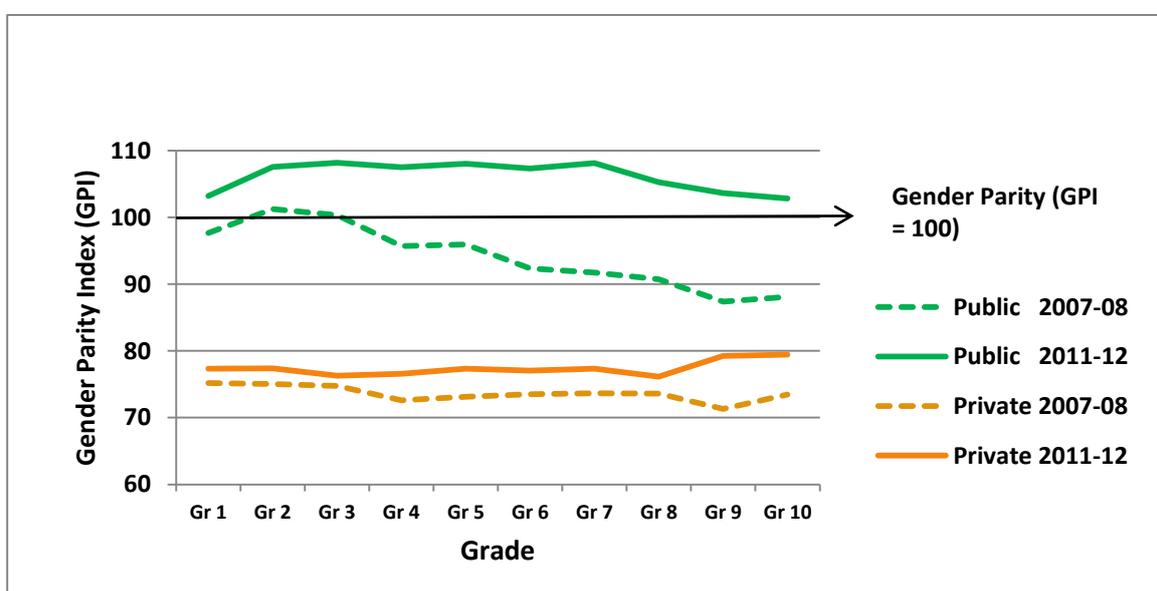


Figure 4: Progress towards gender parity in public and private school enrolments, 2007-08 to 2011-12

In striking contrast, girls were heavily outnumbered by boys in the private schools, both in 2007-08 and in 2011-12. In the latter year, GPIs were below 80 in every grade. It seems that although girls and boys now attend school in roughly equal numbers, parents are still likely to favour their sons over their daughters when deciding who to send to a private school. It is clear that the central problem with gender is no longer that of differential rates of access and retention. However, the gender issue can potentially be related to differential achievement as a consequence of gender gaps in enrolment between government and private schools.

The over-representation of senior secondary girls in the public schools, and their

¹⁰ The government scholarship rate for girls is set at 350 Nepali Rupees (about US\$ 4 at current exchange rates) per student per annum (SSRP, p.15). Eligible female students are selected by School Management Committees (SMCs).

under-representation in the private schools, is likely to have consequences for girls' achievement levels in the SLC examination, and for their subsequent access to post-secondary opportunities. In the 2012 SLC results, only 36% of 326,633 government-school candidates passed, compared with as many as 85% of the 92,416 private-school candidates. According to Thapa (2012, 3), the average SLC score of candidates from private schools was around 39% higher than that of public school candidates in 2004. Disaggregated mean SLC score for boys and girls in the public and private schools are not at present available; they would be of much interest and value.

IV. From the grassroots level: why we support government schools

The Nepal education system currently faces the tension between the two desirable goals: wider access and improved quality.

As we have seen, girls now participate in schooling in equal numbers with boys, but we do not as yet know whether these girls are learning as effectively as the boys. As the government-NGOs collaboration becomes stronger, we as NGOs face serious questions. How much have the NGOs contributed to the expansion of access? Has NGO intervention contributed to improving the quality of education to any degree?

In this final section, insights gained from the macro-level analysis above are used to explore issues confronting NGOs in education service delivery at the grassroots level in Nepal.

(1) Free and compulsory education?

As in many other countries, growing awareness of Universal Primary Education coincided with – and probably contributed to – the expansion of private-sector provision in Nepal. When government school classrooms started to be overcrowded, many parents became concerned with the quality of pedagogy being offered to their children. The rise of private schooling has continued in spite of government and NGO efforts to promote and expand free and compulsory education (FCE).

To ensure all out-of-school children are enrolled, the government has been accelerating its efforts to increase the number of Village Development Committees (VDCs)¹¹ which promote FCE. In consequence, government has shown interest in Save the Children's participatory approach to education-related data collection, called the Community Education Management Information System (CEMIS). This system allows the community to capture data concerning all children, in and out of school. Based on the collected information, the INGO, working together with a local partner NGO,

¹¹ VDC is the administrative unit under the district.

facilitates discussion among community members as to why some children are out of school, and encourages them to take ownership of their data, and to use it to improve school management in a child-friendly way.

However, even though schools accept all children without the payment of any formal fee, the government education system still places burdens on parents and communities. For example, the construction and maintenance of school buildings is mainly a local responsibility¹². Furthermore, most schools employ a number of teachers supported by community funding or through the payment of tuition fees.

At present, the extent to which parents are obliged to make financial contributions to keep their children in government schools is unknown. However, it is evident that community involvement has contributed substantially to the development and expansion of the Nepali public education system. In the SSRP, the current education plan, it is clearly stated:

While there is no well-defined framework for promoting or implementing community cost-sharing, a tradition of contribution to the cost of education has been established. Local communities contribute recurrent costs, and participate in school construction and rehabilitation activities with voluntary labour, materials and financial resources. Under the programme [SSRP], this practice will have to be continued with community contributions for recurrent costs and cost sharing in development costs. However, for transparency in overall national investment in the education sector, community contribution will be budgeted and reported as co-financing inputs (p. 58).

NGOs are expected to play ‘a strong facilitating role contributing to enhance SMC/school capacity in this regard’ (p. 91).

On top of the financial contribution, parents are frequently expected to attend meetings at schools, or to play various roles in groups formed for school management, including the PTA.

The distinction between community contribution and parent-based fee is not clear-cut. Although hard data are not available, there is a likelihood that some parents prefer private schools to government ones, given the financial and non-financial burdens they are expected to bear in the public system. This issue needs to be further explored.

(2) Teaching and learning quality

As is clearly evident from our analysis in an earlier section, one of the major challenges for both the government and the NGOs is how to improve the quality of education for

¹² In the current practice, the government provides a lump sum amount for a new building, by which the community needs to purchase materials and hire a construction company. Usually, this government subsidy is not sufficient for building a block of classrooms and the community needs to mobilise funds for themselves.

lower grade children. Government statistics show that availability of textbooks has been improving, whereas teaching quality remains a serious issue.

During recent school visits in several districts, it transpired that many schools practise subject teaching, rather than grade-teaching, even for the youngest children. Grade teaching is usually more demanding, requiring teachers to be engaged with the same group of children the whole day; whereas subject teachers can often leave school early, when they finish teaching their subjects. Furthermore, grade teaching is thought to be less prestigious than specialist subject teaching. During my visits several resource persons, responsible for providing advice to the schools, argued that government should take a stronger stance on this issue, to ensure that younger children are taught by grade teachers.

In the infant grades, close ties between the teacher and pupils are essential; she needs to know each of the learners well. Her key task is to ensure that each of her pupils has mastered the elements of literacy and numeracy: the system through which oral language is represented through written symbols. To accomplish this, she needs to teach literacy and numeracy in an integrated way. She is more likely to succeed if she is working with a single class of pupils, rather than with several classes.

In SC project schools, the organisation promotes and encourages grade teaching, usually through pedagogical innovation including teacher training in active approaches to teaching and learning. Even qualified teachers often lack the skills needed for the pedagogy of young children, especially when class sizes are large.

That there is something of a crisis in the quality of teaching in the lower grades has been taken on board by both government and Save the Children. It is often the case that the majority of Grade 3 children in schools where the NGO is working cannot write their own names, nor the name of their school.

At present little is known as to the impact of SCs' programmes on learning levels, or on access to continued education and later life opportunities. Recognising the importance of strengthening pedagogy is relatively straightforward, but devising ways to bring it about, and constructing valid assessment instruments to measure its outcomes, are both challenging tasks. Close collaboration between the government and the NGO will be essential, to ensure that reform initiatives are coordinated, and that dual approaches do not develop.

(3) Government, private, and NGO schools

It is increasingly clear that when parents lack confidence in the quality of education offered by the local government school, they will struggle to send their children to what

they perceive as the best private school they can afford.

Even parents who do not have school experience themselves seem capable of making shrewd judgements concerning their children's achievement. Very often these judgements are based on their observations as to how well their children can read newspaper articles or other reading materials. Parents are very concerned with the pace at which their children are taught. There is a general perception that government schools are much slower than private schools in covering the curriculum.

One partner NGO colleague told me that in reality not all parents have enough cash to send their children to private schools even though they might want to. However, the same colleague asserts that most parents paying for low-fee private schools in rural areas would prefer the option of keeping their children in a government school if it offered effective education.

The issue as to whether government should enter into partnership with the private, profit-making sector is highly controversial. What stance should the INGOs take? If poor households are being forced to squeeze their limited resources to pay for private education because of the inadequacies of the public system, the obvious role for the INGOs is to support and strengthen the government schools, so that poor families are not confronted with such hard choices. As Rose notes,

This solution [improving the quality of government provision] would address the root of the problem, rather than the symptom. As such, to avert a human crisis in the face of global downturn, what matters is for governments to focus their energies and resources on public provision of good-quality basic education for everyone (Rose 2010, 479).

Although hard data are not available, it seems that in some cases parents move their children to Save the Children project schools perhaps in the hope that such schools will offer better chances for their children to access higher education or formal employment opportunities. More systematic documentation could provide invaluable evidence as to the factors influencing these key parental decisions.

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