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EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES IN THE SAARC COUNTRIES WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO QUALITY ELEMENTARY EDUCATION IN THE REGION.

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ABSTRACT

The development of children and the promotion of their well-being is a principal area of cooperation identified by SAARC from its very inception. Considering the international efforts to universalize access to basic education since 1948; taking into account the declaration of the years 2001-2010 as the SAARC decade of the rights of the child; and acceptance of DAKAR Framework of Action by the region; this paper aims to provide an understanding of the linkage between the investment in elementary education and well founded human capital. The paper also explores the context in which the south Asian countries have made rearrangements to ensure universalisation of elementary education. This paper enlists constitutional obligations; legislation and other basic regulations concerning elementary education; and management of the elementary education system in the region. The main findings of the paper revolve around the commonality of approaches adopted by the SAARC countries for universalisation of quality elementary education. Data is mainly drawn from the Reports of UN commissions, Ministries of Education of the respective Member States, documents from SAARC Secretariat, UNICEF and UNESCO publications for south and West Asia and UNESCO-EFA reports.

Key words: Human Resource Development (HRD), Quality Elementary Education, Educational initiative.

1. INTRODUCTION

Human Resource Development (HRD) is term, frequently used by the economists after evolution of human capital theory. The core thesis of human capital theory is that peoples' learning capacities are comparable to other natural resources involved in the production process; when the resource is effectively exploited the results are profitable both for the enterprise and for society as a whole. From its inception in the United States after World War II, human capital theory tended to equate workers' knowledge levels with their level of formal schooling, to rely on quantitative indices of amount of schooling in estimating individual economic returns to learning and to infer that more schooling would lead to higher productivity and macroeconomic growth. Throughout the post-1945 expansionary era, the simultaneous increase of school participation rates and earned incomes in advanced industrial market economies lent support to this perspective and encouraged the popular view that more schooling would inevitably lead to economic success (Livingstone, 1997).

At the beginning of the 21st century, the case for investing more in primary education has been made at the international forums for the developing nations. The general trend in the developing world is for college education expanding faster than secondary education, and secondary education expanding faster than primary education. However, according to the World Bank Studies conducted in thirty developing countries show the economic rate of return on investment is higher for primary education than for secondary education and higher for secondary education than for college education. The estimated rate of return which a developing country can expect from investing in primary education is purely economic terms and based on the same study is 24 percent, compared which 15 percent for

secondary and 12 percent for higher education. Despite such evidence, less than half of all educational spending in the developing world and only six percent of the official aid for education from industrialised nations is devoted to primary education. If the poor are to contribute to and benefit from the process of development, rather than being by-passed by it, then universal primary school enrolment for at least four years would seem to have a fair claim to a greater share of both internal and external resource. This perspective considers education as a tool for economic development and competitiveness of the society and the individuals to be educated as 'human capital'. Such studies provided a ground to support new investments in basic education, the very foundation of human development. Emphasis on primary education represents a direct approach to meeting the needs of the majority of children and a direct investment in 'growth from below'. (Haq & Haq, 1998)

In the 1980s and 1990s, a flurry of literature made the case for investing in education based on its economic returns. In the broader definition of poverty, illiteracy and lack of primary education are powerful indicators of poverty. A turnaround occurred in the 1990s and has been strengthened since the Jomtien Education for All (EFA) commitment. Today, institutions such as the World Bank, IMF, Asian Development Bank, and virtually all donors have taken it as an inviolable truth that there are significant quantifiable and non-quantifiable returns to primary education. The case, of course, goes beyond that of showing economic and social returns but is grounded in human and child rights (UNDP: Human Development Reports, 2002).

A multiple linkage exists between education and human security. Primary education enhances human security by allowing citizens to read and think for themselves, to have access to information for making informed choices, to take part in economic activities that require brains and not just brawn, to participate in decisions that affect them both within the household and in their communities, to be able to exercise a meaningful voice in situations of conflict where the uneducated can often be exploited (Sen, 2002). Primary education has, thus, potential to strengthen all dimensions of freedom from fear as well as freedom from want.

Considering this approach of designing primary education for national efficiency, eventually prepared the SAARC countries to endorse the following documents viz.

- UN Convention on the Rights of Child (1990)
- The United Nations Millennium Development Goals (United Nations, 2000)
- The World Declaration on Education for All and the Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs (WCEFA, 1990)
- The Dakar Framework for Action (DFA, UNESCO, 2000)
- The Sustainable Development goal – 4 ("Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.")

These international commitments have given greater moral, though not necessarily legal, strength to the case for universal primary education in the SAARC region.

2. QUALITY ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

Major international institutions tend to agree that basic education in an increasingly complex society requires approximately nine years of schooling." i.e. to say merging the primary and lower secondary level and popularly phrased as elementary education (DFA, 2000). Thus, the elementary education term in this article refers to the period of formal schooling during which the child is introduced to reading, writing and doing arithmetic.

At present in the backdrop of DFA, the quality elementary education should ensure that everybody leaves the education system with three major categories of target skills:

- i. Skills relating to learning the language.
- ii. Mathematical skills required for social and working life.
- iii. Social skills including elements of general knowledge, basic science, and awareness of environment, education, health and citizenship related issues (Ketele, 2004).

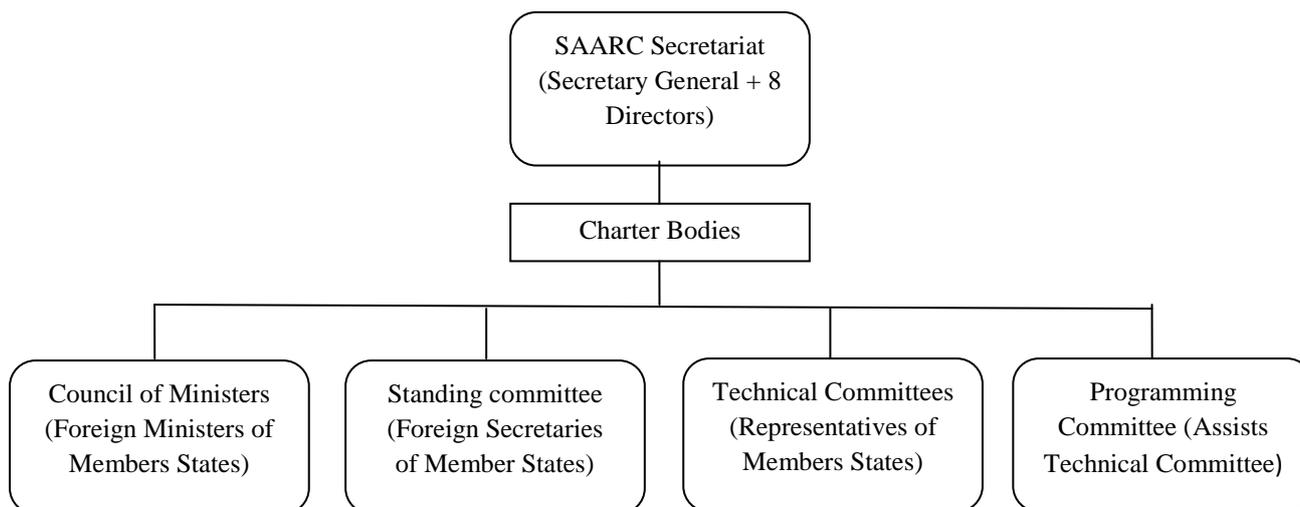
In this paper, the Educational Initiatives refers to the legislation brought in effect in compliance with the constitutional draft of the concerned nation that provide legal basis and framework for the range of policies/programmes focusing on elementary education and associated quality dimensions.

3. REGIONAL COMMITMENTS FOR QUALITY ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) as a regional bloc was founded on December 8, 1985 by the Heads of State of Government of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Afghanistan Joined this Association in April 2007 during the Fourteenth SAARC summit held in Delhi, India . The highest Authority of the Association rests with the Heads of State of Government as shown next page:

Institutional arrangements as discussed above are delineated under articles III to VIII of the SAARC Charter. Technical Committee determines the potential and the scope of the regional cooperation in agreed areas (Integrated Programme of Action) thereby suggesting various projects. Technical Committee on Education was established in 1989. Since, reorganisation of the SAARC Integrated Programmed of Action (SIPA) in 1999, this subject came under the purview of the Technical Committee on Human Resources Development (TCHRD). To strengthen the HRD activities, the Thirty –Fourth Session of the Standing Committee held New Delhi on 5-6 December 2007 shifted the mandate of Technical Committee on Human Resource Development relating to education and skills development to SAARC Human Resource Development Centre - SHRDC. (Sharma 2002). Later in 2017, this centre is closed. At present, The SAARC Secretariat in Kathmandu has a division to monitor Education related activities relevant to 08 member states of SAARC. It is Education, Culture and security Aspect Division. (SAARC-Sec.Org)

Organogram of SAARC



(Charter of SAARC, SAARC Secretariat Publication; Sharma, 2002)

The Association also convenes various ministerial level meetings to focus attention on specific areas of common interest. To date four ministerial level conferences were held on the issue of children. All documents dealing with child welfare reflect an urge of transforming human populace into economically and socially productive populace as shown in the table below:

Table 1: Regional Collaborations on child Welfare

Year of Commitment	Impact / Proposals
1.SAARC Conference on south Asian children (Oct. 27-29, 1986, New Delhi	A ministerial level conference organised before the 2 nd SAARC Summit, Bangalore, India. Brainstorming to identify practical proposals to promote child survival and development. -Impact: i) The meeting identified the basic needs of all children as the principal means of human resources development. ii) Accepted universal primary education as one of basic needs. iii) Establishment of Technical Committee on Education in 1989. iv) Following the World Summit for children 1990 in the region, Member States observed 1990 as the SAARC year of the Girl Child, 1991-2000 as the SAARC decade for the Girl Child.
2. Colombo Resolution on Children September, 1992, Colombo, Sri - Lanka	A ministerial Level Conference on Children endorsed at the 7 th summit, Dhaka: - National Plan of Actions were finalised to realize the of children to survival and participation in the region. - Set common illustrative goals to be achieved through 1990's.
3. Rawalpindi Resolution on Children of south Asia. August 20-22, 1996, Rawalpindi Pakistan.	A ministerial level conference endorsed in 9 th Summit at Male , 1997: - Illiteracy is a major contributing factor in the region's economic backwardness and social imbalances. - Unanimously accepted that it is the duty of the States to enable all children of primary school age to complete schooling at the required level of learning. - Identified pockets of children requiring special protection to achieved target of Education for All- the girl child, working children, children in urban slums, and without shelters, children exposed to sexual exploitation and violence, disabled and displaced children and those caught in socio-political and armed conflicts. - Identified issues related to primary education sector viz. universal enrolment with narrowing of gender gaps; access and retention at school and quality of learning achievement. - Agreed to initiate and strengthen community based social support system, to build enabling environment for Education for All (EFA). - Recommended that the year 2001-2010 to be declared as the SAARC Decade of the Rights of the Child to enable all children of primary school age to complete school.

<p>4. Adoption of SAARC social Charter, 2004</p>	<p>Endorsed the following in the 12th Summit, Islamabad:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The target of providing free education to all children between the ages of 6-14 years (Article V). - Education has been kept under special services to be extended by the government to increase education literacy, and skill development amongst adolescents and young (Article VII).
<p>5. Adoption of SAARC Development Goals (SDGs)</p>	<p>Draft titled as “An Engagement with Hope for 2005-2010-prepared by Independent South Asian Commission on Poverty Alleviation (ISACPA). SDG’s were decided in the backdrop of endorsements being given to convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989 and the World Summit of Children (WSC), 1990, followed by Dakar Framework of Action (EFA 2001).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Goal 13- Access to primary/communal school for all-children, boys and girls. - Goal 14- Completion of primary education cycle. - Goal 15- Universal functional literacy. - Goal 16- Quality education at primary, secondary and vocational levels.
<p>6. Colombo Statement on children of South Asia July 10, 2009, Colombo, Sri Lanka</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expand non-discriminatory access to free primary health and education services through provision of child-friendly education and quality health services. - Ensuring that education leads to employable skills and all children, including girls child and children with special needs, complete at least primary schooling.

(Sharma, 2002; SAARC in Brief; South Asia Democratic Forum, 2017; Saarc sec.org)

A significant impact of aforesaid commitments can be noticed on the national education policy as well as on plan and policy documents, within the region in the post 1986 era.

4. NATIONAL COMMITMENTS

A codified framework exists in all the Member States in form of democratic constitutional arrangements that enumerates and limits the power of political governance.

All accept that primary education for all boys and girls is not something that would be good to achieve but that the government has clear obligations to achieve, as given in Table 2 - .

Table2: Elementary Education in the Constitutions of SAARC Countries.

1. Afghanistan
<p>➤ <u>Constitutional Provision:</u></p> <p>Article 17 [Education]: “The state shall adopt necessary measures for promotion of education at all levels, development of religious education, organizing and improving the conditions of mosques, madrasas, and religious centres.”.</p> <p>Chapter II, Fundamental Rights and Duties of the Citizens.</p> <p>Article 43 [Education]:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Education is the right of all citizens of Afghanistan. 2. The state is obliged to provide compulsory intermediate level education. 3. Teaching in native language. <p>Article 44- Education for women and nomads; Article 45- Unified educational curriculum</p> <p>➤ <u>Legal Provisional/Policies:</u></p> <p>Education Law (Official Gazette 955)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The intermediate (basic) education is free and compulsory 2. Compulsory education age is 6-15 years. 3. Intermediate (basic) educational level comprises grade first to the end of grade ninth. <p>➤ <u>Management of Elementary Education</u></p> <p>Ministry of Education is responsible for intermediate or Basic education arrangements.</p> <p>Dormitories to the Kochi children and mobile schools for nomads.</p>
2. Bangladesh
<p>➤ <u>Constitutional Provisional (1972)</u></p> <p>Fundamental principles of State Policy, Part II, clause 15 enjoins on the state “to adopt effective measures for.... Establishing</p>

universal system of education and extending free and compulsory education to all children ... and removing illiteracy”.

➤ Legal Provisional/Policies:

1. Nationalization of Primary Schools under “The Primary Schools (Taking Over) Act, 1974.
2. Registration of community-managed primary schools as Registered Non-Government Primary Schools (RNGPS).
3. The Primary Education (compulsory) Act 1990- Identified compulsory education age 6-10 years.
4. The penalty clauses of fine (200 Tks) in case of violation of (Compulsory) Act.

National Education Policy will be reviewed and updated after every three years; (NPA II).

Elementary Education cycle will cover primary education (grades I-V called Ebtedayee in parallel Islamic tradition) and Junior Secondary Education Grades VI-VIII (3 years course, called Dakhil in parallel Muslim tradition).

3. Bhutan

➤ Constitutional Provision (2008)

Article 9.16, Principles of State policy states “ The State shall provide free education to all children of school going age to tenth standard and ensure that technical and professional education is made generally available and that higher education is equally accessible to all on basis of merit”.

➤ Legal Provisions/Policies:

Bhutan’s Strategy paper entitled Bhutan 2020, A vision for peace, Prosperity and Happiness states “Basic education is an inalienable right of every Bhutanese.

Compulsory education age is 6-16 years.

In general education, compulsory education is of 11 years:

- Basic education (Pre-primary-VI),
- Lower secondary (VII-VIII)
- Middle secondary (IX-X),
- A parallel monastic system of education is also operated.

National examinations at the end of levels of education namely at grades V, (All Bhutans Primary Certificate Examination) VIII and X is conducted by the Bhutan Board of Examinations.

4. India

➤ Constitutional Provision

Seventh Schedule (Art. 246): Education is a subject of concurrent list that presumes a meaningful partnership between the Centre and the States’.

86th Constitution Amendment Act (2002)

1. Insertion of article 21-A in fundamental Rights: “The State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age between 6-14 years in such a manner as the State may, by law determines.”
2. Replacement of article 45 in Directive Principles of State Policy: “The State shall endeavour to provide early childhood care and education for all children until they complete the age of 6 years.”
3. Insertion of clause (k) in article 51-A in Fundamental Duties: “It shall be the duty of every citizen of India Who is a parent or a guardian to provide opportunities for education to his child or as the case may be, ward, between the age of 6 and 14 years”.

➤ Legal Provisions/Policies:

1. NPE 1986 modified in 1992.
 2. 2% Education Cess earmarked for Prarambhik Shiksha Kosh (2004-05).
 3. Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009)
 4. Compulsory education age is 6-14 years.
 5. Monitoring of child’s right to education by National Commission for Protection of Child rights.
- Compulsory education years are divided into two sub-stages: primary (I-V) and upper primary education (VI-VIII).

5. Maldives

➤ Constitutional Provision:

Chapter II, Fundamental Rights and Freedoms, Article 36:

1. Everyone has the right to education without discrimination of any kind
2. Primary and secondary education shall be freely provided by the State. It is imperative on parents and the State to provide children with primary and secondary education. Opportunity for higher education shall be generally accessible to all citizens.

➤ Legal Provisions/Policies:

1. Annual National Development Plans.
2. Education and Human Resource Development Plan (1985-1995).
3. Education Master Plan (1996-2005) and (2006-2015) with external assistance.

This nation is an archipelago of 1190 coral islands which for the purpose of administration are grouped into 19 units also called

“atolls”. Two government schools one Atoll Education Centre (AEC) and one Atoll School (AS) were established in each atoll to look after quality basic education at grassroots level.

Primary education starts from age 6. In the past, the five-years primary programme was followed by two years of upper primary education (middle school) leading to secondary education. These two levels of education have been unified into one comprehensive programme. i.e. *basic education, lasting seven years*.

The national education system is currently a mix of traditional institutions (Edhuruge’s, or Kiyavaage’s, Maktab’s and modern government and Island Community Schools).

6. Nepal

➤ Constitutional Provision:

The Interim Constitution, 2007 has provisioned basic and primary education as the fundamental right of all with emphasis on ensuring the access to education for female, orphan, children with disabilities, ethnic or religious minorities and other disadvantaged groups. The constitution has also provisioned primary education in mother tongue of the different linguistic groups in the country.

➤ Legal Provisions/Policies:

The Education Act 2001 has provisioned that all children have free access to quality basic education. The government of Nepal has acknowledged the following provisions as an obligation:

1. Compulsory education age is 5-13 years.
2. Basic and Primary Education Master Plan (1991-2001)
3. The National Education Commission (1992).
4. School Sector Reform Plan (2009-15).

7. Pakistan

➤ Constitutional Provision

Chapter 2 principles of Policy Article 37 (b), “the state shall remove illiteracy and provide free and compulsory secondary education within minimum possible period”.

➤ Legal Provisions/Policies:

National Education Policy (1998-2010) envisages:

1. Promulgation and enforcement of free and compulsory primary education act in a phased manner.
2. Official age for primary education shall be 6 to 10 years.

Elementary Education in Pakistan has two stages:

- First stage- I to V (6 to 10)
- Second stage- VI to VIII (11 to 13)

However, at the end of the fifth and eighth year of the primary stage a public examination is held by the education department for promotion to the next grade and award of merit scholarship.

8. Sri Lanka

➤ Constitutional Provision

Chapter VI , Directive Principle of State Policy and Fundamental Duties, Article 27.2 h , states “complete eradication of illiteracy and assurance to all persons of the right to universal and equal access to education at all levels.”

➤ Legal Provision/Policies:

The Education ordinance NO. 31 of 1939 is the basic law of education in Sri Lanka.

Compulsory Education Act 1997 required the state to ensure compulsory attendance of children in the age ranging from 5-14 years and a two tier school structure with a 9 years elementary school, and a 4 year senior school.

(Constitutional draft of respective countries; Pylee, 2006; EFA Mid Decade Assessment Report of respective countries retrieved from www.Planipolis.iiep.unesco.org ; Gabriele, 2000; Kazmi, 2005; UNDP 1990; Vision 2020 of Maldives government; UNICEF, .2000)

To translate foregoing commitments into actions, a number of programmes have been strategized and implemented. Government heads have pursued a ten-fold strategy consisting of:

- (i) Health and well-nourished learners, supported in learning by their families and communities;
- (ii) Habitation as a unit of planning;
- (iii) Removing economic barriers through free of cost or highly subsidized delivery systems;
- (iv) Focused communication strategies to influence the disadvantaged groups of respective member’s society;
- (v) Arrangement of basic needs in the school- drinking water, toilet, safe environment, and in disadvantaged place, day time meal;
- (vi) An inclusive environment, socially, culturally, linguistically, and physically;
- (vii) Decentralized structure of basic education management is one of the priorities of the government. Under this strategy, Primary Education Directorates, Village Education Committees/School Management Committees have been set up in the provinces at grassroots level;
- (viii) Primary education in mother tongue;
- (ix) Attention to teacher capability building to ensure continuity of reforms;
- (x) Increased focus on specification and measurement of learner’s achievement level; and

- (xi) External assistance has been taken for educational reconstruction, partnership with NGOs and community Based Organizations (CBOs). (UNICEF, /2000/2005)

Thus, a well designed national plan of action supported by pragmatic frameworks have contributed significantly in creating new schooling facilities or improving the existing ones including the various aspect of training and capacity building at various levels.

5. REAFFIRMATION

A house to house campaign approach has created mass awareness about direct/indirect benefits of schooling within the region. Under the principles and guidelines of good governance, now the Government Heads believe that citizens should receive at least eight years to schooling in order to fully express their voice and exercise their civic responsibilities. Some other measurable achievements include improvement in enrolment and retention rate, decline in gender gap and drop out percentage. A major strategic change in planning approach of the governments is an increase in the share of national budget to education. However, Government Heads are targeting minimum quality package adhering to basic learning conditions and standards that may decelerate the action plans progress. The current challenges in guaranteeing quality elementary education are:

- i) Quality classroom experiences that will in still in our students a love for life-long learning.
- ii) Increasing relevance of teaching-learning material, fitting it to our context as well as diversifying and giving choices to our children.
- iii) Balancing access with quality.
- iv) A teacher who can transform teaching-learning material into practice with satisfactory minimum level of learning.
- v) Private schools are an alternate track and a challenge to public schools.
- vi) Information management systems are not updated for regular information on access, retention, completion, learning, and social equity so that accountabilities can be monitored.
- vii) Accountability chains are not agreed upon and established, along with mechanisms for their implementation and for monitoring.

A healthy democracy with involved citizens begins with children. The case for universal quality elementary education and its acceleration are founded on political, human, and child rights. Getting all children to school, keeping them there, and ensuring that they are learning must remain the top priority for all countries in the SAARC region for achieving higher levels of human development.

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