ELEMENTRY EDUCATION AND CHILD LABOUR IN INDIA

Elementary education and child labour are intimately linked. The mission of the recent Global March Against Child Labour in which thousands of organizations in almost 100 countries participated acknowledges this clearly: 'to mobilise world-wide efforts to protect and promote the rights of all children, especially the right to receive a free, meaningful education and to be free from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be damaging to the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development' . The National Human Rights Commission of India recently stated that child labour can never be eradicated unless compulsory primary education up to the age of 14 is implemented.

This paper explores the relation between elementary education and the phenomenon of child labour in India. But it also goes beyond that by quoting recent research work indicating that there are quite a number of non-working children who are not going to school either. The paper questions whether poverty is really the most important reason for child labour and consequently low school participation in India. Parental motivation for education and the quality of (elementary) education are other factors being highlighted in the search for the reasons of low school participation and high incidence of child labour. The gender dimension of elementary education and child labour - girls get far less education and work much more than boys - is explored as well.

Is non-formal education the solution to educate presently working children or is it continuing the problem? A section on this question precedes the closely linked wider question what the Indian government has done to tackle the problems of child labour from the education angle. Subsequently the role of NGO's in basic education is highlighted and the example of the MV Foundation is given to show that NGO's can have a significant impact in reducing child labour by 'child labour withdrawal strategies' linked to putting pressure on the existing school system to improve its functioning.

International donor policy with regard to child labour and education is exemplified by the nation-wide District Primary Education Programme funded by a large number of bilateral donors, the European Union and the World Bank. The paper also makes some remarks on North-South coalitions in the field of child labour and education.

Finally some policy conclusions are drawn.

Poverty **as the main reason for low school participation?**

A very widely held belief regarding India's poor performance in education is that the demand for elementary education is low because of the large scale poverty in this country. It is commonly put forward by many, including officials in India, that the poor cannot afford to send their children to school. According to this view it is a 'harsh reality' that poor parents simply cannot miss the income of their children as wage workers or household help in order to make ends meet.

The problem is massive. According to official estimates around half of the children (between 6 and 14 - around 90 million - are not attending school but most probably the number comes closer to 115 million.

Is it true that so many poor households cannot do without the labour of their children and

that therefore many poor parents have to decide not to send their child to school? It is clear that there is a factual correlation - but not necessarily a causal relationship - between poverty and low schooling levels if one looks at the school participation of poorer sections of the population. At the same time however all the available evidence points to the fact that the poverty constraint at the household level can be overcome by appropriate interventions.
A comparison between the states of Kerala and Uttar Pradesh in India for example defies the claim that it is predominantly poverty that prevents the poor from sending their children to school. In both states the proportion of people living below the poverty line is around 45%. Nevertheless Kerala has an average literacy rate of 90% whereas in Uttar Pradesh this figure is around 40%. In terms of average income per capita Kerala is in the middle range of Indian states, but it spends much more on primary education.

It is a well-established fact that children in India are working on a large scale in the household, in family enterprises or in income-earning activities outside the home. It is however not so well-established how many children are working, how much time they spend on that work and how much is the income thus earned or saved (by allowing parents to earn income). Estimations of the number of working children vary from 11 million to at least 90 million children. The former figure is from the Census of 1991 while the latter is based on the official number of non-school attending children. Unofficial estimates of the number of non-school going children go up to 114 million.
It is usually assumed that (almost) all non-school going children are working a major part of the day. But if one looks at the number of working children mentioned by anti-child labour organizations such as the South Asian Coalition on Child Servitude (SACCS) - 55 to 60 million - it shows that there is a large group of children who are neither in school nor at work most of their time. This is corroborated by a recent survey (the Public Report on Basic Education -PROBE- survey) in four of the poorest and most child-labour endemic states: Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. The survey indicated that one third of the children had not done any work during school hours on the day preceding the survey. The same study showed that 18% of the out-of-school children worked more than eight hours, while about half worked less than three hours.

The surprising figures about the relatively short time spend on either household work or income-earning activities of most out-of-school children are supported by a large number of other field-level investigations in different states of India (Kiran Bhatty, Economic and Political Weekly, July 4, 1997). The author states that all available studies indicate that domestic work is the most common and regular kind of work. Especially girls spent on average twice to sometimes even three times as much time working as boys, mostly on domestic duties. The studies he quotes nevertheless indicate that especially young children up to 10 devote about 1 to 4 hours (the latter only in the agricultural peak season) on average to both domestic and (other) productive work. For the older age group of 10 to 14 years this increases while 'it is only after the age of 15 that children begin to make substantial contributions (Bhatty)'. If non-school participation would be largely driven by the time devoted by children to household and income-earning activities one would expect that drop-outs from primary school would increase with age as the time devoted to these activities is increasing. The opposite is the case. Most studies show that drop-outs tends to be heavily concentrated in grades 1 and 2, which suggests other reasons for dropping out than poverty and work.

He also points at the 'apathy of the people' but relates this to a 'fundamental lacuna in our democracy: the failure to provide an organized means of putting pressure and demanding change' as well as to the 'continued social and political marginalization of large sections of the population, particularly of the poor'. Also recent Nobel prize winner Amartya Sen writes in his book 'Economic Opportunity Development and Social Opportunity' (1995)', co-authored by PROBE coordinator Jean Dreze: 'The fact that the government was able to get away with so much neglect in the field of primary education relates to the lack of political clout of the illiterate masses'.
There are however a number of cases where 'putting pressure and demanding change' did have important effects on the provision of good primary education, also for presently working children. We will come to them later.

Summing up: the fact that children work rather than go to school does not necessarily mean that poverty or parental disinterest is to blame for their failure to attend school. Looking at the evidence it is the other way around: children work or remain idle because school-going is not possible or very unattractive. Parents often use the labour of their children after they have dropped out of school, for reasons unconnected to poverty. Bhatty calls it 'child labour as a default activity' and concludes that 'parents are keen to educate their children provided they are assured of basic quality'.
Even in cases where poverty is a real constraint, it has been shown regularly - also in the example of an NGO whose work will be described later - that parents are willing to make sacrifices for the education of their children if a decent form of primary education is offered. Incentive programmes like free midday-meals can also be of help but are not a substitute for good primary education.

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1 NFE
2 EDUCATION OF CHILD LABOURERS
3 NGO INITIATIVES

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