

A study on the child development programs conducted by the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This research paper is concerned with the child care and educational role performed by the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress (ACBC) contributing to the national effort of fulfilling the UN millennium development goals of providing primary education for all children. The ACBC, established in 1919, is the oldest and prominent national representative Buddhist organization in Sri Lanka and it has been working for the advancement of Buddhist religious affairs and the welfare and development children deserving the intervention of a third party. Child development centers can be introduced as one of main development programs, the ACBC has been conducting for

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decades for the children lacking proper parental care. In achieving this goal, socially marginalized children deserve special attention as they hardly have a chance to enjoy the available opportunities through their own families. It is in this context the child development centers of the ACBC have come to play a vital role providing primary and secondary education for more than 800 children. A research study was conducted selecting a sample of 5 child development centers out of 17, with the objective of ascertaining their functional contribution. The five centers have been facilitating the primary education of 80 children, and data was collected through focused group interviews with all the students and 15 staff members. All the children had sought the institutional care after being deprived of parental care and the centers have been playing a decisive role in socializing them. Protection from child abuse, provision of basic needs, facilitation of primary education at government schools, development of life skills and personality required for competing with peers with parental care, and creation of family-like social environment in the child centers and the inculcation of Buddhist values, are the prominent functions identified. Primary school educational performances were also studied to assess the quality of it. As the findings indicate, over 65 % of those have a progressive development comparable with the peers with proper parental care and affection. Their educational achievements have been source of inspiration and motivation for the social workers of the child centers to educate those children enthusiastically. Accordingly, it is concluded that the provision of primary education for socially marginalized children can be successfully accomplished through institutional intervention of Buddhist organizations.

Introduction

This paper is concerned with the significant contribution made by the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress to achieve the UN millennium goal of universal primary education. Even though the millennium development goals are universal, their quantitative and qualitative realization depends on the strategies adopted by an individual country considering the situation at grass root level. Mere development of learning environments may not solve the problem unless the basic needs of children are met and thereby facilitate and enable them to

have a qualitative primary education. Basic needs of children are predominantly accomplished by the family, and this social institution facilitates the primary education of majority of children in Sri Lanka. But the problem remains with the children lacking proper parental care due to variety of reasons. The All Ceylon Buddhist Congress (ACBC) addresses this problem through institutional care and other extended services. This research study brings to light its contribution with the intention of revealing the potentials of Buddhist organizational participation in national development.

Research problem

Research problem is articulated on the issue of dealing with those who are deprived of primary education due to lack of the care of family. A considerable number of such children are looked after by the institutes run by the state and the nongovernmental organizations, where as some still remain in streets or as child laborers. It is in this social context, the ACBC has paid its special attention to look after such children and provide them with primary and secondary education. The research was designed to explore the nature of institutional and other services rendered by the ACBC for the quantitative and qualitative development of primary education of such children.

Objectives of the research

To review Sri Lanka's performance in the accomplishment of UN millennium development goals.

To explore the institutional and other approaches adopted by the ACBC to provide primary education for children without the care of family.

To ascertain the quality of primary education provided through the institutional care.

Methodology

Data was gathered from primary and secondary sources. A sample of five Child Development Centers out of 17 was selected. There were

80 children and data was collected through focus group interviews with all the students and 15 staff members. Observations also provided important data on the institutions and children's behavior. Secondary data were sourced from the documents available at the organizations and relevant other institutions. Lack of official statistics compelled to depend on the available and assess the country situation on them.

Achievement of millennium development goals; Sri Lanka's performance

As survey reports and MDGs country reports reveal, Sri Lanka has successfully achieved most of the national targets of MDGs even before the prescribed year of 2015. During the period 1991-2012 Sri Lanka has reached an economic development that ranged around 4 to 7 percent (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2012). Economic growth is an indispensable prerequisite of achieving not only the goal of reducing absolute poverty but also the other goals. Sri Lanka's economic development has not been proceeding without challenges. The war which protracted for nearly 30 years posed the biggest challenge until it came to an end in 2009. The human, social and material cost of war had a serious impact on the economic growth. However, Sri Lanka has managed to sustain economic growth in the course of last period of over two decades, while maintaining a modest growth of its twenty million population at 1.1 (Department of Census and Statistics. 2011). The per capita income which remained at US \$ 400 in the 1990s increased to over US \$ 1600 in 2012 (Department of Census and Statistics. 2011). Sri Lanka has been able to achieve such a development due to its investment in the economic development, education, health services and the infrastructure development. The government's vision for turning Sri Lanka into the miracle of South Asia (Mahinda, Chinthanaya – in Sinhalese) has accelerated the economic development in the areas affected by the war as well as other districts of the island. All the millennium development goals have been properly addressed in the Mahinda Chinthanaya – Government's vision, giving the highest priority to achieve them by 2015. The following overview reveals the level of those achievements as per the available statistics and other indicators.

MDG1. Eradicate Extreme poverty and hunger

Eradication of extreme poverty has been a serious problem that Sri Lanka has experienced in the whole course of post independence period since 1948. By the time of adopting UN MDGs, 26% of Sri Lankans were suffering from extreme poverty. As a result of its commitment to the realization of MDG s, Sri Lanka had reduced the percentage of poverty to 7 by 2010 surpassing the MDG target of halving poverty by 2015 (Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka, 2010). As employment is directly related to the eradication of poverty attention has been paid to increase the rate of employment in the state and private sector institutions and organizations while supporting the employment in agriculture and other self employed industries and businesses. For example, the fertilizer subsidy of providing 50 kg at one third of the actual price (Rs 3000) has immensely contributed to the productive growth in the agricultural sector alleviating the rural poverty to the above mentioned rate. This state strategy of reducing cost of production by fertilizer subsidies has been successful in enabling the farmers to continue cultivation of lands. Even though the national achievement is attractive, regional disparities in the level of poverty deserve due attention to eradicate it. The less develop regions and communities such as estate communities are being addressed at different levels.

MDG2. Achieve universal primary education

As is evident from the statistics of education, Sri Lanka has performed well in the provision of not only primary education but also the secondary and university education (Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka. 2010). The state policy of providing school and university education free of charge has been properly implemented for over six decades and the majority of people enjoy the benefits of free education policy today. As the primary education is concerned, Sri Lanka has already achieved the MGD of universal primary education with 97.5% enrolment rate. The target will be reached within the remaining period. The percentage of children who are enrolled to the grade one and educated up to grade 5 has reached even 100% in most of the areas in the country. Irrespective of gender, both male and female children in the age of schooling are provided with primary

and secondary education by the state and private sector schools. The literacy level of people in all the sectors has increased over 95% as is evident from statistics (Department of Census and Statistics. 2011).

MDG3. Promote gender equality and empower women

The achievements pertaining to the third MDG differ according to the different tasks. In the case of primary and secondary education Sri Lanka has successfully achieved the goal providing equal opportunities for education and growth. Girls perform better than boys in all the levels of education from primary to university. Over two third of pupils and students having best results are female (University Grant Commission. 2010).

MDG 4 Reduce child mortality

Sri Lanka, as a country with a well integrated and developed health and medical system has been able to report an extraordinary success in achieving the fourth MDG. Its infant mortality rate per 1000 live births has decreased to 8.5 in 2010 from 16.5 in 1995 (Department of Census and Statistics. 2011).

As the MDG 5, improving maternal health is concerned, Sri Lanka records a progressive development reducing the maternal mortality ratio to 14 in 2010 from 34 per live births in 1997. With the development in health care facilities and hospitals 98% of deliveries take place in hospitals. The country is nearly reaching the target of MDG (Department of Census and Statistics. 2011)

The 6th MDG of combating HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other diseases has been duly addressed by Sri Lanka, with limited number of cases recorded and reported to formal institutions. The total number of HIV positive and AIDS cases remain below 2000. The stigma attached to HIV/AIDS prevent those infected from reporting officially. The problem of Malaria has been nearly eradicated from the country with a few cases reported from dry zone areas. The ratio of TB has gone down to 42 per 1000 population in 2010 (Department of Health. 2012).

The seventh goal of ensuring environmental sustainability seems

to have been addressed through number of environmental protection and preservation policies, regulations and programs. Sustainable access to hygienic drinking water is available to more than 85% of people. Improved sanitation is also available to over 90% of people (Department of Census and Statistics, 2011). All the development projects and constructions require the due approval of the relevant authorities who are highly concerned with the impact of such projects on the quality of environment and its sustainability.

The 8th goal of developing a global partnership for development has been taken into account by Sri Lanka in keeping with its non-aligned foreign policy. Economic, political and cultural relations are properly maintained with its global partners. Policies required for the flow of capital for investment have been adopted under the neo liberal economic policies. As a result of the global partnership, Sri Lanka has realized some significant development projects of infrastructure development in the field of telecommunication, road, power and sea and airports development (Central Bank of Sri Lanka 2012).

All Ceylon Buddhist Congest and its contribution to the achievement of universal primary education.

The all Ceylon Buddhist Congest has been the dominant and leading Buddhist organization in Sri Lanka. It was established by prominent Buddhist scholars and leaders headed by Sir D. B. Jayathilaka, in 1919 (Bond.1992.63). Its central objectives are:

1. To promote, foster and protect the interests of Buddhism and Buddhists and safeguard the rights and privileges of Buddhists
2. To promote co-operation among Buddhists and Buddhist associations
3. To represent the Buddhists and act on their behalf in public matters affecting their interests
4. To provide opportunity to Buddhists for the free discussion of any matter affecting their interests
5. To undertake Buddhist charitable activities. (ACBC.2011)

All the objectives have been adopted after careful consideration of the problem suffered by Buddhism and Buddhists under

the British colonial rulers and also the collective actions to be taken in response to them at that time. In the course of its 93 years old history, the ACBC has organized and implemented hundreds of short term and long term programs with the intention of achieving the above objectives (ACBC.2011) .

In keeping with the central objectives and the spirit of Buddhism, the ACBC is currently engaged in a number of social services, welfare and development activities carried out through the country. In particular, different segments of society deserving the helping hands of others for their development, wellbeing and survival, are provided with relevant services under number of wings such as Social Services National Council, National Child Protection council, National Education Council, National Development Council, National Youth Council, National Council for the development of member organizations, National Council of National and Buddhist Affairs, and National Council for Foreign Affairs. All the national councils have recorded progressive development in the area they are concerned with.

The ACBC and free education

The free education policies that Sri Lanka adopted in 1945 have enabled it to achieve the goal of universal primary education. As the history of free education is concerned, it was the ACBC led Buddhist organizations that initiated the movement for free education in the 1920s. At the time of its establishment, the educational system was dominated by the missionary education designed according to the will of colonial rulers (Silva, 2003). The ACBC and other organizations agitated for an educational system based on Buddhist traditions. Within five years, the ACBC was able to increase the number of Buddhist schools from 150 to 250 (ACBC. 2011).

The father of free education in Sri Lanka, late C. W. W. Kannangara pointed out that the discrimination against Buddhist schools referring to the financial allocation of Rs.500,000 for the education of 2.7 million Buddhist children and 1.6 million rupees for the education of 400,000 Catholic children, at the AGM of the 1924 (ACBC.2011). Then the government funds were provided to 58 Catholic schools and only 4 Buddhist schools. The ACBC organized a

massive protest against the colonial rule and adopted 17 resolutions at AGMs to develop the education of Buddhist children. The pioneers of national free education were able to legally establish it due to the courage they gained from the ACBC, led by prominent and reputed scholars such as Professor Gunapala Malalasekara. Today more than 9500 state schools provide free education to more than 3.5 million children of the nation and a considerable number of leading national schools have a Buddhist and Catholic origin (Department of Census and Statistics, 2011).

ACBC's contribution to universal primary education

The National Child Protection Council of the ACBC plays a vital role in providing primary and secondary education for the children looked after by the ACBC. It maintains 17 Child Development Centers. There are 10 centers for girls, 5 centers for boys and one for the protection of infants and one center for blind children. As is evident from the statistics, these centers facilitate the provision of primary and secondary education for more than 800 children. All the children lack proper care of family due to problems such as; being orphans, family problems, legal referrals etc. Such problems usually prevent them from schooling as there is nobody to facilitate the primary education by meeting their basic needs such as food, cloths, shelter, medicine and protection. The fate of such children is decided by those who exploit and abuse them for various purposes. Mere availability of schools, teachers, equipments, libraries, text books and transportation, does not enable a country to achieve the goal of universal primary education. There is another aspect that should be responsible for meeting the basic needs of children and thereby facilitating the successful completion of primary education. The family is the universal social institution that performs the functions of meeting the basic needs of children. In all societies there are considerable numbers of children who lack the care of family fully or partially and consequently deprived of primary education.

The ACBC's Child Protection and Development wing successfully addresses the problems of children lacking parental or any other care of third party. The 17 Child Development Centers provide shelter for all the schooling and non schooling children. They first provide

the due protection required for both male and female children. And feed all with nutritious meal in keeping with standards of child development and growth. Except for some cases of disabilities and diseases, most of the children enjoy healthy life and develop as their counterparts with proper parental care. All the children in the child development centers are being provided with primary and secondary education in government schools. The centers seemed to play roles of family creating a family like social environment while effectively facilitating the schooling of children and enabling them to achieve their educational goals successfully.

In order to ascertain the quality of primary education received under the institutional care provided by the ACBC, 5 centers were closely studied. As the observations, focus group interviews with children and staff members reveal it the children under institutional care perform moderately compared to those with parental care. The average mark obtained at the year-end examination of grade five children of the institutions was 65% whereas children with families were 75%. The children with parental care are individually supervised by parents and motivated to learn well continuously as the Sri Lankan families emphasize on school education for children. Children (with parents) enjoy the benefits of these social values as parents spend their time, money and energy to educate children with high performances. On the other hand, those children in the institutional care do not have such people who closely follow up, supervise and motivate them. All are taken into account as a group and guided. Therefore, students' performance level depends on the guidance and supervision in institutions.

Even though this institutional care provides opportunities to develop various skills and work with deferent people, such a collative life in institutional environments reduce the time committed to studies at the institutes compared to normal family environment. Modern Sri Lankan families tend to confine children to education alone and they are not allowed to participate in domestic activities and develop life skills. Therefore students with parental care have enough time and additional tuition opportunities for mastering the subjects.

As was evident, although the children's school performances

remain at a moderate level, they possess some personality qualities which are more evinced from their personalities compared to the children in families.

The religiosity among children remained at a higher level as both the school and the institution motivate them to engage in religious rituals. Most of them volunteer to perform daily religious activities. The institutions continuously inculcate the Buddhist religious values in the minds of children. Institutional life with religious practices seemed to fill the gap of parents' affection and care. The children have adapted to the institutional life developing a mature personality that encourage them to live as the administration requires. Almost all the children wash their clothes, clean their rooms, keep the room in order with things at due places. All are co-operative and help each other without hesitation. All have gotten rid of inhibition and come forward to participate in social gatherings, speaking courteously. Whereas children of nuclear families become more and more individualistic and selfish, the children in the institutions become more and more integrated to social life attributed to cooperative and altruistic life style.

Conclusion

The study reveals historical and contemporary role of ACBC in the provision of primary and secondary education for Sri Lankan children. The ACBC's leading role in 1920s opened the door of formal education to the majority of children and transformed it into national free education in 1940s. Furthermore, the Child Development Centers established by the ACBC have enabled Sri Lanka to extend the achievement of MDG of universal primary education to those who lack the care of family. The child development centers have facilitated the primary education of thousands of such children in the course of the period prescribed for the achievement of MDGs and before it. The institutional care of ACBC has been able to inculcate Buddhist social values and thereby to develop qualities required for harmonious social life against the individualistic social life promoted by family based socialization of children. In conclusion, these findings show the effective role that the Buddhist organizations can play for the achievement of UN millennium development goals.

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