

Investing in improving quality education in rural areas in Sri Lanka to reduce poverty

Background Paper – Education Through Sustainability

Owing to its free education system, Sri Lanka, with a basic literacy rate of 91.2%¹ and a one to twenty teacher pupil ratio claims an excellent education standard compared to most developing countries. Surprisingly, these statistics concealed the reality of rural schools where unequal distribution of learning resources leads to poor quality in education. Conversely, urban schools capable of drawing enough financial resources, better equipped with modern learning resources, attract more students as well as more resources. This trend continues and expands the gap in the quality of education between rural and urban schools and resulted in closing down many such rural schools. This limits the educational opportunities for poor rural children which will eventually trap them in to the vicious cycle of poverty. Educational spending based on number of available students in schools targets on providing funding for recurrent expenditure and physical infrastructure, ignores improving the quality of education as a strategy towards human resources development and thereby reducing poverty. The purpose of VanLanka initiatives is to help rural schools in Sri Lanka to achieve a qualitative improvement in their education through community level interventions as a poverty reduction strategy.

Rural schools played a challenging role in the 1960's and the 70's where economic and socio – cultural improvement was boosted, led by huge influx of educated youth. Qualitative improvement in the education in rural areas during that time resulted in weakening the rural to urban migration. This situation drastically changed during the late 80's, with the introduction of Provincial Council Administration system where education has become a devolved responsibility to the provincial councils. As such, 90% of the schools were taken under the administration of the provincial government. Almost all the rural schools were categorized in to the Provincial Government schools with minimum resource and less funding. New reforms have also created a national school system where all the prestigious urban schools were taken under the control of the central government with more funding and more resources. National schools, with the high level of resource allocation from the government as well as from wealthy parents, are better equipped with diversified extra curriculum programs, competent teachers provided with computers, internet facilities, English and other foreign languages and science based education to face global challenges and maintain high quality outcomes. Thus they attract more students, draw further resources. This motivated middle class rural parents to send their children to national schools in urban areas. Conversely, children of poor farmers continue in the same rural schools, yet they tend to drop out between 5 – 14 years old. Even worse, UNICEF has indicated that in certain remote rural schools, the drop out rate for that age group is 85% - 90%².

In general, both urban and rural schools use teacher centered, text book based old British education models. Those techniques have their own limitations to survive and to face local and global realities. The Knowledge that the rural children gain from rural schools is not practically helpful for them to meet the career demand of the local economy within which they

¹ <http://www.accu.or.jp/litdbase/policy/lka/index.htm>

² http://www.unicef.org/srilanka/reallives_2619.htm

Investing in improving quality education in rural areas in Sri Lanka to reduce poverty

survive. So they lose the trust and interest in education. The worst case scenario is the closing down of such rural schools as there are not enough students. According to the Department of Statistics Sri Lanka, there were 1298 schools³ with less than 6 students in 2000, and this number has increased up to 1368 in 2002. During the same period, 147 schools have been closed down since there were not enough students to run those schools. Adult educational programs or trade related skill training opportunities for such youth to acquire livelihood support skills are very limited in rural areas. Thus, these youth eventually add to the agriculture labor force as unskilled workers. This has resulted in high rate of under employment or unemployment, thus less productivity.

Currently, in the agricultural sector where most of rural youths end up working, there are major problems. First, extensive use of agrochemicals and fertilizers, although initially profitable have had declining profits due to their overuse, negative effects on the land, and the rising costs of using them. Thus farming has become more marginal for a successful livelihood. Second, the extensive use of these products has led to many chronic illnesses. This resulted in many of them spending a disproportionately large portion of their productive time and earnings on dealing with these health issues.

Youth who represent a large proportion of the rural populations are talented, enthusiastic and capable of leading development yet are susceptible to being overly seduced by the materialistic wonders of the modern world. If their leadership, management and entrepreneurial skills are fostered and encouraged through involving them in the local economy and partnering them with local service deliveries through effective engagement in sustainable practices so local decision making power will be enhanced in the long run.

This situation, among many other factors has contributed to increasing the poverty and accompanying issues in rural areas in Sri Lanka. Therefore investing money on pilot demonstration projects to provide modern learning resources, to train teachers to cope with local and global demand has become quintessential. Further, this process encourage schools to integrate students extra curriculums to gain volunteer work experience in the government, civil society organizations and private businesses in the local areas to acquire practical life skills. We anticipate that this eventually leads to systematic human resources development to yield socio economic impact to eliminate rural poverty.

The first step of this process is to establish pilot projects, involving local communities and school staff to provide required resources to few declining rural schools. The first of this kind has been initiated in Gallalagam School, one of the rural schools in the North Central province. There were 350 students in this school in 2005 and the number decreased to 186 in 2008 of which only 80 students attend classes daily. VanLanka Consulting Company has invested money in providing two computers to the school

³ <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/education/edustat-2002.pdf>

Investing in improving quality education in rural areas in Sri Lanka to reduce poverty

development society⁴, so the society committed to find the other required resources for the center. The vice principal in his speech at the opening discussion for the establishment of the computer resources center stated, “we anticipate this resources center and the new educational facility we plan to provide would definitely attract villagers to send their children back to our school so we could reach up to 2005 statistics within the next 5 years”. This statement signals how powerful those new resources are for schools staff as well as for parents to build trust and confidence in the school. Parents, village youth and children of Gallalagama School donated labor and provided furniture required for the center. They also have negotiated with a local broad band internet service provider to obtain free internet service to the school. This evidence proves that those schools could arrange local fund raising drives through local donors to find running cost of some other needs. On one hand, this secures enthusiasm of the school staff and communities to gain recognition in initiating the new program as their own. Those drives will ultimately inspire rural parents who send their children to urban schools and to build trust about the available resources of the schools located on their door step.

One of the important component of this pilot program is to provide teacher training facilities. Teachers should be connected with and capable enough to understand the changing dynamics of modern realities; they should be willing to learn and define them to students in a practical way. Professional upgrading is only required for teachers to acquire promotion yet not done on a regular basis. Inadequacy of on going professional training, however, has left many teachers with apathy, where they believe the current situation is inevitable and they perceive that any kind of intervention attempts are useless. Therefore, special training on Business Communication Application skills, student centered self learning tools, will be given to those who show the enthusiasm to take the lead and act as trainers and champions. This will enable teachers to get connected with the modern world and transfer their learning to students. In addition, teachers should also be trained to gain research skills in evaluating local resources. This will allow teachers to initiate small scale local research projects such as house hold surveys and natural resources surveys involving village youth and students. Further, they will be given student’s leadership development and community engagement strategies. This will enable them to join with the government, community organizations and private sector business to promote local environmental improvement programs within the school and in the community. This interaction will provide students to acquire volunteer experience and divert their text book centered education towards practical experience, focusing on available resources and opportunities to develop their own career plans.

Village youth program is the final item of this pilots. This could be done as village youth clubs. Village youth clubs consists of students as well as school leavers will be established. After graduation, students will eventually join with these youth groups as active members, so the resource center facilities of the school will be continuously available to school leavers. This facilitates youth to further their competencies and skills and get connected with the outside world. This would on one hand, help youth to explore effective career opportunities. This process will require youth to commit to collaborate with

⁴ School development Society consists of parents and teachers to act as a executive body responsible for school development activities.

Investing in improving quality education in rural areas in Sri Lanka to reduce poverty

the school on the environmental improvement programs and help the school for its fund raising programs. Utilizing the initial training they have been given during the school, and also the special youth training provided by the VanLanka partners, youth will initiate programs in the village to explore, plan and implement small business activities based on available human, physical, social and institutional resources. School staff could assist such programs. This will also capture the possibility of youth and children to take the responsibility of communicating their new learning to their parents, as well as to learn about the local cultures and traditional values from parents. This will help rural schools to build individuals who would be suitably skilled to sustain in the society.

Investing money in this pilot initiative would enhance the qualitative improvement in few rural schools and will establish powerful examples to demonstrate the changes in the socio-economic status and the life styles of students and youth. This will lay a stronger foundation for an improved economy for the rural people. Success of these projects themselves would advocate and influence the governments and large funding agencies to emulate the strategy to restructure the educational spending and to mobilize more funding towards improving the quality of rural education through community level intervention to reduce rural poverty.
