



# Policy Brief 11

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Inter-Regional Inequality Facility  
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## Educational Opportunities for the Poor

## Sri Lanka

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### Objectives

Successive governments in Sri Lanka have made investment in education and other social services a priority. The 'Universal Free Education Policy' was introduced in 1945 and backed up with significant government expenditure on education (around 4 per cent of GDP) during the 1950s and 1960s. As a result, Sri Lanka has achieved remarkable levels of literacy and school enrolment rates, compared to many other developing countries in the world.

Nevertheless, concerns remain about the quality of education in Sri Lanka, the existence of regional disparities in education, and a slowing down of further increases in literacy and enrolment rates at the national level. To address these concerns, successive governments since the early 1980s have introduced a series of measures designed to enhance the quality of education, increase educational opportunities for the poor, and thereby increasing school enrolment and completion. Three significant measures, which are the subject of this paper, are the Free School Textbook Programme, the Free School Uniform Programme, and the Navodya School Development programme.

### Description

The Free School Textbook programme was initiated in 1980. It provides all students in grades 1 to 11 with required text books, free-of-charge. The Free School Uniform Programme was commenced in 1993. It provides all students in grades 1–13 in all government schools with free uniform material. The Navodya school development programme was initiated in 1997, and aims to provide at least one school in each administrative division in the country with funding for buildings, class rooms, laboratories, libraries, computer facilities, and so on.

Currently around 4 million students, in over 10,000 schools throughout the country, benefit from the Free School Textbook and Free School Uniform Programmes. Both are funded entirely out of national budget resources. The Navodya programme had, by 2004, identified close to 400 schools for development. In this case funding is provided by a combination of national budget resources, external credit from the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, and the private sector.

### Lessons learned

The available evidence suggests that the provision of free school textbooks and uniforms, and the Navodya school development programme, have increased school enrolment and attendance among the poor, and the quality of education received. Nevertheless, there are still a number of lessons to be learned which can be helpful to further improve them in future.

First, the impact of the textbook programme on student learning can be improved, through the involvement of the private sector, and through the forthcoming curriculum revision in 2007. Second, a more efficient distribution mechanism is needed to ensure that all the schools, particularly those in remote rural areas and conflict affected areas, receive the required textbooks and uniform material on time. Third, political interference in the Navodya school development programme could be reduced, by passing direct control of the programme and the decision-making to the Ministry of Education and Provincial Departments of Education. Finally, the impacts of the textbook and school uniform programmes need to be analysed rigorously, to identify more clearly any deficiencies and problems they have met, and find out ways to bring higher benefits to students.

## Background

Sri Lanka has been celebrated in the development literature for its success in attaining a high level of human development for a low income economy. It has achieved remarkable levels of literacy and school enrolment rates, compared to many other developing countries in the world, and significant progress in gender equality in education. By 2004, it had an adult literacy rate of about 93 per cent, and net primary enrolment and completion rates of around 97 per cent. This is largely a result of strategic public policy decisions, over several decades, to invest resources in education and other social services. The 'Universal Free Education Policy' (UFEP) was introduced in 1945, and was backed up with significant government expenditure on education (around 4 per cent of GDP), owing to favorable economic conditions during the 1950s and 1960s.

Nevertheless, weaker economic conditions during the 1970s and 1980s strained the government's capacity to sustain and strengthen its commitment to education. Government expenditure on education fell below 3 per cent of GDP in the 1970s and to less than 2 per cent in the early 1980s. This situation contributed to a deterioration in the quality of education, an increase in regional disparities in education, and a slowing down of further attainment in literacy and enrolment (Sandaratna 2000). Even at present, about 18 per cent of children, largely coming from poor families and economically disadvantaged areas, fail to complete the compulsory education of up to grade 9 (World Bank 2005).

To address this situation, successive governments have introduced several programmes with the objectives of enhancing the quality of education, increasing educational opportunities for the poor, and thereby increasing school enrolment and completion, particularly at primary and secondary levels. These include the Free School Textbook Programme, the Free School Uniform Programme, the *Navodya* School Development Programme, and various others such as the mid-day meal programme and subsidised transport facilities. These policies, particularly the first three, are the subject of this paper.

## Details

### The Free School Textbook Programme

The Free School Textbook programme was introduced by the government in 1980, with the objective of enhancing education quality and improving learning outcomes, particularly among children from poor families. Under this programme, all students from grades 1 to 11 are provided with required text books free-of-charge by the government. The government is the main source of funding.

The programme has been expanded in more recent years, in two main ways. First, a policy to improve the physical quality of textbooks was initiated in 1999. The physical quality of school textbooks has so deteriorated over the years that over 70 per cent of the books need to be replaced every year, incurring high and unsustainable costs to the government. The poor physical quality also limits the reuse of textbooks. The new initiative aims at improving the physical quality (e.g. paper, layout, illustration, color) and increasing the life-span of the textbooks (through the

reuse policy of three years), thereby bringing down the cost of the textbook programme over time. This programme is supported by the World Bank under the General Education Project (GEP) II.

Second, the Multiple-Book Option Programme (MBOP) was introduced in 2003, to enable schools to have access to more than one textbook per subject, and to improve the quality of textbooks (both the content and the physical quality). Under this programme a multiple number of textbooks was introduced for each selected subject (e.g. mathematics, science, and languages) for grades 6-11. The schools were given the choice to select one out of the multiple textbooks for each subject and each grade. This programme is also funded under the GEP II of the World Bank. In 2004, it cost around Rs 150 million (US\$ 1.5 million).

### The Free School Uniform Programme

The Free School Uniform Programme was commenced in 1993. It provides all students in grades 1-13 in all government schools with free uniform material, and relevant robe materials for student monks studying in *Pirivenas* (temple schools). The type of material and the quantity received by students depends on the gender and the grade in School. It is totally financed by the government, which currently spends approximately Rs 1,200 million (about US\$ 12 million) per year on this programme. This makes it the second highest item of the recurrent education expenditure, after teacher salaries (which account for nearly 80 per cent of the total recurrent education expenditure).

Due to the high costs involved, the government in 2002 experimented with transforming the programme from the existing universal programme to a targeted scheme providing free uniform materials only to students from poor families. Under this new scheme, the parents of those students who wish to receive free uniforms had to make a request, and handover the completed application forms to Divisional Secretariat (DS) offices. These forms had to be first approved by the principal of the school and the *Grama Niladari* (Village Headman). However, the procedure was so lengthy and complex that many poor students and parents failed to follow the necessary requirements and benefit from it. As a result, the programme was transformed back to the previous universal programme from 2004 onwards.

### Navodya School Development Programme

The *Navodya* school development programme was initiated in 1997, and aims at reducing regional disparities in education and providing quality education to rural students. It seeks to develop at least one school from every DS division in the country to provide high quality education facilities. (There are about 320 DS divisions in the country.) The identified schools are provided with infrastructure facilities such as buildings, class rooms, laboratories, libraries, computer facilities, and so on. The schools to be developed are identified by the Ministry of Education, following consultation with the Provincial Departments of Education. The majority have been chosen from Type 1AB (classes up to Grade 13 including Advanced Level Science Stream) and Type 1C (classes up to Grade 13 including Advanced Level Arts and/or Commerce Stream but not Science) categories.

This programme is funded by the government with the support from various other partners, including multilateral organizations and the private sectors. For instance, in 2004, under the GEP II project the World Bank provided financial assistance (about Rs 50 million) to develop fully-equipped school libraries in *Navodya* schools. Computer Learning Centers are also being set up in number of these schools under the Secondary Education Modernization Project funded by the Asian Development Bank.

## Implementation

The present decentralized structure of public education in Sri Lanka comprises five inter-linked bodies i.e, the Ministry of Education, Provincial Ministries/Departments of Education, Zonal Education Offices, Divisional Education Offices and schools (both national and provincial).

The Free School Textbook Programme is implemented by the Ministry of Education through the Education Publication Department (EPD). The EPD distributes the relevant textbooks directly to the divisional offices, which in turn distribute them to schools in their respective divisions, on request by school principals. Zonal Education Offices are also engaged in monitoring the distribution of textbooks to schools in their respective zones.

The School Uniform Programme is implemented at the national level by the Ministry of Education through its School Supplies Unit. At the provincial level, a committee headed by the Secretary to the Provincial Ministry decides on the stores in the districts and zones of each province. District/Zonal level stores then issue the materials to divisional level stores, from where the materials are distributed to respective schools and *Pirivenas*. Once the materials are issued to schools it is the responsibility of the school principal to distribute them to students through class teachers. The provincial level committees, headed by the secretary to the Provincial Ministry, and divisional level committees are engaged in monitoring the distribution and implementation of the uniform programme at sub-national levels.

The *Navodya* School Development Programme is implemented at the national level by the Ministry of Education. At the sub-national level, the Provincial Departments of Education are also involved in identifying the schools to be developed, the type of infrastructure facilities to be provided to the selected schools, and so on.

## Impacts

Nearly 4 million students, in grades 1–11 in over 10,000 government schools around the country, benefit every year from the Free School Textbook Programme. Currently over 20 million textbooks, covering about 250 different subjects, are distributed annually under the programme. The total cost in 2002 was about Rs 1,033 million (US\$ 10 million), which amounted to 2.8 per cent of total education expenditure, 3.3 per cent of total recurrent expenditure on education, and 0.3 per cent of total government expenditure.

The Free School Uniform Programme also provides benefits to approximately 4 million students, from 1–13, in over 10,000 government schools and about 600 *Pirivenas* schools. The total in 2002 of this programme was about Rs 1200 million (US\$ 12 million), which amounted to 3.2 per cent of total government expenditure on edu-

cation, 3.9 per cent of total the recurrent expenditure on education in 2002, and 0.3 per cent of total government expenditure.

The *Navodya* programme had, by 2004, identified 388 schools for infrastructure development. These schools have been provided with various infrastructure facilities such as buildings, school libraries, laboratories, computer units, and so on. The further expansion of the programme has been limited, however, by budgetary constraints: capital expenditure on education accounts only for about 20 percent of the total education expenditure. As a result, the programme has largely depended on various external sources of funding and operates in collaboration with various on-going donor-funded projects.

## Factors contributing to success

Three main factors have made positive contributions to the implementation and impacts of the three programmes. These are domestic political commitment, complementary government policies, and the support of external agencies.

### Domestic political commitment

Since the 1930s, successive governments of Sri Lanka have considered investments in education, and increased access to quality education, as a priority in the development agenda. In the 1940s the 'Universal Free Education Policy' was introduced by the government, to provide free educational opportunities to all students from primary to tertiary levels. The high government priority for education and other social expenditures, and consequent achievements in education, can in turn be attributed to the country's competitive and democratic political system, in which the political parties tended to woo the voters by promises of a better welfare package including improved educational services.

Even at present, the government's commitment to improve education facilities is shown by the fact that the Ministry of Education is directly handled by the President herself. In other words, the current Minister of Education in Sri Lanka is also the President of the country. Government commitment to education has also been reinforced by cultural and social factors, with households placing huge importance on their children's education, even poor rural households.

### Complementary government policies

Other policies and programmes by the government have contributed to expanding educational opportunities for the poor. Two important examples include the provision of subsidised transport facilities (bus and/or train) for students, and the Grade Five Scholarship Programme, aimed at providing access to good quality schools and financial assistance for children from poor families who perform well in the grade 5 exam. In addition, a universal mid-day meal programme was in operation during 1989–1994. This was discontinued in 1994 due to fiscal constraints, but a targeted nutrition programme was introduced in 2000, to provide a morning meal for students in Grade 1 classes in selected schools. By 2004, this programme was extended to cover 35,000 students in 1,320 schools. Priority is given to schools in those areas that are identified by the Department of Health as having high levels of malnutrition, and

to schools attended by the children of low-income groups (Ministry of Education 2005).

## Role of external agents in supporting policies

Various external agents, including the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and many other donor agencies, have contributed to the success of the programmes. The publication of textbooks was one of the important components of the General Education Project (GEP) II of the World Bank, initiated in 1997. Moreover, under the GEP II, financial provisions were made to establish school libraries in 80 *Navodya* Schools in 2004. The Asian Development Bank was also involved in establishing Computer Learning Centers in some *Navodya* schools, and in hundreds of other schools, under its Secondary Education Modernization Project commenced in 2001.

## Lessons learned

The provision of free school textbooks and uniforms, and the *Navodya* school development programme, have contributed towards improving school enrolment and attendance among the poor, and increasing the quality of education received by the poor communities. Nevertheless, there are number of lessons to be learned from experiences with the policies so far, which can be helpful to further improve them in future.

First, there is considerable further scope for improving the impact of the textbook programme on student learning. The physical quality of free textbooks has, until recently, been low. Furthermore, the content of some textbooks has not been updated for over a decade. Involvement of the private sector in writing and printing textbooks is considered to be one way to improve the quality of textbooks. In addition, a major curriculum revision will be carried out with effect from 2007, to improve the curricula to meet the demands of future generations, and to better suit the knowledge and skills developed with the demands of the labor market.

Second, there are some inefficiencies in the textbook distribution process, including delays in delivering books to schools, delays in printing books, difficulties in delivering to remote areas, and so on. A more efficient distribution mechanism is needed to ensure that all the schools, particularly those in remote rural areas and conflict affected areas, receive the textbooks on time. Minimising the delays and inefficiencies in the distribution of uniform material is also crucial. One way to cut down the large cost of this programme would be to target the provision of free uniforms only to those children from schools located in poor areas.

Third, the *Navodya* school development programme has been adversely affected by political interference. The selection of schools for development is often influenced by political interests. For example, some DS divisions currently have more than one *Navodya* school, and some have more than three. By contrast, there are about 30 divisions, a large number of which are from relatively disadvantaged areas, where as yet no school has been selected for development under this programme. Minimising political interference, by passing direct control of the programme and the decision-making to the Ministry of Education and Provincial Departments of Education and the relevant officials, would help to further improve the positive impact of the programme. The programme has

also been adversely affected by budgetary constraints, stressing the need for identifying alternative sources of resources and promoting private sector participation.

Finally, the impacts of the textbook and school uniform programmes have not yet been studied rigorously. An in-depth study to measure the impact of these programmes, particularly on the school enrolment and attendance among the students from poor families/schools, now needs undertaking. Further, it is important to examine whether the benefits of free uniform and text-book programmes are equally received by the students from both urban and rural areas. Such an analysis will increase the available evidence on the effectiveness of these education welfare programmes, identify more clearly any deficiencies and problems they have met, and find out ways to bring higher benefits to students.

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