

THE IMPACT OF ECONOMIC GLOBALIZATION ON SRI LANKA: THE CASE OF VOCATIONAL AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Following the end of the cold war, economic globalization converged towards the neoliberal model of a global capital society. Free markets, trade liberalization and privatization being some classic elements of this economic framework. This ideology of the economy and productivity are shaping the way schooling is perceived and has, in recent times, led to numerous curriculum reforms worldwide. The following paper focuses on vocational and technical education in the island of Sri Lanka from a global capitalist perspective. Reasons for the introduction of a vocational component, the steps taken in terms of curriculum restructuring and the vindications behind the alleged failure of the vocational stream are some of the themes that will be explored in this journal article.

KEYWORDS: Sri Lanka, Vocational Education, Globalization, Technical Education

1. WHY OPT FOR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION?

1.1 THE RISING DEMAND WORLDWIDE

Henry (1999) notes that education is increasingly commodified and transformed into a service. The purpose of it has therefore shifted to that of ‘participation’ in the greater agenda of economics. Hence we witness a shift away from child centred education to a more industry centred vocational system. Due to advancements in modern technology and automation, fewer highly qualified middle and lower level skilled personnel are needed. Instead, there is an unprecedented demand for the two extremes of highly competent and low skilled workers (Tilak 2002). A concept which made Foster (1965:153) declare that ‘vocational education is the cart rather than the horse in economic growth’.

In relation to this, Stromquist and Monkman (2000) observe that schooling is used as a method for differentiating students in their early phases into those that grow up to be the top dollar earning innovators of the 21st century and those that simply supply the missing labour. They note this by stating that a ‘knowledge society must count on a cadre of individuals whose knowledge is low enough to accept menial tasks or whose social conditions are such that they cannot claim the more dignified, high paying tasks for themselves’ (Stromquist and Monkman 2000:13).

It is because of this that transnational agencies such as the ILO and UNESCO have played a significant role in the development of vocational education. They have provided high levels of funding as economic requirements for skilled labour increased. With globalization rose migration and in the West, vocational education was seen as a means of integrating the immigrants as well as the working class youth to the economy while upholding basic moral commitments to equal educational opportunities (Benevot 1983). In Sri Lanka, a similar rationale holds true. As Diyasena (1976) notes, by introducing pre-vocational studies at junior secondary level, the enrichment, diversification and partial vocationalization of the secondary curriculum will hope to correct the prevalent 'white-collar' bias within the island. Vocational education would also be a method of teaching and learning that is more interesting and meaningful by relating it to the environment of the student.

Lillis and Hogan (2006:90) observe that in developing countries, vocational education is initiated with the hope of alleviating unemployment, halting migration and transmitting skills that are considered useful for employment. Through a three-step process of job training, job creation and job improvement, they note that vocational education ensures a 'creation of manpower for socio-economic growth'. In South Asia, a complimenting idea is that vocational training would enable to develop a 'skill culture'. In the case of Sri Lanka this would be training in traditional arts and crafts that could then be promoted in the wider business of tourism (Tilak 1985).

1.2 THE CALL FOR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA

In Sri Lanka, the emergence of trade liberalization and the growth of the private sector since the political reforms of 1977 meant a greater demand for a workforce to serve in the modern technical environment. Changing livelihood opportunities to production and service oriented private firms demanded youth with specialized skills at different levels thus resulting in a greater demand for vocational and technical education (Hettige 2004). Moreover, technical training was to also denote an avenue for self-employment in the booming informal sector that is an inevitable characteristic of large developing cities.

Unlike the rest of her South Asian neighbours, Sri Lanka does not have large-scale industries. Rather, small to medium enterprises (SMEs) govern the country. Hence, vocational education was also seen as a means for youth to obtain training within these SMEs (ADB 2011).

Furthermore, in 1971, an insurrection led by unemployed youth to overthrow the government generated violence throughout the island; questioning the quality of education as well as its effectiveness in aiding people to find suitable livelihoods (Aturupane 2008). Thus, the corporate plan by the Tertiary Vocational Education Commission (TVET) was initiated and called for reforms in the light of providing education that keeps up with the human resource needs of the economy. The Ministry of Education recognized the importance of globalization demanding flexibility in the workplace and thus decided to implement a flexible learning opportunity with the introduction of a 'life-skill' component to the general curriculum.

Another intrinsic element of the global capitalist model was the flourishing of the high tech industries; a concept that Carnoy (1998) referred to as the ‘rise of a science and math culture’. Techno-science, Slaughter (1998) states, at once becomes both science and product and hence collapses the distinction between knowledge and commodity. Sri Lanka has therefore recognized a potential niche to provide not just low skilled labour but also highly competent technologists to specific industries. The vocational educational component thus plays a vital role in facilitating the development of knowledge-based experts (Obeysekera 2009).

In addition, for a conservative patriarchal culture such as that of Sri Lanka, vocational training provides an opportunity to expose women to non-family settings; thereby allowing them to build self confidence (Malhotra and Mather 1997). As Aturupane (1996) shows, the percentage of working individuals with vocational and technical training is slightly higher among women compared with their male counterparts. It has been revealed in his studies on education in Sri Lanka that for women with some training in this field, the earning capacity is 11% greater than for someone with no vocational training.

2. THE SRI LANKAN TVET SYSTEM

Sri Lanka has some of the highest human development outcomes relative to per capita income among developing economies (Aturupane 2008). For instance, the island has managed to successfully implement near universal primary and secondary education. Adult literacy, life expectancy, and gender equality are remarkably high in comparison to the rest of South Asia. This is because, since gaining independence

from the British in 1948, the national governments have worked rigorously to provide education for all regardless of socio-economic background or geographical location.

Technical and Vocational Education too has a prominent place in history, being established for over a century. The first technical college of the country was set up in Colombo in the year 1893 when agriculture needed irrigation expertise. Since British rule, however, the focus was shifted away from vocational education to a more colonial induced general education system that prepared students for national Ordinary and Advanced Level examinations. The insurrection events of 1971 however re-focused the attention on vocational training. This was because well qualified yet unemployed youth ended up becoming militant, attempting to overthrow the government as they struggled to make ends meet. The ministry of education hence introduced pre-vocational education into the junior secondary and secondary curriculums (Grades 6-9, 10-13) in 1972; the justification being that vocational education would 'introduce the student to the world of work and its ethics and bring the school closer to the community' (MoE 1976).

Pre-vocational education was to take 20% of class time meaning that out of the 10 compulsory subjects, 2 were to be of a vocational nature. A decade later, pre-vocational education was replaced in schools by 'life-skills education'. The difference between these two forms lay in the fact that life skills was not linked to a particular vocation or locality, which was the case with the former system. In addition to the compulsory vocational component of the formal schooling system, there are also non-formal schools such as farm schools present in the island (Gunawardena 2006).

In 1991, the Technical and Vocational Education Commission (TVEC) was established as a nationally recognized system under the Ministry of Vocational and Youth Affairs to provide Technical and Vocational Educational Training (TVET). TVET was defined as the ‘study of technologies and related sciences, and the acquisition of practical skills, attitudes, understandings and knowledge relating to occupations in various sectors of economic and social life’ (Jayalath 2010:2). According to the TVEC corporate plan, ‘their vision’ was to assure gainful employment globally that is relevant to changing market needs. Consequently, in 1997 a presidential task force on TVET was set up in order to implement some major reforms to the existing vocational system. The National Vocational Qualifications were to be extended to a seven level plan from certificate level (levels 1-4) to Diploma (5-6) and Bachelors level (7) (ADB 2011).

Sri Lanka currently has over 600 vocational courses that cater for 96 craft occupations, 14 middle technician jobs and 4 degree level occupations. The Vocational Training Authority has 275 training centres operating throughout the island at national, district and rural levels in addition to the 1138 private and NGO led training centres of the island (Corporate Plan 2011). In 2008, Universities for Vocational Technology (UNIVOTEC) was set up that provides degree level education in 38 technical colleges out of which 09 receive external funding from the Asian Development Bank. Moreover, there is also a National Apprentice and Industrial Training Authority that provides apprenticeships to students with vocational education.

Sri Lanka has recognized the need to focus beyond the industry sector and recent changes to the system include vocational qualification that are specific to the service sector such as beautician courses and information and communication technology (ICT). Hettige (2004) observes that increased integration into the global system requires ICT and English skills. In 2001 therefore, the school curriculum was upgraded so that all students would be competent in ICT by the end of their secondary education. As Aturupane (2008:37) notes, incorporating English and ICT would 'orient the education system better to the world of work'.

3. REPERCUSSIONS OF GLOBALIZATION: THE FAILURE OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

3.1. INNOVATION, FLEXIBILITY AND SAPs

The world is based on strong notions of individualism and economic globalization demands a workforce that is both innovative and flexible (Carnoy 1995). Vocational study, in this sense is criticized of being limiting and uni-dimensional (Benevot 1983). As Carnoy (1995) points out, the greater necessity for flexibility and high rates of innovation will result in those with vocational education being penalized due to their inflexibility. Innovation requires critical thinking and therefore a more general education is advantageous. Furthermore, in the world of new knowledge work, technical professions are threatened by Computer Aided Manufacturing (CAM) (Aronowitz and De Fazio 1997). For the craft sector, technology also means that paid work loses its intrinsic meaning. The mass production of arts and crafts in Sri Lanka

is an example of this where artisans are pushed out of their traditional roles despite having exceedingly high talent and training.

With globalization rose certain neoliberal policies known as structural adjustment programmes (SAPs). SAPs pressure developing countries to deregulate and privatize their national systems. While the early 1990s were a phase in which the World Bank highly promoted vocational education realizing its potential for productivity increase (Jones 1997), the following decade saw a greater demand for cutbacks on government spending for TVET claiming that it's best left for individual enterprises. Development policies such as this have disadvantaged the TVET sector in Sri Lanka. Without government intervention, private sector institutions will not be able to provide skills and countries will not be able to gain comparative advantages (Benell and Sagerstorm 1998).

3.2. LACK OF THE TANGIBLE...

Cooray (2006) shows that technical education in Sri Lanka is lacking a market driven approach. The modern world changes rapidly with technological evolutions and vocational teaching needs to keep in par with these global economic trends. Yet it often lags behind (Obeysekera 2009). 'Relative scarcities' such as computer technology are an intrinsic element of the neo-liberal world (Stromquist 2002) but in Sri Lanka, machinery and equipment in TVET centres are 'irrelevant and obsolete'. Syllabuses are too rigid with a lack of capital, skilled teachers and learning material in local languages (Lillis and Hogan 2006). Thus, nearly one fourth of the students are

trained in sectors that are not in industrial demands with indiscipline and politicization of the university system further limiting success (Amarasinghe 2009).

The capacity building of staff in TVET is a problem because of the geographic widespread of teachers that is augmented by infrastructure shortcomings within the island. Jayalath (2010) suggests that e-learning could be a potential solution. However, at present, the ICT sector is rather limited. Moreover, for the self-employed, TVET alone is not enough. There needs to be supplementary post training support measures such as start-up capital or access to markets and raw materials (NEC 2010).

3.3...AND THE INTANGIBLE

Historical expectations about what is valid knowledge is embedded in Sri Lanka's colonial history. The British colonists and the local elites perceived education as 'wholly restricted to reading, writing or the academic' (Lillis and Hogan 2006:92). Hence, TVET was considered as something for the poor and it was the interests of the elites that received most commendation and funding. These normative perspectives based on colonial value have shaped the emerging division of labour and re-defined the core-periphery relationship. This 'colonization of the mind', as Tikly (2001) observes, limits the state capacity to reinforce own educational agendas.

Parents therefore resent the TVET system and students select it only as a default option due to its lower level of recognition. Preconceived cultural gender roles restrict girls in particular from entering vocational fields. Moreover, regional disparities in

vocational education also exist. For instance, better off schools in Colombo offer photography and motor mechanics while rural schools limit their vocational education to subjects like local ‘fishing techniques’ (Diyasena 1976). Even government organizations and private industries fail to see its worth. There is an absence of a fixed salary structure for craft personnel and a lack of compulsion for public institutions to recruit TVET candidates (NEC 2010). As the ADB (2011) points out, the biggest challenge is to promote vocational education as a recognized qualification among the general public.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Tilak (1985:254) quotes that ‘the problems of vocational training are paradoxically not primarily educational, but ultimately bound up with intricate economic, technical and social variables’. Improper management of vocational education can hence result in ‘double deprivation’; depriving students from entry into higher education and denying them access to employment. In Sri Lanka, it was the influx of subcontracting that launched the need for vocational education. However, it was globalization itself, with SAPs and a growing demand for flexibility that ultimately led to its alleged failure.

Thus, educational reforms alone are insufficient. They need to be supplemented by changes in recruitment and selection, salary structures and labour market conventions in order to truly succeed. This essay’s primary focus was on how the economic aspect of globalization calls for educational reforms. Yet it was evident that social, cultural

and political facets all interact in complex ways to promote and obstruct the prevalence of vocational training within the island.

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