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Education And The Labour Market And The Child

As the market does not provide all the needs of people in the form of social services, and neither is it able to reach out and touch all the different socio-economic groups, the assumption that when government services are lacking people will invest their own resources in education does not necessarily hold true. Added to this is the very real fact that poor people feel a strong compulsion to send their children out to work to supplement the family income.

As domestic market forces are all too frequently influenced by current global trends, this often results in stimulating the labour market and creating a greater provision for participation of children by opening up new opportunities for children of the poor to be employed, at low wages, in preference to adults. That this phenomenon is widespread throughout South Asia does not make it right, for it inevitably has disastrous consequences for children, for their education and for their health and long-term productivity, which is often overlooked as a simple truth.

Although there is already either a constitutional directive in support of a programme of compulsory primary education in all the countries in South Asia, or at least an enabling law or public policy, these provisions have not really been very effective in reducing child labour. Yet there are so many examples of countries in other parts of Asia which have successfully managed a policy of compulsory education and have eliminated child labour and have, as a result, been able to protect their children from this evil, even though their own level of development was little better than the present state of development of South Asian countries today.

While accepting that a change in the present situation will take time, a bold step is undoubtedly needed for those countries with less than satisfactory levels of completion rates in school to make primary schooling compulsory under the law and, as this is important, to be ready to enforce it. For, when it is agreed that children must be protected on a priority basis from the evil of child labour, the provisions must necessarily be in place to allow the market to adjust to the fact that children of a certain age would no longer be available for work and will, instead be engaged full time in the process of acquiring a basic education. This will give scope to markets, households and institutions to adjust to the reality. But, as this is more a matter of political will and economic foresightedness than an issue of education, the time has come for policy decisions and actions to measure up to the seriousness of the situation by recognising the cumulative consequences of inaction and inefficiency.