

Universal primary education remains elusive in Asia

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How much progress have Asian and Pacific countries achieved in implementing the 1980 Karachi plan calling for universal primary education? After more than 20 years, not much, reports ESCAP in its annual regional economic and social survey. "Despite considerable progress the target has not been achieved in many countries well beyond the plan's deadline."

The deadline set was 1980. By that time, every country in the region should have provided a system of universal compulsory and free primary education of seven years or more, according to the plan. But as it is notes ESCAP, this goal will not be reached in some countries before 1995.

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There are two major obstacles against its fulfillment. The first is rapid population increase, and the second is inadequate resources devoted to education in general and primary education in particular.

That the "baby boom" has made it extremely hard for nations to achieve the target can be gleaned from these figures: the number of primary school age children (6-11 years old) in the region — excluding China — rose from 133 million in 1960 to

227 million in 1982.

The percentage of children enrolled has, however, also risen quite rapidly. From 49 per cent in 1960, the figure jumped to about 71 per cent in 1982.

Still the absolute number of children who failed to go to primary school remains very large, says ESCAP. In 1982, there were about 67 million compared to 1960's 68 million.

"By 1985, the number of school age children not enrolled in primary schools was still estimated to be about 60 million," adds ESCAP. "This represents a formidable unfinished task and a continuing challenge to social development efforts in the region."

Compounding the situation are two problems that militate against universal primary education. For one thing, there is a low level of the enrolment ratio among females.

Girls form the majority, sometimes up to three-fourths, of children not enrolled in the primary school age group. And nowhere has this been more true than in South Asia.

The only exception is Sri Lanka where the goal has been essentially achieved, says ESCAP. But for the rest it's still touch and go like

Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. Indian is an example. Because of sharply reduced expenditure allocated to the

primary sector, 72 percent of the schools don't have library facilities and more than 42 percent are without blackboards.

Thirty-five per cent of the primary schools have a single teacher to handle three or four different classes. Only 44 percent of the educational expenditure is devoted to rural areas where more than 70 percent of the total population lives.

Another common problem faced is the high dropout rate, usually within the first two years. "Dropping out



is a source of waste of human and financial resources invested in the system as no basic skills are retained within the first two years," ESCAP notes sadly.

"The causes for dropping out are diverse but they seem to affect children from poor families more than others. This also seems to be confirmed by inter-country comparisons which show dropout rates to be more significant in poorer nations (in the region)."

As the march towards free universal primary education is impeded so does the region's campaign to combat adult illiteracy. The low enrolment and retention rates at primary school level help aug-

ment the ranks of adult illiterates," ESCAP explains it simply.

In 1985, according to UNESCO estimates, there were more than 613 million illiterate men and women aged 15-64 years in the region. Between 1970 and 1985, the number of illiterates grew by over 80 million despite the increase in the aggregate literacy rate from 53.6 to 63.6 per cent.

The biggest increase was registered in South Asia, including Sri Lanka. On the number of illiterates has declined in all the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) except Malaysia.

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