

Introduction

The policy of the government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) is to provide free education from the primary to the first degree level of the public university education. The government has accepted that education is a right of each citizen, and the Sri Lankan constitution ensures everyone the right to universal and equal access to education at all levels (Balasooriya, Wehella, & Wijeratne, 2010: 815). To ensure that every child has access to schooling, a network of schools has been established covering the entire country. The necessary resources—human, physical, infrastructure, and in kind—to these schools have been provided by the government.

Purpose of the review

The main purpose of this review is to study unseen features of free education policy and its challenges. Studying such challenges will be useful in addressing equity and sustainability issues in relation to the post-2015 development agenda for education. The post-2015 development agenda for education has focused on improving quality of education as well as ensuring equity and sustainability of schooling and resourcing schools. The free education policy in Sri Lanka was introduced by Dr. C. W. W. Kannangara in 1945. The implementation of free education policy is a turning point in the history of social and human capital development in Sri Lanka. This led to provision of equal educational opportunities across the system ensuring equity principles both distributional (including horizontal and vertical) and procedural. This policy impacted on the development of the country not only for education, but also in economic, social, and political spheres as well. However, from time-to-time, some challenges affected the implementation of

free education policies due to many reasons. Nevertheless, by and large, since the introduction of free education policy, all governments that ruled the country have committed to ensure free education policies. Currently, there are rapid developments on-going and changes are taking place in the society and the economy. As a result of such developments and changes, the free education policies in the country face challenges that need to be addressed. The major challenges are those related to governance such as access to primary and secondary education, opportunities for higher education, effects of private tuition, private and international schools, and investment in education. It is necessary to address such issues in order to ensure the free education facilities for the next generations through comprehensive reforms in school education. This paper will explore the current key issues and challenges of free education in Sri Lanka. Finally, in order to fast-track development of the education sector in the country, the paper will discuss possible policy suggestions as food for thought for policymakers, planners, technocrats and intellectuals as well as other stakeholders in education.

Methodology

This study comprises extensive review of relevant literature and use of secondary data and evidence (i.e. national and international academic articles, reviews, and official documents) where appropriate.

Free Education Policy

Before the Western colonisation of Sri Lanka, the religious centres delivered education voluntarily, on an honorary basis. Under the British colonial rule vernacular schools established both by the government and the denominational bodies provided education free while English medium schools