Globalisation and education in Sri Lanka

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Background

1 Since the end of the 20th century it has been commonplace to speak of globalisation: its causes, manifestations, consequences, promises, and its discontents. Globalisation is bringing about one the major social transformations of our times.

2 Globalisation may be described simply as “the accelerated movement of goods, services, capital, people and ideas across national borders”. The spread of markets, capital, peoples and ideas across borders also characterised the earlier eras of imperialism and colonialism but it is the most recent phase of globalisation, starting from the late 1960s and the 1970s, that forms the main focus of this paper.

3 In thinking about globalisation it is important to distinguish its manifestations from its underlying drivers. The spread of markets, capital, peoples and ideas across borders may be thought of as the manifestation of globalisation. Its underlying drivers, I would suggest, are economic policies, supported by the digital technological revolution that has accelerated the speed of communication exponentially.

4 Globalisation of the 1970s was prompted by declining economic growth, oil shocks, rising inflation and pressures on public expenditures in many industrialised countries. Across the globe, monetarist neo-liberal policies designed to increase growth were introduced. Dubbed “Thatcherism” and “Reaganomics”, these policies advocated deregulated finance sectors, privatisation of state-owned companies, and reduced government spending, among other measures. International finance institutions that had, through the 1960s and early 1970s, advised poorer countries to substitute costly imports with home-grown food and goods – a strategy known as “import substitution” – were now advising a shift away from this and towards economic and trade liberalisation. A new phase of global capitalism and a restructuring of the world economy had begun.
The relationship between globalisation and education is reciprocal. Education changes as a result of globalisation and education can influence the ways in which countries engage with globalisation.

This paper focuses on globalisation and education in Sri Lanka with comparisons drawn with other counties in Asia. The paper addresses four questions. First, I ask the question, “What impact has globalisation had on education in Sri Lanka?” Second, “What are the education conditions that help countries to globalise?” Here I examine the experiences of the four Asian Tiger economies that eschewed the advice of the international finance institutions in the 1960s and 1970s and which integrated rapidly into the global economy. Third, I return to the case of Sri Lanka and ask why, when Sri Lanka’s economic and social development status was ahead of most other Asian countries in 1950, her economic development fell so far behind subsequently? Finally, I question our dominant and shifting concepts of globalisation and ask whether the concept of sustainability needs to be more consciously included in our judgments about and analysis of desirable social transformation and education.

Question 1: What impact did globalisation have on education in Sri Lanka?

Politically independent in 1948, Sri Lanka followed the import substitution strategy from the mid-1950s to mid-1970s. She strove for economic self-reliance, and nationalised agricultural and manufacturing production. In education she unified a diverse array of schools into one state system, strengthened a national examination system and strove to delink subject syllabi and curriculum texts from the former colonial power, Britain. Formerly private and denominational schools were nationalised. Youth unrest, low economic growth and high rates of unemployment among educated youth during the late 1960s led to widespread youth unrest and the downfall of the left-leaning regime of the 1970s. A change of government to the right in 1977 led to the introduction of the open economy policies of export-oriented liberalisation, with the relaxation of exchange controls, the lifting of import restrictions, and the promotion of foreign investment in export-oriented industries, all designed to promote Sri Lanka’s participation in a rapidly globalising economy.

Overall, our story of globalisation and education in Sri Lanka is one of growth and disparity, of new opportunities and continuing and widening divisions.

- Since liberalisation the growth of the economy has been unprecedented.
- Average household incomes have increased, but their distribution has worsened.
- Unemployment rates have declined but among women they remain high and twice that for men.
- Young people are more likely to be employed rather than unemployed. They are more likely to be employed in manufacturing and services rather than in agriculture, and employed in the private sector, but they are also more likely to have casual rather than regular employment.
- Access to qualifications, both foreign and domestic, has increased among all social groups but it is the better-off that have greater access to the foreign-controlled examinations perceived to bring greater labour market returns.
• Young people’s educational and occupational expectation levels are much higher than earlier but for many those expectations remain unfulfilled.
• The relationship between educational and occupational expectation levels and social class remains strong. But it appears to have become stronger for occupational expectations, but not educational expectations. In other words, comparing the expectations of youth in the pre-liberalisation period and the post-liberalisation period, the gap between the middle and the lower classes has widened.
• Educational participation has increased at all levels for all social groups, but access to science, IT and English, and to the private-sector, post-secondary opportunities that provide pathways to the new jobs in the liberalised economy, is concentrated in urban areas.
• Finally, performance in many academic school subjects appears to be increasing, but significant disparities remain between schools of different types, different language media, different locations, and between boys and girls, with girls outperforming boys in most subjects.

Question 2: What are the educational conditions that help countries to globalise?

Here we turn to the experience, which some have described as a “miracle”, of the so-called Asian Tigers. Already by the 1960s and 1970s Hong Kong, Korea, Taiwan and Singapore had embarked on an economic strategy of the export of manufactured goods long before the international finance institutions were advocating this as a global panacea. Not only did they grow rapidly, but they did so with a high degree of equity. What were the common features of this economic and social transformation and were there any common features among the respective education systems that accompanied it?

Common features of economic and social transformation:
- Export orientation, focused on manufactured goods
- Adaptation to ever “higher added-value” activity
- Availability of foreign exchange
- High levels of investment and savings
- Absence of rural landowning class
- Increases in rural productivity
- Increases in income equality
- Adaptation to the information paradigm

Common education features:
- Availability of educated, low-paid, highly productive and disciplined labor
- High levels of basic education and literacy prior to economic growth
- Gender-equitable access
- Equitable public education expenditures
- Open, competitive and largely meritocratic education
- Creation of strong sense of national solidarity and identity
Question 3: Why did Sri Lanka’s economic and social development fall behind that of the Asian Tigers?

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries Sri Lanka’s economy – albeit a colonial economy – was an export-led economy par excellence, and well-integrated into world markets. Based on the export of plantation crops – mainly tea and rubber – the economy was strong enough to give her “a standard of living well ahead of that in the rest of South Asia and most of South-East Asia, with the possible exception of Singapore and parts of the Federated Malay States” (de Silva, 1981: 376–377). Sri Lankans often recall that when Lee Kwan Yew visited Sri Lanka shortly after her independence in 1948, he averred that Sri Lanka provided a development model for Singapore to emulate. Far from lagging behind the Asian Tigers, Sri Lanka had been well out in front in both economic and social terms, including education, in 1950. And although she continued to perform very well in terms of expanding education access, a number of factors held Sri Lanka back from strengthening her overall development position, among which were her:

- Import substitution policy, low growth, and high unemployment among the educated
- Low foreign exchange, domestic savings and investment
- Inefficient public sector
- Pervasive politicisation of policy implementation
- Lack of development of higher, technical and vocational education
- Educational segregation, which strengthened ethnic and weakened national identities

Question 4: How to integrate the concept of sustainable development into an analysis of globalization?

Much of the academic and policy literature on globalisation positions economic growth as its underlying goal. Over time increasing attention was paid to its impact on social transformations and in particular social equity. Attention shifted from growth, to growth with equity. In my own work developing a notion of successful globalisation with colleagues, I introduced a third dimension – peace. My concern stemmed mainly from my analysis of the globalisation process in Sri Lanka, where growth and a degree of equity from the late 1970s were accompanied by a civil war that destroyed thousands of lives. How could we judge that a country had globalised “successfully” when it was at war with itself? Attention shifted from growth with equity, to growth with equity and peace.

However, the notion of sustainable development adds yet another dimension to our thinking. Strategies for globalisation should not be considered to be successful if they are not also sustainable in the long-term future. Strategies for globalisation should not be considered to be successful if they so deplete natural and environmental resources that the needs of future generations are compromised. Export-oriented growth strategies often undermine a country’s ability to produce and distribute basic production of food and water for domestic consumption, both of which must be considered the most basic resource of all for the survival of people both in the present...
and the future. Should our development aspirations move from growth with equity and peace to sustainable growth with sustainable equity and sustainable peace?

If so, what then might be the impact of globalisation on education, and of education on globalisation?

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