

# Nepal

## *Respecting diversity and social inclusion in relation to care and education of young children*

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*This article describes the forms and issues of diversity and social exclusion pertaining to care and education of young children in Nepal. It gives an account of the efforts made to deal with these issues and the impact of affirmative programmes outlined in some recent studies.*

### **Forms and issues of diversity and social exclusion**

#### *Diversity based on geographical location/region*

Nepal's geography is a factor of exclusion.

There are urban/rural differences in access to markets, services and information (Bennett 2005). Basic infrastructure and such services as roads, electricity, water, health and education, including early childhood care and education (ECCE) were available mainly in urban areas only. For many years development efforts were concentrated in the Central Development Region, which includes the capital and the two adjoining Eastern and Western regions, while the Mid- and Far-Western Regions were neglected, if not forgotten. As a result, the socio-economic status and living standards of people living in these areas remained comparatively low. Literacy and school enrollment rates, available health services and the nutritional status of children and women fell short of the national averages. For several years early childhood development services were only available to children living in urban areas. One of the pioneers of ECCE services, the Nepal Children's Organization (NCO), established centres as early as 1970 and now has established a childcare centre (CCC) in the headquarters of each of Nepal's 75 districts, where they primarily cater for children of urban or suburban residents and government officials working within district headquarters areas (Joshi 1991).

From the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, many international NGOs, including Plan International, Save the Children-us and -Norway and Action Aid, only provided ECCE services in the Central Development Region and surrounding areas, mainly due to the lack of basic infrastructure in other places. Even now, ECCE services provided by the private sector are concentrated in urban areas.

#### *Social exclusion based on caste, ethnicity, language and gender*

Socio-cultural diversity is one of the important features of Nepalese society, which is categorised into a number of caste groups and ethnic communities. Power was consolidated by links to the Hindu caste system, which, though diluted, does somehow remain active even today. The Brahmins were at the top of the caste tree with the Kshatriyas (king and warriors) just beneath them; next came the Vaishyas (merchants) and the Shudras (peasants and labourers). Beneath everyone were occupational groups of Dalits, considered 'impure' and untouchable (Bennett 2005). Nepal's Hindu-dominated society has generally excluded three groups from the development process: Dalits or lower-caste people, indigenous people or Janajatis and women.

The Dalits, as victims of discrimination, are prohibited from intermingling with all other

categories of the population. It is not possible for them to be involved in social activities including educational activities for young children. The Hindu caste system considers Dalits to be unholy and polluting, and denies them access to education, wealth and governance. Such norms and values guide social ethics in formative early childhood (Vishwakarma 2006).

In Nepal over 200 forms of commonly practiced caste-based discrimination have been recorded. These include limiting the so-called lower castes to socially sanctioned roles, refusing to share water sources and avoiding any direct bodily contact with them (Bennett 2005). This discriminatory system has a direct negative implication in the school enrollment of the Dalit children and their involvement in other activities.

Language plays a major role in the enrollment, retention and achievement of children in school. The Nepalese government's one-language policy, in practice until 1990, debarred children from early education in their mother tongues. According to the Census Report of 1991, around 52 percent of the population did not speak the national language Nepali as their mother tongue. This meant that Janajati children and children from other linguistic minorities were introduced in school to a less- or unfamiliar language. Studies revealed that children in early grades dropped out because of differences between the languages they spoke at home and the language their teachers used in school. Students who came from Nepali-speaking families achieved more than students from non-Nepali speaking families, not only in Nepali but also in all primary school subjects (CERID 1997).

The legal provisions relating to property rights, employment procedures, nationality and citizenship, right to reproductive health, marriage and family rights discriminate against women (DFID–World Bank 2005). Only very recently have Nepali women obtained the right to sign for citizenship for their children. Gender-based discrimination against women and girls exists from their early years, and it is interesting to note that even in lower-caste families for social, cultural and economic reasons boys are preferred to girls.

### **Efforts made to deal with the issues of diversity and social exclusion**

Social inclusion is a political agenda, requiring state transformation (Gurung 2006). The re-advent of democracy in Nepal in 1990 provided diverse groups with space to exert their identities and rights as citizens. Various social movements – mainly the women's movement – succeeded in placing questions of gender equality and justice on the national agenda and Dalits began challenging Nepal's caste-bound society. The Janajati movement raised fundamental issues of fair ethnic representation and of rights to languages other than Nepali and to cultures and religions other than Hinduism (Bennett 2005). Similarly, people of Terai origin raised their voices for equal rights.

Since 1990 efforts have been made to increase the access of marginalised segments of the population to education. Some of the major programmes and strategies implemented to deal with the problem of social discrimination are discussed below.

#### *Commitment to provide basic and primary education for all*

In response to commitments made in such international forums as the World Summit for Children, World Conference on Education for All (EFA) and United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Government of Nepal is committed to extending basic and primary education to all citizens irrespective of region, caste, ethnicity or gender. In compliance with this commitment the Government has prepared a National Plan of Action to implement EFA programmes. This has, to a large extent, changed the traditional practice of exclusion from educational participation. Almost all the components of EFA aim to eliminate discrimination. Moreover, Nepal has included one more component: providing basic and primary education in the mother tongue.

#### *Provision of special incentive programmes*

The Ministry of Education has launched various incentive programmes to promote education for girls and disadvantaged children.

#### *Primary school scholarship for all girls*

Conducted by the Department of Education to increase girls' participation in primary education,

this programme was first implemented in 1997 in 12 districts where girls' participation in education was deplorably low. It is now being implemented in all 75 districts. Under this scheme 50 percent of girls from socio-economically disadvantaged families that are enrolled in primary grades are provided with Rs. 250 (about USD 3.90) per head per year. However, in five selected districts in the Mid-Development Region, where girls' enrollment is very low, the scholarship is given to all girls enrolled in both primary and secondary levels.

#### *Dalit scholarship*

All Dalit students enrolled in school in all 75 districts receive annual scholarships, each worth Rs. 250.

#### *Upgrading scholarships for girls*

The government is rehabilitating 18 hostels, each accommodating 20 girls. This is expected to have a positive impact on girls' enrolment, as girls from remote areas who are staying in such hostels receive scholarships of Rs. 1050 per month, while those from accessible districts each receive Rs. 850 per month.

#### *Scholarships for disabled children*

In each district where the Special Education Programme is conducted, a quota of 50 places, supported by scholarships of Rs. 50 per child is provided to physically disabled children.

#### *Educational incentive programme for girls*

Since 2002 a pilot programme has been in progress targeted at economically, linguistically and educationally disadvantaged girls from two Village Development Committees (VDCs) in each of 17 districts. The aim is to provide opportunities for girls to participate in primary education. Schoolgirls annually receive Rs. 300 for educational materials and each new enrollee receives Rs. 500 for a school uniform.

#### *Education for special focus groups*

Under a pilot scheme operational since 2002 in ethnic and religious communities, six ethnic groups (Rai/Lepcha, Musahar, Tamang, Muslim, Chamar and Kamaiya Tharu) have been identified as social or community groups with low participation in education, have been provided with annual scholarships in three VDCs in each district.

The scholarships are intended for children of economically, linguistically and educationally disadvantaged special focus groups. The main objective is to encourage such children to enroll in school, attend regularly and complete the primary course cycle. Special focus group children already in school receive Rs. 300 for educational materials and new enrollees receive Rs. 500 for school uniforms.

#### *Formulation of decentralised policy*

The 1990 Constitution of Nepal described the country as multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and democratic, and stated that all citizens were equal irrespective of religion, race, gender, caste, tribe or ideology. The Statute also gave all communities the right to preserve and promote their languages, scripts and cultures, to educate children in their mother tongues and to practice their own religion.

The Local Self-Governance Act (LSGA) (1999) gave the rights to local government bodies – VDCs and municipalities – to establish pre-primary schools/centres with their own resources and to grant permission to establish, implement and manage such schools/centres. It also introduced mandatory representation of women in local government.

In order to attract women to teaching jobs and with the intention of increasing girls' enrolment and retention in school, the government has provided places for at least one female teacher in every school.

The EFA National Plan of Action has devised a strategy to provide full government support with required facilities to establish and run early childhood development centres in areas with deprived and disadvantaged communities.

#### *Provision of education in mother tongue*

The 1990 Constitution of Nepal guaranteed rights to primary education in a student's mother tongue. Various efforts are now being made to implement the Constitution. Primary school textbooks have already been translated into 14 local languages and many more are in the process of translation. Teachers are being prepared to use local languages as the medium of teaching-learning activities.

*Implementation of the Inclusive Education Programme*  
Inclusive education is a comparatively recent trend



The Government of Nepal has launched various incentive programmes to promote education for girls and disadvantaged children

in Nepal. It is a reorganised form of education, which comprehends all groups (deprived and marginalised) and categories (disabled and emotionally disturbed) and treats them without discrimination based on gender, ethnicity or impairment. It aims to bring all types of children, into the same educational environment. Under its EFA programme the Government of Nepal has been implementing the Inclusive Education Programme since 2004 (CERID 2006). The strategy comprised establishment of integration structure, teacher training, human resource development, community involvement and provision of residential facilities. The programme is conducted with the cooperation of all stakeholders including community members, parents and local organisations, it emphasises student-centred activities, the creation of a learning environment and an appropriate self-learning environment for children.

Inclusive education teacher training concentrates on preparing teachers to teach children who are

mildly disabled, have learning and/or language difficulties, are ethnically disadvantaged, live in remote areas, are psychologically affected, child labourers and street children and children who need special help.

*Efforts of donor agencies and international NGOs*  
Since 2001 donor agencies have shown interest in educational programmes and projects that seek to empower the disadvantaged and marginalised (Gurung 2006). Most of these agencies have laid stress on funds for the promotion of women, children and people living in disadvantaged situations. International NGOs like Save the Children-us and -Norway, Action Aid and Plan International have been involved in providing ECCE services since the early 1980s, but their coverage has been limited. As the target populations of these organisations are the poorest of the poor, they are playing a crucial role in dealing with the problem of including traditionally excluded groups.

### Affirmative programme impact

In the context of recent changes in Nepal, respect for diversity and social inclusion is directly linked to the political system and democratic values of the government and civil society. Studies conducted in recent years have revealed encouraging results:

- In one of its studies Save the Children–us found that Dalit children were outperforming non-Dalit children in child-friendly schools as well as non-child-friendly schools (Save the Children–us 2005).
- Of all the children enrolled in early childhood projects jointly launched by Save the Children–us and –Norway from 1999 to 2002, 90 percent were Dalits. Of those who participated in the ECD program more than 95 percent joined formal school, and attended regularly.
- There has been a decrease in discriminatory practices against Dalit students and girls. Children eat and drink together, and teachers give equal, if not extra, attention to marginalised students (Arnold 2003).
- The enrollment, attendance and retention of girls and Dalits have increased (Save the Children–us 2005).
- Almost all of the boys and girls who had attended ECD centres were enrolled in Grade 1 – as opposed to a 61:39 (boys:girls) ratio for children with no ECD centre experience (Save the Children–us–Norway 2003).
- The formative research and documentation of the inclusive education process in Nepal (November 2001 – July 2004) have observed that the Inclusive Education programme brought about important changes in the pilot schools (CERID 2004; Formative Research Project, 2003).
- There has been an increase in school enrollment, even among the children of Dalit and Janajati communities and of poor families were enrolled in pilot schools
- More physically disabled, blind, deaf and mentally disabled students have been enrolled and admitted to regular teaching–learning processes
- Teachers have been highly motivated towards the new inclusion-based teaching methods and materials
- The school–community linkage is gradually being developed and strengthened (CERID 2004).

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