

EUROPEAN COMMISSION HIGH LEVEL EDUCATION EVENT

BRUSSELS, 2 May 2007

Presentation by Shanta Sinha, Chairperson NCPCR.

I thank the European Commission for inviting me to this High Level Education Event. All our endeavors for abolition of child labor and emancipation of children from a world of drudgery and exploitation is a continuance of the history of many a battle and struggles that were fought and won for ensuring children's right to education. We draw strength from them even as they paved the way for bringing to the centre stage the issue of children's right to education as being indispensable for attaining freedom and dignity. In making whole hearted investments in education and in sending a serious message that would compel the establishments at all levels especially the concerned nation-States to vouch for children we contribute to this history of struggle for giving children their lost childhood. Armed with this moral force for realizing a world that cares for children, it is certainly possible to accomplish the task of getting every child to school.

The way a nation deals with its children, looks after them, nurtures them, brings them up, educates them decides whether that nation will have a large majority of citizens living with dignity, self esteem and feeling secure, who not only demand but also contribute, not only assert their individual rights but also observe their collective obligations. This implies that the State must make all arrangements to ensure that all children are in schools and not at work and this right of children is protected and is delivered in the framework of the values of equity and justice. Many States have yet to fulfill their obligation of translating this commitment to reality and in ensuring that every child is indeed in school. Being out of schools, millions of children are in the labour force living lives of drudgery and exploitation working in agriculture, mining, construction, fishing, on garbage dumps, brick kilns, and in countless other occupations, mainly in the informal sector. Instead of a moral indignation that children are ill-treated, child labour is tolerated and often even justified as if it was their 'karma' to be at work and provide for income, earnings and upkeep of the family.

Simultaneously, we are witness to an explosive demand for education in the world today. Poor parents see education as the only redemption from poverty and exclusion and thus are making enormous sacrifices to send their children to schools. Having a great faith in the system, perhaps more faith than the system has in itself, they send their children to schools, even if the schools are woefully ill-equipped, with little infrastructure and teacher facilities, and unprepared to accept first generation learners. Since schools do not appreciate the predicament of poor children and the first generation learners' they get excluded from the school system to join the labour force. The debate on ensuring children their right to education must resonate with the voices of the poor parents who seek to educate their children against all odds.

Rights based perspective in planning for Education

All planning for education must be informed by a rights based perspective.

1. All planning for ensuring children their right to education must be based on linking the program for a total abolition of child labour and children's attendance in full time formal day schools.
2. Investments in education must include all stages of education-i.e. primary, secondary and high school education simultaneously and not use the approach of fragmenting education into achieving universalisation of primary school first and then take up universalisation of the next levels of education.
3. Planning has to be made for social mobilization, in creating a social norm that children must not work and that they must attend schools. This would involve building local institutions structures and processes to identify children who are out of school, rescuing them from work and mainstreaming them into full time formal schools. A process of campaign and public debate and discussions on children's rights brings pressure on the system to correct its inadequacies.
4. There is unevenness in the educational attainments of *out of school* children. Some may have dropped out of school in the early stages of primary education and seek to comeback after a long gap of four to five years while some others may not even have been enrolled in schools. Arrangements for residential bridge course camps, motivation centres and any other local initiative that emerges in the process of campaign and mobilization needs to be taken up. A message must be sent that no child is so old that he/she cannot get back to school.
5. Simultaneously, the entire education system must be prepared to anticipate the backlog of children who have never attended schools, to join schools. Arrangements must be made within the school system to prepare them to be mainstreamed into an age appropriate class and ensure that they catch up with their peers. It would also require abundance of flexibility in governance of schools in terms of procedures of admission, rules governing attendance and absence from schools, examination and evaluation systems, and curriculum devised for accelerated learning, teacher autonomy, to accommodate children who have been left out of the school net, or those who wish to rejoin schools after a long absence.
6. Special efforts such as providing residential facilities must be made for children of migrant labour, children belonging to disadvantaged groups, children who live in scattered habitations, street children, orphans, child labour and adolescent girls and those without family support and atmosphere to study.
7. Special attention must be paid for inclusive education for children with disabilities while planning for mainstreaming children.

Enhancing Capacities of the State

To accomplish all the above tasks there is a great role for the donor agencies:

1. Donors have to increase investments in education and press for provision of schools at all levels simultaneously. This can happen only if there is an increase in the budgetary allocations

on education from the current levels. In this context, it is necessary that the EC provides the necessary leadership. I am given to understand that its contribution to education has declined dramatically from 4% of ODA in 2000 to 1.1% in 2004 as shown in the 2015 Watch Report 3 of Alliance 2015 (launched in 2006). **We must pledge our resources, and an abundance of it, if we are to earn the trust of the poor to respond.** We have failed the poor too often and it would be a shame if they stop taking our commitments seriously. They are no longer ‘objects’ receiving doles, but ‘subjects’, who understand when there is seriousness in the messages that flow from above.

2. At the same time **it must be ensured that contributions from multilateral donor agencies results in reduction of States dependence on external funding.** In fact it must insist on the States concerned in not only maintaining their existing commitments on education but in even raising it each year. This has far-reaching consequences for children’s rights to be protected and getting their due share of the national resources.

3. Overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problem at hand, many a time there is a search for practical, tangible and quick fix solutions by policy makers, and even the donor agencies. These solutions are in the nature of ad hoc provisioning such as parateachers, alternate, makeshift schools, non-formal education centres and so on. They also result in setting up of parallel institutions sometimes even within the governmental framework in the name of ‘missions’, ‘time-bound projects’ and ‘schemes’. Since existing institutions, departments and processes within the State are systematically bypassed, on completion of the contract with the donors, the government’s capacities to run its departments are totally weakened. Decisions do not emanate as a part of the organic process of the countries own strategic thinking and long term vision of the concerned nation-State. What is left behind is a dysfunctional system. **Care must be taken to ensure that all interventions are made to enhance the State’s capacities and not to weaken it.**

4. **Donors have an important role to play in ensuring that each of their policy interventions results in enhancing the credibility and legitimacy of the State.** Entertaining a discourse that de-legitimizes the State would only enable a move towards abdication of State’s responsibilities.

5. Getting children to school is not a soft program. It is ridden with conflicts, even as a child who is engaged in work or a girl who is engaged to be married off is brought to schools. Each level of politico-administrative unit from local, national to global has a role to play in resolution of tensions. **Donor agencies have a critical role in setting the terms of debate and discourse.** It is important that there is a zero tolerance of child labour and children being out of school and an insistence that all children must attend schools until they graduate school. Indeed setting the normative framework is a deeply contested area and the donors must exhibit courage of conviction in pressing for uncompromising positions on children’s right to education.

It must be recognised that a compromising position only comforts those structures and processes that reproduce child labour and the large mass of illiterate children. On the other hand if it is understood that children’s rights have to be protected no matter what then all of us including the **donors are indeed part of the movement for attainment of children’s right to education and consequently for social transformation and deepening of democracy.** In fact the battle is in arriving at this agreement and commitment for children. I do hope that in this meeting a categorical stand on total abolition of child labour and ensuring children’s right to education in

full time formal schools as a non-negotiable principle is adhered to whole heartedly. I strongly feel that if we pledge our resources charged with this imagination and the moral force to stand by children, child labour would be consigned to history. Children would begin to enjoy freedom and in doing so all of us too would get liberated.