

Part 2

The Reality of Educational Reforms

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Improving Schools through Decentralization: Observations from Nepal's Primary Education

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Introduction

The centralization-decentralization debate has become a central issue in the governance of education systems in recent times. It seems that countries with a strong tradition of centralization are moving towards decentralization while those with a strong tradition of decentralization are moving in the opposite direction (see, for example, Manna 2006; McGinn 1992; Weiler 1993). In the majority of developing countries, which generally have highly centralized education systems – even though the central authority is generally weak both in terms of its capacity to formulate and develop realistic plans and programs, and to pragmatically implement them – decentralization has been seen,

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either on their own or through external persuasion, as a panacea to various educational problems emanating from centralization. According to Manor (1991: 1), “it appeals to the people of the left, the center and the right, and to groups which disagree with each other on a number of other issues.” Nepal remains no exception.

Nepal’s move towards decentralization started at the same time as the partyless Panchayat system (1960–1990) moved towards an expansion and consolidation of the central government.¹ In the education sector, the successive governments since the 1980s have adopted an incremental approach to decentralization by giving greater space for non-state and community involvement in the provision and management of schooling and literacy. A major motive for this has been the perceived linkage between poor performance of public schools and the lack of community participation in education. Here, decentralization has been seen as a strategy to encourage community participation in school management and, in turn, improve the quality and legitimacy of public schools (see, for example, NPC 1992, 1997, 2002; HLWGE 2058 v.s.). However, as I will discuss later in the paper, Nepal’s educational decentralization is also an immediate response to the conditions put by the aid agencies supporting educational reforms in Nepal, seen, for example, through the use of district and school based planning and transfer of school management to the local communities.

This paper focuses on various initiatives that have been carried out in the name of educational decentralization in Nepal and discusses their likelihood of bringing about changes in

¹ For example, a number of decentralization commissions and committees were formed between 1963–1984 (Kafle 1984; Shrestha 1999). See also Bienen et al. (1990) and ADDCN (2001) for further discussion of decentralization in Nepal. For a treatment of decentralization in Nepal’s public health sector, see Aitken (1994).

current pedagogical practices in the classrooms and improving the quality of education. The paper starts with a general discussion of the theory and practice of decentralization in education. It then describes the various approaches to educational decentralization in Nepal, particularly focusing on the transfer of primary school management to local communities. It concludes by saying that the current forms of decentralization in primary education are unlikely to lead to significant changes in classroom pedagogy and consequently on the quality of education. It thus suggests that a much more coherent, meaningful and inclusive decentralization strategy evolving from widespread public participation, dialogue and consensus should be pursued.

Educational Decentralization: A Review of Literature

Decentralization is usually defined as a shift in the location of those who govern, about transfer of authority from those in one location to those in another, usually lower, level (McGinn and Welsh 1999: 17). More generally, it can be defined as “a means to ensure wider representation of legitimate interests” (McLean and Lauglo 1985: 5). Decentralization can assume a number of forms. A common starting point is the Deconcentration-Delegation-Devolution typology used by Rondinelli (1981) and Rondinelli and Cheema (1983). Deconcentration is the least extensive form of decentralization, which may involve a mere shifting of workload, not decision-making authority, from the central ministry headquarters to its local line agencies. In delegation, the decision-making and management authority for specific functions may be delegated or transferred to existing or newly created organizations that are not directly under the control of the central government. In both deconcentration and delegation the power may be transferred or revoked at the wish of the central authorities. However, devolution is a more extensive form of

decentralization that implies a legal transfer of power and resources to the local units of governance which are usually elected and accountable to the local people and which lie outside the formal command and control structure of the central government. Subsequent studies have greatly modified this typology. For instance, Manor (1999) identifies three types of decentralization based on what is transferred: administrative, political, and fiscal decentralization, and suggests that true decentralization, which he terms democratic decentralization, occurs when there is a proper mix of all three. Another form of decentralization is privatization or market decentralization whereby “functions that had been primarily or exclusively the responsibility of government are allowed to be carried out by businesses, community groups, cooperatives, private voluntary associations, and other non-governmental organizations” (World Bank 1999: 4).

A number of arguments have been put forward for decentralization of education. A most common way is to look at the rationale for decentralization from the motives of resource mobilization, efficiency, and politics and legitimacy (see, for example, Govinda 1997; McGinn 1992; Rondinelli 1981; Weiler 1990). According to McGinn and Welsh (1999: 28–29), decentralization has been proposed to: improve education per se directly (by increasing the quantity and quality of inputs, increasing relevance, innovativeness and choice of programs, reducing inequalities and increasing learning outcomes); improve the operation of education systems (by increasing the efficiency in allocation and utilization of resources, and increasing the use of information); change the sources and amounts of funds available for education, benefit the central government (by relieving the work load of central bureaucracy, by mobilizing local resources, and increasing its legitimacy), and benefit the local government (by increasing revenues and capacity, and power). However, according to Weiler (1990),

the political motives are the most important because there is an inherent conflict between the decentralization rhetoric and centralizing tendency of the state. According to him, while the central government would always prefer to have education system under its control, a loss of legitimacy of the modern state obliges it to use decentralization as a tool for conflict management and compensatory legitimation. In such circumstances, the centralizing tendency of the central state gets reflected in the new and uniform standards for evaluating decentralized education systems.

Decentralization in education can take a number of forms based on who are the main actors (McGinn and Welsh 1999). The most common form is the professional expertise approach whereby education experts with the professional technical knowledge about how best to operate the education system assume the primary responsibility. In this case, the authority may be transferred from the central education ministry to the state/region, district, school supervisors or even the head teacher at the school. School based management is the most decentralized form of this approach. Another approach is the political legitimacy approach whereby community members and/or their elected leaders govern education. Municipal schools in Chile and community schools in El Salvador and a number of African countries can be seen as governed according to this approach. The third approach is market efficiency in which schools are governed by marketization and choice. Private schools, education vouchers and Charter schools are cited as examples of this approach. Countries often use a mix of all these approaches deliberately or by default to govern and manage their education systems.

Available literature on decentralization indicates a number of conditions that have to be met for it to be successful. In these literatures, there is an emphasis on the need to focus not only on the technical, but also the political and legal aspects of

decentralization. An issue that is particularly highlighted is dialogue and consensus-building among the various interest groups in order to build a shared vision and commitment to the reform (Fiske 1996; Gaynor 1998). Another issue that needs adequate attention is the legal aspect because the nature and content of the legislation and the process in which it is legislated significantly affect decentralization outcomes (Florestal and Cooper 1997). Generally, creation of temporary structures through executive orders or decrees may not produce enduring results. To be more sustainable, “the reforms must be legislated so that their very existence is assured within broader relations of accountability, and national level separation and balance of powers” (Agrawal and Ribot 1999: 37). Similarly, teacher management is also a contentious issue in decentralization because the cooperation of teachers is essential for any educational reform to succeed. According to Gaynor (1998), a clear resolution of who should control the hiring and firing, and evaluation of teachers is important; at the minimum, decentralization should not threaten teacher’s job, promotion prospects, workloads, or conditions of service.

Decentralization, in and by itself, does not lead to improvements in the efficiency, equity, and quality of education (Prawda 1993), and holds little promise for reducing overall government expenditure and performing tasks off-loaded by the central government (Manor 1999). Decentralization and school autonomy may evoke educational improvement at the local level, but generally only under conditions where educational spending and central technical expertise are increased, especially to poor localities and low-income schools (Carnoy 1999: 56). According to him, “educational improvement is the result of systemic efforts ‘led’ by a central authority. These efforts combine educational evaluation, more and better materials, investments in teacher training, more local supervision to assure that teachers actually implement change,

and increased parent participation and investment in improving school management” (p. 56). In other words, the question is not simply one of centralization or decentralization because “it makes little sense to talk of ‘decentralization’ as a unitary process or phenomenon ... The task should be to understand which specific decisions (or, categories of decisions) should be made at what location within the governance structure of the system” (McGinn and Welsh 1999: 60).

Major Approaches to Educational Decentralization in Nepal

It is now widely accepted that Nepal’s early educational expansion (school establishment, financing and management) was a truly community initiative.² The state merely formalized these schools through granting permission and licensing.³ Immediately after 1951, the major focus of the Nepali state in the education sector was to develop a tax-supported single system of national, uniform and universal free education (NEPC 1956). The strategy for this was to view education as a “cooperative enterprise ... [between] central government, children, teachers, parents, administrators and managing committee ...” (MoE 1957: 7). Under this strategy, the central government would finance curriculum and textbooks, and training (largely with financial support from the USAID) whereas community people would assume responsibility for school construction, local resource mobilization and overall

² The 1951–1970 period has been referred to as the boom period in people’s participation in education (Upadhyay 1988). See Bhatta (2000) for an overview of community participation in Nepal’s education.

³ This permission and licensing has entailed providing government support mainly in the form of teacher quotas and textbooks. This mechanism continues to this day. State support to school’s physical facilities (i.e., school-building construction and renovation) gained momentum only after 1990. According to DoE (2008), there are 3,387 primary, 2,838 lower secondary and 1,426 secondary schools awaiting government licensing. They are known as unaided community schools.

management of the school. Evidence indicates that this approach was highly successful in expanding schooling throughout Nepal in the following decades.⁴

However, this educational expansion suffered from a lack of trained teachers, good textbooks and the low status accorded to the teaching profession mainly because the central government could not fulfill its role as envisaged by the NEPC (see, for example, Issacson et al. 2001; Stiller and Yadav 1979). Various types of schools continued to exist – government schools, government aided public schools and independent or private schools – each with their own curriculum and textbooks, and it was felt that the quality of education in these schools was neither improving nor relevant to national needs. The successive governments, particularly after the Panchayat takeover in 1960, were frustrated in their inability to rein in various types of schools under a uniform structure. This set the stage for King Mahendra to nationalize all schools under the aegis of the National Education System Plan (NESP, 1971–1976).

Much has been written about the various motives of NESP.⁵ Suffice to say here that the plan nationalized all community schools and obliged them to follow a uniform school program, teaching the same curriculum and using the same teaching techniques as determined by the center. The previously active role of the community was limited to that of providing local resources for school construction, and the government assumed total responsibility for the planning, financing, delivery, and

⁴ Nepal's education system – as measured by the number of schools, teachers and students – expanded twenty-fold between 1950 and 1970 (Issacson et al. 2001: 208).

⁵ See, for instance, MoE (1971) and Mohsin and Kasaju (1974, 1975) for descriptions of and support for NESP. See Onta (1996) for an analysis of the role of education during the Panchayat years in creating a particular version of national history.

monitoring and supervision of education through an elaborate network of Regional Education Directorates (REDs), District Education Offices (DEOs) and school inspectors who were all accountable to the Ministry of Education (MoE). However, a lack of implementation progress meant that by 1975, when NESP should have been implemented in 50 districts, only 25 were really affected by the change, and it had all but crumbled by the end of the 1970's (although it was never officially declared over).⁶

It is beyond the scope of this paper to carry out an analytical treatment of the cumulative effects of NESP on Nepal's educational development.⁷ However, from the perspective of decentralization, NESP is widely blamed for arresting community participation in education, increasing the alienation between the school and the local community, and thereby eroding the legitimacy of the public schools. Thus, subsequent efforts at educational decentralization through community participation have focused on undoing many of its components. In the following sections, we will look at some of the major decentralization-related reforms that have been implemented in Nepal's primary education since the 1980s, each building on the other, mainly with financial and technical support from various aid agencies. This focus on primary education (grades

⁶ According to Harka Gurung (who was involved in NESP formulation and implementation), perhaps the first challenge came from the ruling elites who began to send their children to Indian schools in greater numbers (Gurung 1984). During an interview with Trailokya Nath Upraity in August 2003, it was revealed that an even greater impediment to NESP's success was the attitude of people in the education bureaucracy, characterized by a tendency to hide the weaknesses and exaggerate the strengths in order to impress the king, which made it impossible for the king to understand the reality of NESP implementation.

⁷ A number of teachers I have talked to at various times have stated that NESP ensured them of a regular salary. Before NESP, since the teachers were managed by the communities, they could not get salary on time, and often it could be in the form of 'kind.' Other significant contributions of NESP include promotion of mass education and attention to regional and gender equity.

1–5) stems from the fact, particularly after the 1980s, it has become the most important beneficiary of government’s public expenditure on education as well of foreign aid to education in comparison to lower secondary (grades 6–8) and secondary (grades 9–10) education. In general, the government has attempted to decentralize primary education through school clustering, district and school based planning and financing, and transfer of primary school management to the local communities.

School Clustering (Resource Centers and Satellite Schools)

Although the use of school clustering and resource centers (RC) dates back to the 1940s in the United Kingdom, they were widely promoted throughout the developing world after the late 1960s, and after the Jomtien conference in 1990, they have become “a common feature of educational reforms and improvement programs throughout the developing world” (Giordano 2008: 24). In Nepal, school clustering and RCs were first used in the Seti Education for Rural Development Project (Seti ERDP, funded by UNESCO, UNDP and UNICEF) in the early 1980s and extended to six other districts by World Bank funded Primary Education Project (PEP) in the mid-1980s.⁸ A major responsibility of these RCs was to provide teacher training and supervision for a group of 8–10 satellite schools in order to improve classroom pedagogy and student learning achievement. This concept was gradually extended throughout the nation by the Basic and Primary Education Program (BPEP, 1992–2004). Under this concept, a comparatively better-equipped and centrally located secondary or lower secondary school operates as the RC for a cluster of 15–30 primary schools (or

⁸ Seti ERDP was implemented in the five districts of Seti zone in Far-Western Nepal. PEP was implemented in six districts – Jhapa and Dhankuta in the East, Tanahun and Kaski in the West, and Dang and Surkhet in the Mid-West.

primary levels of lower secondary and secondary schools) in its vicinity.⁹ The RC, manned by a resource person (RP), is expected to provide professional and pedagogical support to the primary level teachers in the form of on-the-site training, development and dissemination of locally made teaching materials, regular classroom observations and discussion meetings in order to promote local level innovations and adaptations, and improve the quality of teaching-learning in the cluster. Over the years, this local level structure has become an important conduit to introduce such reforms at upper levels of the school education cycle too.

During my visits to many schools in various parts of the country since 2003, the majority of teachers have stated that RPs seldom come to the schools for systematically observing classroom teaching and supporting teachers. RPs visited school according to their convenience and whim rather than according to the requirements of and problems faced by the schools, and instead spent most of their time at the DEO. The turnover rate of RPs was also reported to be quite high. When RPs did come, it was more to inspect student and teachers attendance, suggest teachers to make lesson plans, and ask if the school had any problems. Most teachers understood these inspections as mere formalities rather than a forum where they could genuinely discuss their problems and receive feedback. Similarly, many teachers did not have a very high regard for the professional competence of the RPs during RC-based training activities. According to the RPs, the big size of the school cluster, inadequate travel money and ad hoc demands placed on them by the DEO and other MoE agencies hampered the regularity of school visits and classroom observations.

⁹ In recent years, RC concept has also been used in lower secondary and secondary levels through the Secondary Education Support Program (2002–2009, supported by ADB and Danida).

These observations are not surprising given that some 39 percent of the RP's time was used in the performance of 'non-core' functions, and supporting teachers' professional development was given the lowest priority (Bista and Carney 2001). According to CERID (2004a: 23), teachers viewed the RP/RC more as an administrative unit of DEO responsible for data collection. And the low regard for the RPs was because of the fact that their academic qualifications and expertise were not significantly different from those of teachers (Bista and Carney 2001).

With regard to the contributions of RC/RPs to student learning outcomes, an evaluation of BPEP in 1999 concluded that the impact has remained minimal in terms of promoting changes in the classroom (MoE 1999a). According to Danida/MoFA (2004: 51), the capacity of the RPs has not been significantly strengthened in terms of their educational expertise and their capability to provide effective professional support to teachers in the classrooms (for which purpose they were deputed). It thus seems that the RCs, by being accountable not to the schools but to DEOs, by engaging more in routine administrative matters at the cost of professional activities, and by being manned by people without adequate professional qualifications and expertise, have just added an extra layer to the education bureaucracy (Bhatta 2000; Bista and Carney 2001).

District and School Based Planning and Financing

Another major decentralization reform promoted by BPEP in primary education after 1999 is a two-pronged strategy consisting of bottom-up planning, which is a result of the program's emphasis on processes and outcomes rather than on inputs only. In this planning modality, each school is expected to prepare a school improvement plan (SIP) and each Village Education Committee (VEC) a Village Education Plan (VEP)

through participatory, micro-planning exercise. Similarly, a team of DEO staff, in conjunction with the District Education Committee (DEC), prepares a District Education Plan (DEP) using available secondary information (from the SIPs and VECs) and limited participatory exercise) (MoE 1999b: xv). This is, in theory, a good combination of a ‘professional’ and ‘political’ approach whereby the MoE line agencies work closely with the local political bodies and other relevant stakeholders. In reality, however, this decentralized planning has remained a sectoral activity only with little inputs from the local governments.

Decentralized planning in Nepal started with the formulation of the DEPs. It can be seen as an immediate response to the conditions put by the donor agencies supporting BPEP. In other words, external funding for BPEP after 1999 was conditioned on the production of DEPs by the end of February 2000, and the money was actually released after the DoE was able to produce DEPs for 19 districts by the end of January 2000.¹⁰ Prior to the development of the DEP, the DoE prepared a DEP formulation guideline and a draft format which were distributed to the district planning team as part of technical support. Two members from the DEO were given one-week training in Kathmandu and they were then expected to train other members of the planning team. In addition, a plan advisory committee was formed in each district to extend support to the plan formulation committee. Similarly, Danida contracted the National Institute for Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA) from India to assist in the capacity building of the districts in areas of planning, and NIEPA played an important role in the development of DEPs for five districts.

¹⁰ This statement is based on an interview carried out in March 2006 with an ex-Deputy Director of DoE who was deeply involved in the program. The DoE was given only three months by the aid agencies for the preparation of these DEPs. See also Aide Memoire, 17–29 November 1999, and the Terms of Reference for Third Joint Review of BPEP II (8–19 May 2000).

An evaluation of 44 DEPs that I had carried out in 2007 showed a striking content and chapter-wise similarity across all the plans as they had fully followed the format provided by the DoE (Bhatta 2007a). While these plans included a large amount of statistical data, there was no adequate analysis of the district's context as well as an identification of schools by their performance on which to build an improvement strategy. Similarly, the DoE had no record of the extent to which these plans were implemented in the individual districts because funding allocations to the districts were based not on these plans but on quotas determined by the center.

School improvement planning followed soon after. The joint donor-government mid-term review of BPEP II in 2001 had concluded that in order to effect changes in the education system, a move towards community ownership of public schools was necessary. It also concluded that several shifts from current practices to new practices needed to be initiated and/or consolidated. These shifts included decentralizing budget and authority, providing a block grant to schools, and improving the capacity of school and community to manage its school (MoE 2002). These recommendations made way for the introduction of school-level planning in Nepal. SIP was initially piloted in five districts and was expanded to all the schools soon after. According to this concept, schools are expected to develop a plan that focuses on improving the quality aspects of education.

All schools that have prepared SIP receive block grants based on student size and geographical location. For instance, in 2008, schools received NRs 150 per student in the Mountains, 140 in the Hills, and 130 in the Tarai and Kathmandu Valley, respectively. In addition, schools were also entitled to NRs 126 per student in the Mountains, 116 in the Hills, and 101 in the Tarai and Kathmandu Valley, respectively, to cover management and stationery costs. In addition, there were provisions for

efficiency and performance based block grants (MoE 2065 v.s.). In reality, however, what schools received through these provisions was far less than what was stated in their SIPs, and this document merely became a 'wish list' of the things needed by the school rather than one to be implemented in a systematic way over a period of years to improve the quality of education. I have often heard head teachers talking about the need for extra personnel to produce and forward these documents and other necessary information for central consumption because it was becoming an onerous task for the head teacher.

In this way, a good 'bottom-up' planning approach on paper has become a good example of a top-down or guided approach to planning. A number of studies (Acharya et al. 2002; CERID 2002; Pokhrel 2003; Shrestha et al. 2002) have noted that decentralized planning under BPEP has remained fund-driven and completely guided by central formats. These studies have also highlighted the lack of institutionalization of these initiatives and a lack of ownership by schools over these plans mainly because of a lack of capacity building exercises at the lower levels. In this regard, a third party review of BPEP II in 2001 has found that the level of achievement in relation to training of headmasters, VEC and School Management Committee (SMC) members was well below target for the year 1999–2000. For instance, the achievements in providing training to SMC and VEC members were only 42 and 21 percent, respectively (Team Consults 2001: 78). Similarly, the achievements in providing management training to head teachers, VEC members and SMC members were 58, 27 and 47 percent, respectively. Likewise, achievements in SIP training were 47 and 22 percent, respectively, for SMC and VEC members, and the achievement in preparation of SIPs was only 52 percent (p. 80). These low achievements at the local level were in sharp contrast to the high quantitative achievement at the central level.

Transfer of Public Primary School Management to the Local Communities

As I have indicated earlier, successive governments have sought to increase the role of local communities in school management. Particularly since the early 2000s, we can discern an increased attention to this aspect. In 2001, the report of the High Level Working Group on Education (HLWGE) recommended the renaming of ‘public’ schools into ‘community’ schools, and a greater role for the community (especially SMC) in school management, including teacher recruitment and management. The Seventh Amendment to the Education Act in 2001 addressed some of these recommendations, by redefining the composition and functions of SMC, DEC and VEC to give them greater role and responsibility in the overall management of the school.

But perhaps the most important impetus for the policy to transfer public primary school management to the local communities came from the aid agencies supporting the education sector. The government decision towards this policy in 2002 can be seen as the result of the commitments made by the Government of Nepal to the donor agencies to expedite reforms, especially by “prioritizing public and national resources, improving service delivery, enhancing transparency and accountability and, consequently, maximizing the impact of development efforts in poverty reduction,” evident in the Immediate Action Plan (IAP) released on June 6, 2002. In the education sector, IAP called for a transfer of public primary school management to communities, hand over of recruitment of primary teachers to SMC in community schools, and freezing of recruitment of primary school teachers by the government (HMG 2002a).¹¹ This was reiterated in the government budget for fiscal year 2002/03 as follows:

¹¹ Similar provisions were also put in place for the management of sub-health posts by the local communities.

Hundred primary schools will be handed over to the Primary School Management Committee within July/August of the coming fiscal year with a view to enhance the standard of basic and primary education and to promote the community ownership in the management of primary schools. Responsibility of recruiting teachers will be given to the management committees and a block grant will be provided to such schools. The task of handing over of primary schools to the local communities will be expanded gradually (HMG 2002b).

Many MoE and DoE officials and education experts I interviewed in September 2003 indicated that there was donor pressure, especially from the World Bank to transfer the management of public primary schools to the local communities. It should be noted that the World Bank extended a US\$ 5 million Learning Innovation Loan to the Community School Support Project (CSSP, 2003–2007).¹² The proposal developed for the purpose states that “the transfer of public schools to community management is one of the most concrete and immediate steps the government can take to demonstrate its commitment to changing the way it serves the people” (World Bank/Nepal 2003: 4). It further asserts that “limited experience of community managed schools in Guatemala, Nicaragua and El Salvador indicates the chances of this pilot succeeding [in Nepal] are reasonably high” (p. 5).

However, World Bank espousal of this policy predates the CSSP. For example, in 2001 it had suggested to “decentralize the education system... so that schools might then be transferred

¹² UNDP has also supported community management of schooling through its Community Owned Primary Education Program (COPE, 1999–2007). UNDP, which was deeply involved in the formulation of Local Self-Governance Act 1999, supported the establishment and operation of 120 new COPE schools in six districts in an alternative framework consisting of Ministry of Local development, District Development Committees and the local communities. After the end of the project in 2007, however, these schools have been brought into the regular structure of the MoE. For details, see Bhatta (2007b) and Bhatta and Koirala (2007).

to communities, or more broadly teacher cooperatives, NGOs or private operators under an umbrella act with provisions similar to those covering other user groups such as those in the community forestry” (World Bank/Nepal 2001: vi). Furthermore, Ken Ohashi, who was the Bank’s Nepal Country Director at the time, was actively engaged in advocating for such a transfer before the policy was made public by publishing a series of articles in the local English daily newspapers between 28 May and 24 June, 2002. In these articles, Ohashi not only advocated for a transfer of public primary school management to the local communities but also explained how the concept would work in Nepal, and after the policy was announced he praised it as “one of the most promising elements of the IAP” (Ohashi 2002a; see also Ohashi 2002b, and 2002c). It should also be noted that in an interview in July 2002, Ohashi had explicitly stated that continued budgetary support to Nepal would depend, among others, on the vigorous and effective implementation of IAP including the transfer of the first batch of at least 100 public primary schools to full community management (Nepali Times 2002).

After the budget speech, the government issued a communiqué on 23 July 2002 in the state-owned newspaper *Gorkhapatra*, inviting applications from the local government bodies, SMCs or communities for the transfer of public primary school management. The communiqué stated that the transferred school would continue to receive government grants and incentive money as stated, and the agency willing to take responsibility of school management could make decisions with regard to teacher recruitment and other provisions. However, no applications were filed at any of the DEOs in the country. Then on 8 August 2002, the cabinet approved the *Operational Manual for Community-Managed Schools* (hereafter *Manual*) in the form of a decree. On 22 August 2002, the DoE issued a second ‘very urgent’ communiqué in the same newspaper

inviting local bodies or SMCs for transfer, adding that the school should be a community school receiving regular government grants, have a functioning SMC constituted according to the Education Act, and received consent from the concerned VDC, municipality or SMC and parents meeting that the school can be managed by the community. Applications from local communities for management transfer started to flow in only after this second communiqué.

The *Manual* was issued in order to provide a formal basis for the operation of community managed schools, to clarify the roles of various agencies, and to specify the provisions concerning inspection and evaluation of the schools (HMG 2002c). The draft was prepared by high-level officials at the DoE and approved by a committee at the MoE. These activities occurred separately. It was stated that the DoE officials had wanted the *Manual* in the form of regulations while officials at the MoE had insisted on a decree. It was also clear that the MoE and DoE had not sought participation of various indigenous stakeholders in the formulation of the policy although consultations had been going on with the donor community. In the words of a high level MoE official, “since the transfer is a voluntary program and the local communities can decide whether or not they want to take over the management of their public school, there is no need to consult them in the formulation stage as they can always refuse if they don’t like the provisions.” In September 2003, officials at the DoE were revising the *Manual* in light of the many problems encountered in its implementation. When asked how participatory the amendment process was, it was stated that more efforts were in place this time to listen to, and take note of the local perspectives on the policy. For instance, MoE officials and donor representatives visited some transferred schools. At the national level, workshops were organized for the staff of the MoE and DoE to inform them about the process.

However, the teachers' unions, a group opposed to the transfer, were not consulted. While education officials were of the opinion that participation of various stakeholders can be and should be increased, it had not happened during this early period.

I visited three public schools in Banepa Municipality (located in Kavrepalanchowk district of Central Nepal) in September 2003 to understand the reality of transfer at the school level. The municipality had assumed responsibility for the management of all primary schools in Banepa. In fact, it had been managing public primary schools under its jurisdiction since 1994 under an agreement with the MoE.¹³ Under this agreement, the responsibilities of MoE were to: provide the salary and other benefits of teachers; carry out comparative evaluation of the program; and, give policy directions from time to time. Similarly, the responsibilities of Banepa Municipality were to: conduct the program on its own during the pilot phase; implement the curriculum, textbooks and teaching materials specified by the MoE; conduct teacher training and make provisions of teaching-learning materials for quality improvement; make provisions for the assessment of program implementation at the end of the academic session; and, seek advice for future programs and follow MoE directions. However, this initiative was never evaluated although the municipality officials stated that most of the activities mentioned in the agreement were conducted by the municipality.

The public primary schools in Banepa Municipality were among the first to be transferred, although an agreement to this effect was signed between the municipality and the DEO of Kavrepalanchowk only in March 2003. This agreement was

¹³ When the experimental piloting of school management by local bodies was first carried out in 1994, there was a provision in the Education Regulations according to which the government could provide block grants to DDC, VDC or municipality for the operation and management of one or all levels of schools.

based on the conditions that the municipality would continue to support the activities in the previous agreement and in case the agreement was annulled, the MoE would bear responsibility for the teachers it had deployed and the municipality would bear responsibility for the teachers it has recruited through SMC. According to the agreement, the job and financial security of teachers was well protected despite the belief of teacher unions to the contrary. It should also be mentioned that the municipality was not involved in preparing the contents of the agreement. The municipality was simply expected to do as directed by the MoE and its line agencies and to not carry out any programs without permission. The MoE expected the municipality to use its own resources to implement many of the programs and there was no provision of grants and other incentives to the municipality to build its capacity and implement educational programs. Similarly, there were no provisions for monitoring, supervision and evaluation of the transferred schools by the district and central level agencies. The RPs and school supervisors were implicitly expected to perform this task.

Prior to the (second) transfer, head teachers from all schools were invited to the municipality, and together with representatives from the DoE, DEO and municipality, a meeting was conducted to inform them about the transfer of primary school management to the community. However, SMC members were not invited to this meeting. Moreover, the head teachers, teachers and SMC members were not invited during the signing of the agreement at the DEO. There had not been any orientations at the district level for the municipality officials, head teachers and SMC members with regard to the transfer of primary school management to the local communities. At the community level, parents had not been informed about the policy. Thus it was no surprise that the majority of parents had no information of the transfer.

The SMCs in all three schools had been formed from among the parents (mostly through consensus) in accordance with the provision in the Education Act. The usual activities of SMC members included: regular monitoring of teacher and student attendance, helping solve problems of the school especially with respect to resource mobilization, and urging teachers to teach well. Some of them also reported observing classroom teaching and evaluating teacher performance. It should be noted that many SMC members, as in the case of parents, held the teachers responsible for the poor quality of education in their schools.

SMC members reported no interactions with the DEO and RC. However, a lack of coordination and sharing within the SMC itself was evident from SMC members' comments such as, "may be the chairman knows about that." Regarding the transfer of school management to the local community, SMC members overwhelmingly stated that they had not read the *Manual* (they had not been provided with a separate copy) and did not know about their roles, responsibilities and authority in the changed context. Nonetheless, they felt that the transfer signified a greater role for the community and it would lead to increased community ownership, enhanced teaching learning and increased monitoring of the classroom.

Primary school teachers from the three schools were also interviewed. Most teachers identified a lack of parental interest in the education of their children as a major problem of the school, which in turn, according to them, was exacerbated by the fact that only the children of the poor and marginalized were attending public schools while the children of the rich attended private schools. They cited irregular student attendance and lack of physical infrastructure (especially enough classrooms and big playgrounds) as other major problems. When asked about the activities of SMC, most teachers stated that SMC members, especially the chair person, checked the regularity of teachers and students, and helped solve school's problems,

especially those related to physical facilities. While SMC members said that they also monitored classroom activities such as teaching learning, teachers refuted this claim by saying that SMC members were not qualified to do that.

Teachers appeared to be the most informed about the transfer of school management. They stated that the transfer had remained a formality, just on paper, and nothing had really changed after the school management had been handed over to the municipality. Some teachers alleged that the government was trying to shoulder off its responsibilities and please donors to get more aid. Others warned that the SMC should not be given the function of teacher evaluation since many SMC members are illiterate. They predicted that the program would not succeed because most of the parents of public schools are from the poorest section of the society and can do little to raise additional resources or to help improve the quality of education in the school. It was evident that teachers had not been consulted either in the process of policy formulation or in its implementation.

All teachers stated that the policy was good in theory; it is the implementation they said they were not satisfied with. According to them, some of the weaknesses were a lack of timely information, no perceived change in the role of the DEO and municipality, and lack of community mobilization activities. Some also warned that it could lead to conflict among the teachers and the SMC, especially if the latter tried to exert undue pressure on the teachers.

These findings are also supported by a number of studies carried out to assess the progress of the policy. A study in 2003 did not find the community managed school to be different from a non-community managed school, and pointed to a lack of preparation for management transfer and indifference of the local bodies to the process (CERID 2003). It also pointed to a lack of evolution of local monitoring, an issue reiterated in a similar

study in 2004 (CERID 2004b). Both of these studies stated that the management transfer stood on a weak legal basis, and although the concern and enthusiasm of SMC members and parents had increased, their capacity to manage the school locally had not been developed. By 2004, the World Bank had also realized that the risks to this policy were ‘substantial’ and it could be hampered by the reluctance of government officials to surrender greater autonomy to schools and communities, and opposition of teacher unions to SMC appointment of teachers (World Bank/Nepal 2004: 12). However, by this time, policy implementation had been negotiated, especially in terms of protecting the rights of teachers to permanency of tenure. This meant that SMC could only recruit temporary teachers from its own resources, and permanent (MoE appointed) teachers could seek transfer from a community managed school if they so desired.

Improving Nepal’s Primary Schools through Decentralization: Further Discussion

None of the reforms I have described above were organically developed in Nepal: most of them were aid agency conditions and prescriptions to support and reform the education sector, and after a piloting of 1–3 years, were up-scaled, first to all primary, and more recently to lower secondary and secondary levels. The reforms and their implementation logic were formulated and designed at the central level, through (often exclusive) consultations between the aid agencies and high level MoE officials. In these consultations, there has been a proclivity to opt for reform packages whose success has been ‘proven’ elsewhere primarily because of a lack of home grown and tested alternatives (See also, Bhatta 2007b). However, these aid agency representatives and MoE officials had little or no involvement in their actual implementation. There were no concerted efforts over a period of time to nurture these reforms through careful monitoring of their progress (barring some piloting during very

early project periods) by people who had internalized them and who were highly committed to the reforms' success.¹⁴ Rather, blanket implementation strategies and modalities were developed, to be uniformly applied to as many districts and schools as possible within a short period of time. The burden of implementation was left to those at the lower tiers who had not only little information and knowledge of the reform package and limited opportunities for engagement with higher level officials, but also little room for maneuvering to adapt it to the local context.

There are at least two ways in which transformation from centralization to decentralization may occur (Govinda 2003a: 208–209). It can take the form of a 'technical-administrative' transformation which "*begins essentially as a top-down technical exercise*" (p. 208; emphasis in original) with the center as the main locus of action. In such a case, the empowerment of the local governments depends on the central government, which may choose to transfer power through executive orders or through legislative action. Another approach is 'socio-political' in which the reform starts from the other end as a 'bottom-up' exercise, with the local community, the village, the school and teachers as the main locus of action. Here, although the transformative actions may be carried out under the patronage of the central leadership and through external intervention, "primacy is given to the local community in formulating the rules of the game" (p. 209).

On paper, successive governments in Nepal have – through amendments in the Education Act and through decrees – provided greater space for involvement of local bodies in the planning and overall management of the schools under their jurisdictions (e.g., through the DEC's and VEC's, elected SMC's,

¹⁴ I borrow some of these terms from Noel McGinn's (1998) analysis of *Escuela Nueva* reforms in Colombia. See also Reimers (1997), who states that absence of conditions to facilitate dialogue and organizational learning is one reason why educational policies do not reach schools.

and agreements with some municipalities for management transfer). However, existing legislation on decentralization in education is still very weak and ambiguous. It does not adequately define the fundamental aspects of the law and there is a tendency to use phrases such as ‘as directed’ and ‘as stated’ to make the law as brief as possible: the details are spelt out in regulations and by-laws. This practice gives space for governments to frequently amend or change regulations to serve their immediate political interests (Poudel 2003). Another reason for this frequent change in regulations is the lack of lower level stakeholder involvement in the rule making process, who then oppose or remain indifferent to the implementation of the rules and force an eventual compromise. According to the Education Act, the main responsibility for school management falls on the SMCs and VECs. However, these bodies have not been adequately empowered and trained to perform functions such as teacher management and quality improvement (see Bhatta 2004). What they have been given are responsibilities without authority and are expected to follow MoE rules and regulations. Moreover, in the current political scenario where there are no elected local bodies in place, VECs and DECAs (whose members consist of local elected bodies) have lost their relevance, and in the words of an official at the MoE, transfer of school management to SMCs has become the favored approach of both aid agencies and MoE officials.

We can see an increase in funding allocations to the lower levels for addressing equity and quality related issues after the emphasis on decentralized planning, and school management transfer to the communities. For example, schools that improve enrollment and retention of marginalized group children are entitled to additional funding from the state. Schools of Mid and Far-Western regions and Karnali zone are entitled to additional funding for improving the net enrollment rate (NER) of girls and other marginalized groups (MoE 2065 v.s.). In the

CSSP, in addition to the one time incentive grant of NRs. 100,000 that all transferred schools receive, there are performance grants and scholarships for mainstreaming out of school children (World Bank/Nepal 2003). However, these provisions are generally applied on a blanket basis without an adequate identification of low enrollment areas and poor performing schools. The current differentiation of districts on the basis of Mountain, Hill and Tarai (with Tarai districts getting the lowest amount per student) or development regions is not appropriate as shown by the fact that of the 12 low net enrollment districts (with NER at less than 80 percent) in 2003, eight were in the Tarai and none of the 12 districts were from the Far-Western region (MoE 2003). Similarly, in 2008, of the eight low NER districts (NER less than 85), six were from Tarai and again none were from the Far-West (MoE 2008). At the same time, these funding provisions are yet to be legally enshrined in the Education Act, and their endurance cannot be ensured until this happens.

In order to enhance quality related improvements, there are provisions for performance-based block grants, whereby school grants are linked to performance of schools based on teacher's competency, adequacy of physical facilities, accountability, school operation processes, learning outcomes and other results. It is however, difficult to ascertain improvements in school performance in the absence of: (i) close, regular monitoring of school and classroom processes, and (ii) regular, reliable and standardized assessment tests to measure student learning outcomes. What is more surprising is that no systematic mechanisms have been established concurrent with program implementation to closely monitor the school and classroom processes intended to be positively affected by the reform.¹⁵

¹⁵ This lack of monitoring mechanisms is not exclusive to the reforms I have described in this paper. For example, the Teacher Education Project (2002–2009, supported by ADB and Danida) – with its main objective to assist the government in improving the quality and efficiency of and access to basic

Nepal is clearly following the ‘technical-administrative’ or ‘guided’ approach to decentralization. In such a case, according to Govinda (2003b: 240–241), a proper dissemination of the changed framework and its implications for people at different levels, especially the school or community level is necessary because often only the high level officials may be aware of such changes. Moreover, in such a case, an active involvement of decision-makers is desired not only in formulating plans and programs but also in their implementation (Thomas Isaac and Franke 2001). From the findings of this study, it is evident that this has not happened in Nepal. The MoE and its line agencies did not include key stakeholders – Ministry of Local Development representatives, DDC, Municipality and VDC representatives, SMC members, school teachers and their unions, and parents – from the beginning of policy formulation.¹⁶ The central government saw the local communities as keen and ready to assume responsibility for school management once the policy was announced. However, this was not the case because the community people did not have adequate information of the policy, as shown by the fact that applications for transfer were filed only after the government issued the *Manual*. Another reason was that the design and implementation of the policy was not widely shared and discussed. More significantly, the government neither had a clear, coherent and time-bound strategy for school transfer, nor a new mechanism in place to check, monitor and evaluate the performance of schools after

education through provision of better qualified teachers – was unable to set up a strong post-training teacher support mechanism from the beginning. Such a system was established only at the very last minute of project completion (in January 2009), and thus, for the major duration of the project, teachers received little follow-up support after training. This new mechanism, among others, seeks support from the RC/RP and head teacher for formulation of individual teacher’s teaching improvement plan (NCED 2009).

¹⁶ Even at the local level (in case of Banepa Municipality), SMC members and parents have not been involved in the agreements between the MoE/DoE, DEO and the municipality.

they were transferred. It expected the existing (and, as I will discuss below, over-burdened) system to carry out this task. The government also expected local communities to carry out professional activities such as monitoring and evaluation of performance and efficiency of teachers and head teachers. Most surprisingly, the government expected all this in the absence of local level capacity building and the presence of ambiguities and contradictions with regard to the roles and responsibilities of various bodies.

In this way, an unintended but nonetheless significant cumulative effect of these reforms has been to increase the burden on the local level implementers, as greater demands are placed on them by the center for preparing the necessary documents and for collecting, processing and forwarding data/information on 'progress.' For example, before the introduction of decentralized planning, DEOs and RPs did not have to perform DEP and SIP related functions. But now they have to perform these additional functions without a concomitant increase in the number of personnel deputed to these agencies and improvement in their professional capacities. For the school head teachers, these burdens are even greater: in addition to the teaching responsibilities, they have to perform the roles of data collector, analyst and planner (with support of some other school teachers who have even greater teaching obligations). These can all have a negative impact on the amount of time they can provide to supervise classroom teaching and learning. More importantly, when reforms become burden, they tend to be implemented for the mere sake of formality, just to meet the minimum requirements.

The choice before Nepal's education planners and policy makers is no longer of whether or not to decentralize education. Decentralization is intrinsic to democracy, and is necessary given the country's geographical and socio-cultural diversity. Rather, the debate henceforth needs to focus on: (i) its ideological aspect

– whether to pursue a political approach or a professional expertise approach, or even a more meaningful synthesis of the two – and, (ii) functional aspect – which education related functions should be executed at which level of the education system. For example, given that teacher management is one of the most contentious issues in decentralization of education, is the current Teacher Service Commission located in Kathmandu the most suitable institution for nationwide teacher allocation and management or are some regional and district bodies strategically better located to execute these decisions? Similarly, is the DoE located in Kathmandu the most appropriate institution to implement all school education related policies and programs? Which institution is most suitably located to monitor, supervise and provide professional support to schools and teachers and how? The answers to such questions can help determine not only what policies to formulate and which programs to implement but also who formulates and implements them.

However, answers to these questions will not emanate from the sectoral confines of the upper echelons of educational bureaucracy alone or from closed-door government–donor interactions. Rather, they will come from widespread consultations with important stakeholders such as teachers, students, parents, and SMC members, something that our planners did when they produced the first education plan in 1956. Mere hand over of additional responsibilities to local or community bodies without adequate legislation, capacity building, resources, and space for local maneuvering is unlikely to increase parental interest in education and improve student learning outcomes. A successful decentralization strategy will emerge from a proper understanding of the weaknesses in the present system, through a more intensive involvement of professional committed to the reform's success, and from careful dialogue and negotiation among the different stakeholders. At

the very least, the government needs to reverse its current approach of designing policies and programs without consulting relevant stakeholders and negotiating their implementation when opposition or limitation arises.

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