

DECENTRALIZATION OF PRIMARY EDUCATION IN NEPAL

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Introduction

The centralization-decentralization debate has become the central issue in the governance of education systems in recent times.¹ 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. 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 (either on their own or through external persuasion) as the panacea to educational problems emanating from centralization. According to Manor, “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” (1991: 1). Nepal remains no exception.

Decentralization of primary education in Nepal has been aimed primarily at improving the quality of education through better school management. Since the 1980’s, Nepal has tried to decentralize the administration of public education in an incremental manner. However, since 2002, the policy has been to transfer the authority for management of public primary schools to the local communities. The management of more than 900 public primary schools has already been transferred to the local communities and the Tenth Plan (2002-2007) aims to hand over 8000 public primary schools to the local communities. Moreover, the involvement of donor communities, especially the World Bank, in the process has been significant.

This paper looks at the various forms of educational decentralization in Nepal and discusses whether these forms of decentralization are likely to produce changes in how teaching-learning is carried out in the

1 This article is a slightly modified version of my Master’s thesis (P. Bhatta 2004). I would like to thank Tatsuro Fujikura and Pratyoush Onta for comments on a previous draft of this paper.

classrooms at the school level. The paper starts with a general discussion of the theory and practice of decentralization in education. It then proceeds to describe the various forms of decentralization being carried out in primary education in Nepal. It concludes by saying that the current forms of decentralization in primary education are unlikely to lead to any substantial changes in how teaching-learning is carried out in the classrooms and have any visible impact on the quality of primary 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.

Review of Literature on Educational Decentralization

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 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 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, which now is more commonly known as administrative decentralization. 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 public service sectors, including education. A most common way is to look at the rationale for decentralization from the motives of resource mobilization, efficiency and politics and legitimacy. According to McGinn and Welsh, 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) (1999: 28-29). According to Weiler (1990), there is an inherent conflict between decentralization rhetoric and the centralizing tendency of the state. According to him, while the central government would always prefer to have education system under central control, a loss of the legitimacy of the modern state obliges it to decentralize to regain that legitimacy. However, the centralizing tendency or behavior of the central state is 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 of education decentralization 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 lower levels such as 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 approach whereby schools are governed on the principle of 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.

Development of a National System of Education in Nepal:

Historical Overview and Current Status

When Nepal pursued systematic efforts at educational development after the overthrow of *Rana* regime and its replacement by a democratic government in 1951, not only was the structure very rudimentary and coverage very poor, but also various types of school systems were in operation – the English schools based on the British Indian Model, traditional *Bhasa Pathashalas* and Basic schools based on the Gandhian ideology. There were only 321 primary schools attended by about 8500 students out of an approximate population of 8 million and 11 secondary schools with 1700 students (MOE 1971). The literacy rate was a mere 2 percent. Thus the first challenge was for the educators of the time to develop a national, uniform and universal system of education – uniform in content, style and form. However, the central government alone was not in a position to accomplish this Herculean task given the very low level of educational development in the country. The report of the first National Education Planning Commission in 1956, which formed the basis for the subsequent five-year education plan, thus laid emphasis on people's participation in funding the expansion of education institutions (with decentralization as the democratic principle for the organization of school administration) while the central government focused on teacher training, and development and dissemination of curriculum and textbooks (NEPC 1956).

The period between 1951-1970 has been referred to as the boom period in people's participation in education (Upadhyay 1988). The decade of the 1960's was also the beginning of political turmoil and the growth of a monolithic form of nationalism that "tried to produce a people as one ethnicity" (Onta 1996: 231) after the replacement of a multiparty, democratic system of governance by a partyless *Panchayat* system headed by the king. According to Onta, "by the late 1960's uniformity in school curricula and textbooks was in place at a much greater level than ever before" (1996: 219) and "while reading the plan documents one gets feeling of repeated beginnings they do not prevent us from seeing the cumulative nationalization of school curricula that happened over the 1960's and the 1970's" (1996: 221). Thus after the overthrow of the multiparty democracy and its replacement by a partyless *Panchayat*

system of governance, nationalization of education occurred with greater determination. This is because the *Panchayat* system used education, especially the curriculum, to create a single Nepali ethnicity in place of a the multiethnic and multilingual society in existence.

To borrow from Issacson, Kerry, Moran and Kalavan (2001: 208), “Nepal’s education system, as measured by the number of schools, teachers and students, expanded twenty-fold between 1950 and 1970.” Tables 1 and 2 depict this dramatic educational development between 1951 and 1970.

Table 1: Expansion of Education in Nepal between 1951-1970

Level	No. of Schools			No. of Students			No. of Teachers		
	1951	1961	1970	1951	1961	1970	1951	1961	1970
Primary	321	4001	7256	8505	182533	449141	-	-	18250
Seco-ndary	11	156	1065	1680	21225	102704	-	-	5407
Higher	2	33	49	250	5143	17200	-	417	1070

(Source: MOE 1971)

Table 2: Expansion in Student Enrolments between 1951-1970

Year	Primary	Secondary	Higher
	% of primary school going age (6-10 years) children	% in terms of primary enrolment	% in terms of secondary enrolment
1951	0.9	19	20.5
1961	15.8	12	24.4
1970	32	23	16

(Source: MOE 1971)

However, while expansion in the number of schools and students was remarkable after 1951, qualitative improvements did not keep pace with this quantitative expansion. Education suffered from a lack of trained teachers, good textbooks and the low status accorded to the teaching profession (Issacson et al. 2001: 208). The community had played its part by building schools but the central government could not fulfill its role as envisaged by the first Five-year plan. Although there were no ways of measuring the quality of education at the time, it was felt that the quality was not improving. It was also realized that the education was not

relevant because university graduates were already becoming unemployed even as technical posts remained vacant. This set the stage for the introduction of a new National Education System Plan (NESP) in 1971.

This new plan aimed at “counteracting the elitist bias of the inherited system by linking it more effectively to productive enterprises and egalitarian principles,... tackling irrelevant and disorganized varieties of education that still exist in the country, ...unifying education into one productive system that serves the country’s needs and aspirations, ... and replacing the concept of education as an end to white collar jobs by a new concept that regards education as an investment in human resources for the development of the country” (MOE 1971: Preface). The main priorities of NESP were “to give special emphasis to vocational education, correlate higher education with job opportunities, synchronize quantitative expansions with qualitative improvements, stress on the production and distribution of necessary educational materials, upgrade teaching profession, strengthen inspection system, standardize textbooks and apply uniform standards of education throughout the country, and expand educational opportunities” (MOE 1971: 9-10). The other priority was to inculcate a strong sense of loyalty to the crown, and to develop strong nationalistic feelings.

NESP was implemented with the strong political will of the king. No aspect of the education sector was left untouched by NESP. The school education structure was changed from a previous 5+3+2 to a 3+4+3 system. A high-level National Education Committee was set up to implement the new plan and to evaluate the progress of the entire educational program. All previously community owned schools became government schools after NESP. The previously active role of the community was sidelined and the government assumed total responsibility for the planning, financing, delivery, and monitoring and supervision of education through an elaborate network of Regional Education Directorates (REDs), District Education Officers (DEOs) and school inspectors who were all accountable to the central ministry of education. Before the implementation of NESP, Nepal was still continuing with the three types of schools - government schools, government aided public schools and independent or private schools. NESP sought to standardize all schools throughout the country, with a uniform school program, teaching the same curriculum and using the same teaching techniques as determined by the government of Nepal. The detailed school program would be transmitted from the top to the bottom and progress reports would be forwarded from the bottom to the top.

NESP, unlike all previous efforts, finally succeeded in creating a uniform and centralized national system of education in the country. An unfortunate consequence of this, however, was that by removing the role of the local community in school management and by limiting their role only in providing local resources for school construction, it led to a gradual alienation of the school system from the local communities; schools became 'government' schools rather than 'community' schools. A mid-term evaluation of NESP pointed out that planners were unable to supply the trained teachers that the expanding system required. Even more discouraging for those who had championed a nation-wide egalitarian system of education was the geographical spread of trained teachers; the more remote areas of the country that needed trained teachers especially in subjects such as mathematics, science, and geography, found it impossible to get them. Another disturbing fact was the high dropout rate among primary school students – more than 70 percent dropped out after the first year (Stiller and Yadav 1979: 259-263).

By 1975, when it should have been implemented in 50 districts, only 25 were really affected by the change and educational planning and policies reverted to *status quo ante*. Perhaps the first challenge came from the ruling elite who began to send their children to Indian schools in greater numbers (Gurung 1984). But an even greater impediment 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 true nature of the implementation of NESP.² Although the NESP was never officially declared over, it had all but crumbled by the end of the 1970's. Its legacies were a large educational budget and bureaucracy, and the start of an ever-increasing alienation between the school and local community in which the school was located.

The decade of the 1980's was significant for the development of new management systems in educational administration and the gradual reversal of NESP policies and programs, evident in the Sixth Plan (1980-85). The overall emphasis of the Sixth Plan was a focus on improvement in the quality of education given the substantial increase in access after the implementation of NESP. Primary education was once again changed from grades 1-3 to 1-5 and English and Science education was introduced from grade 4. The Plan policy was to spread general education (as compared to the emphasis on vocational in NESP), discourage the

2 Personal communication with a member of the NESP team.

tradition of the state assuming complete responsibility for financing of education and encourage the principle of people's participation and involvement. The plan recognized the importance of pre-primary education and giving responsibility for the same to the private or panchayat sector. It also set the stage for the piloting of the Seti Education for Rural Development Project (Seti ERDP) and Primary Education Project (PEP).

Seti ERDP was implemented in five districts – Achham, Bajhang, Bajura, Doti and Kailali – of the Seti zone in the Far-Western Development Region of Nepal in 1981 with the financial assistance from UNICEF, UNDP and UNESCO. Its main objectives were: to strengthen the administrative system; to train teachers to be 'change agents' of community development; to make the school a community institution by enhancing community participation; to provide increasing opportunities for children from deprived groups to acquire a minimum basic education; and, to combine both formal and non-formal approaches in order to evolve a comprehensive basic system of education for rural development (MOE 1990: 14). Seti ERDP involved a series of innovations, the most widely referred of which are the concept of the resource center and satellite schools, and the *Chelibeti* program for girl's education. However, it also initiated what can be alternatively seen as the development and dissemination of locally based teaching and learning materials for formal and non-formal education. Seti ERDP has been evaluated as a highly successful program by subsequent evaluations and one of the main reasons for this success has been attributed to the closeness of high level officials to the implementation of the project. For instance, one evaluation report states that "the presence as well as the proximity of project personnel in the project area and the system of strict supervision followed in the implementation process have yielded good results" (CERID 1986: 99) and recommends that "all its personnel be based in the project site and appropriate measures be taken to ensure presence of a cadre of well-trained and competent personnel to take care of implementation without unduly disrupting their continued progress" (pp. 109-110). PEP was implemented in six districts – Jhapa and Dhankuta in the Eastern Development Region, Tanahun and Kaski in the Western Development Region, and Surkhet and Dang in the Mid-Western Development Region. It was funded jointly by HMG/N, the World Bank and UNICEF. The main objectives of PEP were to achieve cost-effective quality improvement in primary education and, to strengthen the administrative and technical capacity of the program (MOE 1990: 14). The innovative

approaches in these projects concerning decentralization of school management were: establishment of resource centers and school clustering; development of teaching and learning materials at the local level; supportive school supervision system; involvement of local community; and in-service on-the-spot training programs for school teachers and SMC members (Lamichhane et al. 1997: 174-175).

Seti ERDP and PEP set the stage for the implementation of the biggest-ever educational project in the history of Nepal. It was called the Basic and Primary Education Project (BPEP). However, mention also needs to be made at this stage of some other national and international events that had far reaching effects on education and that set the stage for massive reforms in the education sector. In 1990, a second democratic revolution led to the overthrow of the partyless *Panchayat* system and its replacement by a multiparty system of democracy with a constitutional monarchy. The year 1990 also saw the World Conference on Education for All held in Jomtien, Thailand. This conference led to an increasing focus and emphasis on basic and primary education, which in turn led to increase in the flow of funds for basic and primary education from both bilateral and multilateral donors. Nepal was a participant of, and signatory to, the subsequent World Declaration on Education for All that vowed to provide basic education for all by the year 2000. Subsequently, Nepal's Eighth Plan (1992-1997) included the formulation and implementation of BPEP. The project was formulated, designed and implemented by indigenous expertise albeit with substantial expatriate assistance under an autonomous project framework. The major donors supporting the project were IDA, DANIDA, JICA and UNICEF. BPEP had three major objectives: to increase access and equity, to enhance quality, and to improve the management efficiency of public primary education. The school clustering approach, with resource center and satellite schools, piloted by Seti ERDP and modified by PEP was the bedrock of the project for extending supervisory and professional support to, the school level. Emphasis was primarily given to construction of new and renovation of existing, classrooms, resource center construction, teacher training, curriculum development and development of new textbooks. Attention was also given to attract special focus groups such as girls and low caste children through the provision of scholarships. When the first phase of BPEP (1992-1997) was completed in 1999, substantial progress had been made in the provision of inputs such as construction of classrooms and completion of teacher training. Evaluation reports showed that in statistical terms, the achievement of some targets was 100 percent or even

more. However, these statistics provided an incomplete picture of the progress of BPEP. There were no statistics that showed, for instance, how or even whether trained teachers were using their newly acquired skills and teaching-learning in the classrooms was improving.

Some of these issues became the concern of the second phase - BPEP II (1999-2003). BPEP II was implemented within the regular structure of the MOE. For this purpose, a Department of Education (DOE) was created at the central level as the main implementation body for school education. Many see this as a paradox to the rhetoric of educational decentralization in the policy papers of the government because the creation of DOE has called into question the relevance of Regional Education Directorates. BPEP II shifted its focus from inputs to processes and outputs. It also shifted its funding modality from a project approach to a sector wide approach or 'basket funding.' The formulation of the District Education Plan (DEP) and the School Improvement Plan (SIP) are some of the important 'decentralized' activities of the BPEP II.

**Table 3: Expansion in Schools and Enrolments
between 1979-2004³**

Level	No. of Schools				No. of Students			
	1979/80	1989/90	2001	2004	1979/80	1989/90	2001	2004
Pre-primary	-	-	4263	4032	-	-	260000	512151
Primary	10136	17842	24943	24746	1043332	2925820	3853618	4030045
Lower secondary	3261	-	7340	7436	408907	-	1058448	1202211
Secondary	704	5917	4113	4547	120838	708663	449296	513229

(Source: NPC 1980, 1985, MOE 2003a, 2004a)

A third phase of BPEP known as Education for All: 2004-2009 has been implemented since the end of BPEP II in 2004. The major objectives of this third phase are: ensuring access and equity in primary education, enhancing quality and relevance of primary education, and improving

3 A note has to be made with reference to data for the year 1979/80 and 1989/90. Until 1980, primary education consisted of grades 1-3, and lower secondary consisted of grades 4-8. In 1989/90, lower secondary level was annexed into the secondary level so the data for secondary level for 1989/90 include grades 6-10.

efficiency and institutional capacity of schools and institutions at all levels providing technical backstopping to schools (MOE 2003c). It has adopted an inclusive education approach with emphasis on decentralization and capacity building of the entire education system. This phase aims to increase the transfer of primary school management to the local communities and increase the amount of resources available to the schools for quality improvement components through block grants program.

Like 1951-1970 period, the period from 1971-2004 also made remarkable gains in increasing the number of schools and students. Tables 3 and 4 show this quantitative expansion.

Table 4: GER and NER between 1979-2001

Level	Gross Enrolment Rate				Net Enrolment Rate			
	1979/80	1989/90	2001	2004	1979/80	1989/90	2001	2004
Pre-primary	-	-	12.8	39.4	-	-	-	-
Primary	88.3	107.0	124.7	130.7	-	-	81.1	84.2
Lower secondary	28.7	-	63.2	80.3	-	-	39.4	43.9
Secondary	14.6	34.2	43.8	50.4	-	-	25.5	32.0

(Source: NPC 1980, 1985, MOE 2003a, 2004a)

However, the fundamental problems plaguing the education system of Nepal are yet to be resolved. Some of the major problems are:

1. Access: according to MOE (2004a), about 16 percent of primary school age children are still out of school (majority of who come from poor and marginalized groups such as low caste, ethnic groups, and girls), while a substantial proportion of primary school children are under and overaged. In recent years a large number of primary schools have been established. However, as they are established more on the basis of political pressures than on scientific mapping, they have done little to solve the problem of lack of universal access.
2. Low internal efficiency: the problems of dropout, repetition, and absence are prominent in primary schools, especially at grade one. For instance, in 2003, only 51 percent of grade one students were promoted to the next level, about 34 percent repeated the grade, often

more than once, and 15.3 percent dropped out of the system (MOE 2003b).

3. Low quality of education: A common observation made about Nepal's public education system is that it imparts education of a very low quality. National assessments of grade 3 students carried out in 1997 and 2001 have shown that average student achievement in major subjects such as Language and Mathematics is less than 50 percent (EDSC 1997, 2001). Moreover, the study has shown very little improvement in student achievement despite the implementation of BPEP since 1992 (See Table 5 for details). Similarly, a study on district level assessment of grade 5 students has reported that the overall mean achievement scores of students in Nepali, English, Mathematics and Social Studies were 45.31, 38.33, 30.08 and 34.45, all well below 50. At the secondary level, the results of the annual national School Leaving Certificate (SLC) examinations, as shown in Table 6, are even more discouraging. Not only are the overall pass rates below 50 percent, but the majority of those who pass achieve less than 60 percent in aggregate.
4. Low teacher qualification: people entering the teaching profession are themselves of low quality and most of them are not academically qualified to teach subjects such as Mathematics, Science and English. This problem is further complicated by the fact that the majority of primary school teachers are untrained or under-trained. According to MOE (2003b) only about 17.4 percent of all primary teachers were fully trained and student/full trained teacher ratio stood at 206.1:1 in 2003. Moreover, teacher attendance in primary schools, particularly in rural areas, is not encouraging, where most schools do not complete the mandated 180 days of operation per year.
5. Poor quality of physical infrastructure: this is a major issue especially in rural areas where schools are without toilets, drinking water and playgrounds. Some schools do not even have proper and safe school buildings.
6. Poor school management: poor school management of a centralized nature has been cited as the root cause of other ills infesting primary education, such as lack of community participation in education, irregular attendance of teachers, and lack of professional ethics in teachers, which have an ultimate bearing on the quality of education measured in terms of the learning outcomes of students.

7. In addition, of great concern in recent years has been a ‘pauperization’ of public schools as more parents from the middle and upper classes send their children to private schools that have English as the medium of instruction. Coupled with this are wide discrepancies in achievement of students from public and private schools, with the students from private schools doing much better than their public counterparts in national school leaving certificate examinations. For example, the public schools (fully financed by the government) that account for more than 85 percent of the total examinees have pass rates of around 20 percent as compared to private schools with the reverse scenario.

Table 5: National achievement of grade 3 students

Subjects	1997		2001	
	Mean	Std.*	Mean	Std.
Nepali	45.65	15.9	44.5	21
Mathematics	43.81	21.6	47	23
Social Studies	50.37	16.1	63.6	21

(Source: EDSC 1997, 2001)

*Std. refers to standard deviation.

Table 6: SLC performance in various years

Year (VS)	Pass Percentage			
	Total	1st division	2nd division	3rd division
2056	46	10	25	11
2057	32	11	18	2
2058	31	13	17	1
2059	32	12	18	2
2060	46	16	26	4

(Source: S. Bhatta 2004: Table 4.1)

Major Approaches to Decentralization of Primary Education in Nepal

There are a number of motives for the decentralization of primary education in Nepal. First is the perceived linkage between poor performance of public (community) schools and lack of community

participation, and decentralization has been seen as a strategy to encourage community participation, improve management and thereby improve the quality of primary education. Decentralization has also been seen as a strategy for local resource mobilization through bodies such as School Management Committees (SMCs), Parents Teachers Associations, Village Education Committees (VEC) and District Education Committees (DECs). Moreover, decentralization can also be seen as a response to donor conditionalities. The commitment to educational decentralization has been increasing after 1990, as evident in the successive development plans of the government. In general, the government has been trying to decentralize primary education through school clustering, district and school based planning and financing, and transfer of primary school management to the local communities. Each of these approaches will be described in the following pages.

School Clustering (Resource Centers and Satellite Schools)

Resource centers (RC) were first used in the Seti ERDP followed by PEP in the 1980's. The RCs of Seti ERDP did not have a provision for a separate resource person, while in PEP provision was made for a separate post. BPEP adopted the PEP model of school clustering whereby a comparatively better-equipped secondary or lower secondary school would operate as the RC for a group of 20-30 primary schools (or primary levels of lower secondary and secondary schools) in its vicinity. In a phased manner, BPEP has extended this concept all over the nation. The RC, manned by a resource person (RP), is expected to provide professional and pedagogical support to the primary level teachers through on-site training, teaching materials development and dissemination, observations, and discussion meetings. The original motive of school clustering was to develop RCs as autonomous units and encourage teaching innovations and provide professional support to the teachers at the school level. However, an evaluation of BPEP in 1999 concluded that the impact of RC system has remained minimal in terms of promoting changes in the classroom (MOE 1999a). Other studies carried out to determine the effectiveness of the system have pointed out that the RCs, by being accountable not to the schools but to District Education Office, by engaging more in routine administrative matters at the cost of professional activities, and by being manned by people without adequate professional background, have just added an extra layer to the education administrative system (Bhatta 2000; Bista and Carney 2001).

Emphasis on District and School Based Planning and Financing

Recognizing the need to develop the capacity of district and local levels to plan, manage, implement and monitor education activities at the school level, the second phase of BPEP proposed a two-pronged strategy consisting of bottom-up planning (whereby each school would prepare school improvement plan (SIP) through participatory, micro-planning exercise and each VEC would prepare a Village Education Plan or VEP) and district-based planning (whereby a team of DEO staff would prepare a District Education Plan or a DEP using available secondary information and limited participatory exercise) (MOE 1999b: xv). The second phase has considered it important to develop the district as a capable unit for planning and implementing basic and primary education activities under decentralized framework.

District based planning started immediately after the second phase was implemented in July 1999 and by February 2000 all districts had a DEP. Prior to the development of the DEP, the DOE prepared a DEP formulation guideline and a draft format on DEP and distributed to the district planning team, known as the plan formulation committee, as part of the technical support. Two members from the DEO were given a weeklong training in Kathmandu and it was expected that they would then 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.

The first part of the BPEP II mid-term review that took place in the last quarter of 2001 concluded that in order to effect changes in the education system, a move towards community ownership of public schools would be necessary. It also concluded that several shifts from current practices to new practices would need 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. It was initially piloted in five districts and has now been expanded to 12 districts. According to this concept, schools are expected to develop a plan that focuses on improving the quality aspects of education. The schools receive a block grant for the implementation of the plan based on a criteria of NRs. 150 per student in the Tarai, NRs. 170 per student in the Hill, and NRs. 190 per students in the Mountain region.

However, a number of studies (CERID 2002; Shrestha, Gautam and Singh 2002; Acharya, Sibbons and Bailey 2002; Pokharel 2003) have

noted that decentralized planning under BPEP has remained fund-driven rather than guided by a vision and is format-based whereby the center expects the districts and schools to closely follow pre-determined formats provided by the center. These studies have also highlighted the lack of institutionalization of these initiatives and a lack of ownership by schools over these plans. They identify the current cascade or top-down approach to DEP and SIP formulation as the major problem and suggest a change in mode to a more facilitative and horizontal approach.

Another activity that has become significant since 2004 is the concept of school block grants whereby non-earmarked funds are directly allocated to individual schools to be spent at the school's discretion in addition to the regular earmarked grants. For instance, schools receive a block grant of NRs. 3000 per year and NRs. 100 per student per year for quality enhancement aspects. All schools that have prepared SIP also receive additional NRs. 200, 175 and 150 per student per year in the Mountain, Hill and Tarai districts respectively. In addition, there are provisions for efficiency and performance based block grants (MOE 2004b). However, these grants are provided to all schools on a blanket basis and have not adopted the concept of equity in allocation leading to a condition whereby schools that are comparatively better-off receive greater funding from the state.

Transfer of Public Primary School Management to the Local Communities

The decision to transfer the management of public primary schools in 2002 can be seen as the result of the commitments made by the government of Nepal to the donor community 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 management of public primary schools to communities, hand over of recruitment of primary teachers to SMC in community schools, and freezing of recruitment of primary school teachers by the HMG/N, so as to ensure greater community control over the management of the schools and

improve the quality of education⁴ (HMG/N 2002a). This was reiterated in the budget speech for fiscal year 2002/2003, which stated that

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/N 2002b).

Subsequent budget speeches have been giving continuity to this process.

Most officials I interviewed in September 2003 in the MOE and DOE, and education experts 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 here that donor representatives have spoken fervently through the print media about decentralization to the grassroots but one finds a relative lack of opinions of indigenous experts on the matter, at least in the mainstream print media. For instance, the country director of the World Bank, Ken Ohashi, 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 with the *Nepali Times* in July 2002, Ohashi had stated explicitly that continued budgetary support for 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). The World Bank has been supporting the transfer of public primary school management to the local communities and has extended a Learning Innovation Loan worth US \$ 5 million to the Community School Support Project (CSSP). 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

4 Similar provisions have also been put in place for the management of sub-health posts by the local communities.

the government can take to demonstrate its commitment to changing the way it serves the people” (World Bank/Nepal 2003: 4) and argues that “limited experience of community managed schools in Guatemala, Nicaragua and El Salvador indicates the chances of this pilot succeeding are reasonably high” (2003: 5).

After the budget speech, the government issued a communiqué on July 23, 2002 in the state-owned newspaper *Gorkhapatra*, inviting applications from the local government bodies, SMCs or community for the transfer of public primary school management, stating that the transferred school would continue to receive government grants, receive 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 August 8, 2002, the cabinet approved the Operational Manual for Community-Managed Schools in the form of a decree, and on August 22, 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 grants from the government, have a functioning SMC constituted as per the Education Act, and the concerned VDC, municipality or SMC and parents meeting should have given consent 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 was issued.

The Operational Manual for Community-Managed Schools was issued in order to provide a 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/N 2002c). The draft was prepared by high-level officials at the DOE and was approved by a committee at the MOE. These activities occurred separately. It was found out that 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 the DOE had not sought participation of various indigenous stakeholders although dialogue and discussions about the transfer had been going on with the donor community. In the words of a high level official at the MOE, “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, the reply was that this time more efforts were in place to listen to, and take note of, the perspectives of the local people. For instance, high-level officials from the MOE and donor representatives had visited some transferred schools to comprehend the perspectives of local community people with regard to the transfer of public primary school management. 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 of public school management to the local communities, were not consulted. While officials were of the opinion that participation of various stakeholders can be and should be increased, it had not happened at the time of this research.

I visited three 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 has assumed responsibility for primary school management in Banepa. In fact, it had been managing public primary schools under its jurisdiction since 1994⁵ under an agreement with the MOE. Under the agreement, the responsibilities of MOE were to provide the salary and other benefits of teachers, to carry out comparative evaluation of the program, and to give policy directions from time to time, while the responsibilities of the Banepa Municipality were to conduct the program on its own during the pilot phase; to implement the curriculum, textbooks and teaching materials specified, provided and/or approved by MOE; to make provisions for the assessment of program implementation at the end of the academic session and seek advice for future programs; to follow directions handed down by MOE; and to conduct teacher training and carry out inspections to make provisions of teaching-learning materials for quality improvement. 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.

5 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.

The public primary schools in Banepa Municipality were among the first to be transferred, although an agreement to this effect was signed between Banepa Municipality and DEO of Kavrepalanchowk district only in March 2003. This agreement was based on the conditions that the municipality would continue to support the activities in the previous agreement and in case the agreement became void, MOE would bear responsibility for the teachers it allocated and the municipality would bear responsibility for the teachers it has recruited through SMC. It should also be mentioned that the municipality was not involved in preparing the contents of the agreement. The agreement shows that the job and financial security of teachers is well protected despite the belief of teacher unions to the contrary. The municipality is simply expected to do as directed by the central ministry and its line agencies and not carry out any programs without permission from the top. The MOE expects the municipality to use its own resources to implement many of the programs and it does not have a provision of providing grants to the municipality to build its capacity and implement educational programs. The incentive for the municipality to manage public primary schools appears to be very minimal. Similarly, there are no provisions for monitoring, supervision and evaluation of the transfer process by the district and central level agencies.

No substantial changes have been envisaged in the structure of the DEO for monitoring and evaluating the progress of transferred primary schools: the present structure consisting of resource persons (RP), based at the resource center (RC), is expected to carry out that task. In addition to regular inspection and supervision of satellite primary schools, RPs are entrusted with, and expected to extend professional support to primary teachers through the resource center. The RPs are accountable to the DEO and have to regularly send information to the DEO about their activities. In reality, according to the teachers, RPs have seldom lived up to their expected roles and functions. In all three schools (which are very conveniently located adjacent to the main highway), when teachers were asked about the regularity of inspections and supervision, they replied that such visits are very irregular and carried out more on the basis of convenience and whim than on the basis of needs and problems of the schools, or needs of the DEO. The RPs are based at the RC and expected to spend most of their time in the RC or in the satellite schools, but it was reported that they are seldom there, spending most of their time at the DEO instead (located in Dhulikhel, about 3 kms from Banepa). The turnover rate of RPs was also reported to be quite high. When asked about

the nature and purpose of these visits and professional support extended, teachers replied that RPs usually look at the number of students and teachers attendance, observe classes, suggest teachers to make lesson plans, and ask if the school has any problems. Most teachers understood these inspections to be mere formalities rather than a forum where teachers could genuinely discuss their problems and receive feedback.

Prior to the second hand over, head teachers from all schools were invited to the municipality, and together with representatives from DOE, DEO and the municipality, a meeting was conducted to inform the community about the transfer of primary school management to it. However, the head teachers and SMC chairpersons were not invited during the signing of the agreement at the DEO. In fact, SMC members have never been invited to the municipality. There had not been any seminars or orientations at the district level for teachers, SMC members and community people with regard to the transfer of primary school management to the local communities. Thus it was no surprise that the majority of parents interviewed had no information of the transfer. They stated overwhelmingly that to increase the interest and participation of parents in education, schools need to invite parents and involve them in its activities, awareness campaigns need to be conducted with regard to the importance of parental involvement in school activities, and SMC members and teachers should be involved in carrying out information dissemination and awareness campaigns.

It was found that 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, to help solve problems of the school especially with respect to resource mobilization and to urge teachers to teach well. Some of them also reported observing teaching learning in the classroom and evaluating the performance of teachers in the class. SMC members reported no interactions with the line agencies of MOE (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 management of public primary schools 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. 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. It should be noted that many SMC members, as in the case of parents, held the teachers responsible for quality of education in school. Their suggestions for increasing the effectiveness of the hand over process included: giving regular training and information to SMC members regarding their roles, responsibilities and authority, building their capacity to execute these functions and identifying and mobilizing people who are more active and interested in public education (even if they are non-parents).

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 economically better off 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 replied that SMC members, especially the chairman, 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 dismissed 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, and that the program will not succeed because most of the parents of public schools are from the poorest section of the society who can do little to improve the quality of education in the school or raise additional resources. 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 is good in theory; it is the implementation they said they are not satisfied with. According to them, some of the weaknesses or the negative aspects of the process include 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. In their opinion, to make the program more effective, first of all massive awareness and mobilization activities need to be carried out to increase the interest and involvement of parents in their children's education and to increase the trust between parents and teachers. At the same time, orientation programs need to be targeted at teachers and SMC members, and additional resources need to be provided to public schools so that they can compete with private schools in terms of educational resources.

Current Models of School Governance in Nepal

In Nepal, school education consists of five years of primary, three years of lower secondary and two years of secondary education. A single school can offer all three levels of education. However, policy makers have treated primary, lower secondary and secondary education as separate, distinct entities rather than treating school education as an integrated unit, and have thus sought to carry out decentralization only in the context of primary education. This has led to a situation in which different levels of education in a single school are governed by different methods and personnel. At least three types of schools can be identified on the basis of how they are governed or managed.

Under the first category are the public 'government' schools which receive regular government grants for teacher salary and school operation purposes.⁶ In these schools, the responsibility for the implementation of government's policies and plans and for monitoring and supervision of schools and teachers has been delegated to the MOE line agencies such as DOE, RED, DEO and RC. The DEOs employ school supervisors and RPs to carry out monitoring and supervision of schools within the district but a large number of studies have indicated that the school supervisors rarely visit the schools, and even if they do, rather than focusing on working with teachers to identify and deal with problems, they were viewed by teachers as 'threatening' and interested in recording and quantifying problems (see, for example, Bhatta et al. 2000; Bista and Carney 2001). Bista and Carney (2001) have found wide discrepancies between what is stated in the job descriptions of DEOs and what they undertook on a day to day basis: they often neglected strategically important tasks because of pressure from the center to undertake immediate and ad hoc tasks.

6 After the 7th Amendment to the Education Act in 2001, all government schools are known as community schools.

Second, at least three types of schools can be identified under the rubric of 'community' schools. First are the public primary schools or levels whose management has been transferred to the local communities. In theory, the SMC and local community has the most important role in the management of these schools. The government plans to transfer 8000 public schools by the end of 2007. Second, new community owned primary schools have been established and are in operation under a program known as Community Owned Primary Education (COPE), supported by the UNDP with Ministry of Local Development as the lead agency. COPE was initiated in April 1999 and has been implemented in 83 VDCs of six relatively underprivileged districts – Achham, Baitadi, Bajhang, Kapilvastu, Okhaldhunga and Rautahat – covering all three ecological regions of Nepal. At the moment, a total of 120 COPE schools are in operation in partnership with 6 DDCs, 83 VDCs and 241 Community Organizations. COPE schools are operated by parents, school management boards and community organizations in line with the concept of political devolution, in which local government bodies have the primary role in school governance. Instead of being implemented in already established schools, the strategy of COPE has been to establish new schools particularly in areas where there is a large population of out of school children from marginalized social groups such as girls, low castes and ethnic minorities. The logic of establishing new schools is that "it is easier to bring about changes in new schools than in old ones where the particular trend of school management has already been well established."⁷ Local communities share the cost of school construction with the COPE program. Only female teachers are hired and they are provided pre-service training in the Primary Teacher Training Institutes of the MOE. A school endowment fund is created with contributions from the VDC, DDC and COPE and the interest is used to pay for the teacher salaries and other costs of schooling.⁸ Available documents and newspaper reports have shown that COPE has been very successful in decentralizing educational management and involving local communities in the operation of schools at the local level. However, COPE schools are operating outside of the mainstream and thus cannot make any significant impact on the way the majority of public schools are governed.

7 Personal communication with a COPE official in September 2002.

8 The information on COPE is based on interview, annual report 2002 and COPE website: www.cope.org.np.

In addition to these, there are the 'true' community schools, established and operated by the communities with their own resources while they wait for the government to recognize their status and take over the financial and other responsibility. According to MOE (2004) these schools are catering to 3.6 percent of the total enrolments in primary education although about 92 percent of the total enrolment in these community schools is in primary level. These schools are located in areas where access to schooling is very low and where a large majority of children are from marginalized groups. These schools follow the regular government curriculum and textbooks and hire less qualified locally available teachers who are paid nominal salaries. These schools do not receive any grants from the government including textbooks although recently the government has committed to provide teachers salaries and World Bank supported CSSP has also decided to support a number of these schools.

In the third category are the private schools which also do not receive any government support.⁹ According to MOE (2004), there are 3137 private schools enrolling 652089 students, representing about 11 percent of the total enrolment in school education in Nepal. Private schools are concentrated in urban areas. The enrolments in private schools are concentrated in pre-primary (about 63 percent of total enrolments) and secondary levels (about 15 percent of the total enrolments). Private schools are generally seen as providing education of a higher quality, based on the fact that more students from private schools pass the national school leaving certificate examination conducted at the end of secondary education than students from public schools. Due to lack of data and research, it is difficult to tell whether private schools are implementing the national curriculum or not, how they are managed and what the status of teachers is. For the most part, the MOE has failed to monitor and supervise the growth and development of private schools. It can be said that the growth of private schools in Nepal is by default rather than by any particular policy of the state.

Improving Primary Education in Nepal: Is the Current Process of Decentralization the Answer?

Available knowledge and evidence is not conclusive as to whether decentralization on its own leads to improvements in the quality of

9 After the 7th Amendment to the Education Act in 2001, Private Schools are known as Institutional Schools.

education and enhancements in access and equity. Carnoy, referring to the educational reform experiences of some Latin American countries, observes that decentralization and school autonomy may evoke educational improvement at the local level, but generally only under conditions where educational spending and central government technical expertise are increased, especially to poor localities and low-income schools (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. Evidence from education vouchers in Chile and Charter Schools in New Zealand shows that these practices had a negative effect on equity. So what impact will decentralization of primary education in Nepal have on issues related to access and equity, retention, and quality of education? The following discussion mainly focuses on decentralization through BPEP and transfer of primary school management to local communities.

The transfer of school management, school improvement planning and block grants program have provisions for addressing issues related to access and equity. For example, under the efficiency based block grants, schools that improve the retention rate of students and enrolment of marginalized groups are entitled to additional funding from the state. Schools of Mid and Far Western regions are entitled to additional funding for encouraging the net enrolment rate of girls and other marginalized groups (MOE 2004b). In the CSSP funded by the World Bank to facilitate the management transfer of primary schools, 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 approach to all schools and no adequate identification of low enrolment areas is done. 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 adequate as shown by the fact that of the 12 low net enrolment districts (with NER at less than 80 percent), 8 are in the Tarai and none of the 12 districts are from the Far-Western Development Region (MOE 2003b). Moreover, in the absence of the concept of school mapping and school districts, it is impossible to determine the net enrolment rate of schools. Another point to remember is that the permanency of these safeguards

cannot be ensured unless these financial provisions are legally enshrined in the Constitution and Education Act, a condition which has not yet happened. With regard to improvements in the quality of education, while it is difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend within a short term if these efforts are producing any visible changes in the classroom practice, what is more surprising is that no systematic efforts/tools/mechanisms have been put in place to monitor the progress of these efforts. Although the block grants program has 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 impossible to know the learning outcomes of students in the absence of reliable and standardized assessment tests. In fact, a number of studies mentioned earlier have conducted periodic assessment tests even at the national level. These tests could be used as such or modified for use nationally and on a regular basis to ascertain student learning achievement.

Information sharing and dissemination, dialogue and consensus building have been the weakest aspects of educational policy making and implementation in Nepal. For example, with regard to the policy to transfer primary school management to the local communities, the central government expected local communities to be keen and ready to assume responsibility for school management once the policy was announced. However, such was not the case because the community people did not have sufficient and clear information regarding the program, as shown by the fact that applications for transfer were filed only after the government issued the Operational Manual for Community-Managed Schools. Another reason was that the design and implementation of the policy was not adequately shared and discussed publicly. Such interactions occurred only between the donors and high level officials of the ministry. The government does not have a clear, time-bound strategy for the transfer of schools, and it also does not have a new system or structure in place to check, monitor and evaluate the performance of schools after they are transferred. It expects the old system (consisting of school supervisors and RPs) to carry out this task. The government also expects local communities to carry out professional activities such as monitoring and evaluation of performance and efficiency of teachers, head teachers and SMC members. However, what is most surprising is that the government expects all this in an absence of local level capacity building and the presence of ambiguities and contradictions with regard to the roles and

responsibilities of various bodies. The central government thinks that a mere transfer of primary school management to the community will automatically lead to an increase in community interest and participation in education. However, the SMC members, parents and even teachers do not have adequate information of the transfer policy and process. These findings have been supported by a number of studies carried out to assess the progress of the policy. A study by Research Centre for Educational Innovation and Development in 2003 has pointed to a lack of preparation for management transfer and indifference of the local bodies to the process (CERID 2003). It also points to a lack of evolution of local monitoring, an issue reiterated in a similar study in 2004 (CERID 2004). The 2003 study did not find the community managed school to be different from a non-community managed school although the 2004 study did report enhancement in access of dalit and other marginalized children and teacher regularity. Both of these studies have stated that the management transfer stands on a weak legal basis and although the concern and enthusiasm of SMC members and parents has increased, their capacity to manage the school locally has not been developed.

Existing legislation on decentralization in education is very weak and ambiguous in Nepal. According to the Education Act, the main responsibility for school management at the local level 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 enhancement. What they have been given are responsibilities without authority and are expected to follow rules and regulations from above. Moreover, in the current political uncertainty, 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 school management committees has become the favored approach of both donors and MOE officials. Thus, in theory, Nepal's educational decentralization seems to be moving towards school based management. However, the transfer policy has a very weak legal status, since the policy is in the form of decree. Another aspect related to education legislation is that acts and regulations are amended as soon as they are implemented. This is because the laws do not adequately define fundamental aspects and use phrases such as 'as directed' and 'as stated' to make the law as brief as possible which leaves ample room for subsequent governments to change or make amendments to suit their immediate party interests (Poudel 2003). Another reason for frequent change in regulations is the lack of stakeholders' involvement in the rule making process,

stakeholders who then oppose the implementation of the rules and force the government to make compromises after the rule has been enacted.

Govinda who termed Nepal's educational decentralization as 'radical' in terms of the contents of policy statements (1997: 21) while 'technical' in terms of implementation (1997: 55), suggests from the Indian experience that there are at least two ways in which transformation from centralization to decentralization may occur (Govinda: 2003a). It can take the form of a technical-administrative transformation in which case the "*transformation process begins essentially as a top-down technical exercise*" (2003a: 208; italics in original) and the center is 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 decree (whereby it retains the option to abrogate the agreement) or through legislative action (where it is more difficult for the central government to recentralize) (2003a: 208). Another approach is 'socio-political' in which case the reform begins 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" (2003a: 209). Nepal is clearly following the 'technical-administrative' or 'guided' approach to decentralization. In a case where the central government is the main player, Govinda (2003b) warns that changes in the roles, responsibilities, and rules and regulations often remain only on paper and only higher-level authorities remain aware of such changes. He thus calls for a proper dissemination of the changed framework and its implications for people at different levels, especially the school or community level. Moreover, he emphasizes that such awareness building exercises are needed for all actors and that it is necessary to inform the actors not only of the roles that they have to play but also in relation to the roles that other people are going to play (2003b: 240-241). From the findings of this study, it is evident that this has not happened; people at the local level do not know the roles of other actors with respect to theirs, but more significantly, they do not even know their own roles, functions and authority clearly. The MOE and DOE at the center and the DEO and the municipality have not sought to include the participation of key stakeholders such as SMC members and teachers (apart from the head teacher) from the early stages of the transfer. However, information dissemination, public debates, and dialogue with

the stakeholders are necessary and important because absence of conditions to facilitate dialogue and organizational learning is one reason why educational policies do not reach schools (Reimers 1997). Experience from decentralized planning in Kerala suggests that widespread campaigns are necessary not only to inform and activate citizens but also to create new organizations. The Kerala experience also calls for an active involvement of decision-makers not only in formulating plans and programs but also in their implementation (Thomas Isaac and Franke 2001).

The choice before Nepal's education planners and policy makers is not one of whether we should decentralize our education system or not. In the case of Nepal, decentralization is necessary given the geographical and socio-cultural diversity. Moreover, decentralization, like democracy, has intrinsic values. Rather, we should be asking which education related decision should be taken or executed at which level of the education system? For instance, 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? 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.

Such consultations and dialogue should focus first on what kind of decentralization should be pursued by Nepal's education system. An assessment of available, although scanty, literature is useful here. For instance the concept proposed by Shrestha (1998) might be a useful starting point. He argues that the user group principle, whereby the group that is an exclusive organization of the direct beneficiaries or stakeholders, should be the basic principle for the organization of SMCs and such user groups should be given complete authority for Planning, Resource mobilization, Implementation, Monitoring, and Evaluation (i.e., PRIME functions) (Shrestha 1998: 97-99). This is similar to what has been widely applied in the community forestry sector in Nepal whose success has been widely documented in various national and international studies. The other study that clearly spells out the notion of educational

decentralization is the Nepal Human Development Report 1998. The report argues for the devolution of school management to local elected bodies, i.e., the municipalities, VDCs and ward committees, and emphasizes that “such bodies should have the authority to modify, within broad limits, local learning needs – and thus the syllabi, modes and media of instruction, the school calendar as well as the hiring and firing of teacher” (NESAC 1998: 96). In other words, it sees an increased role for local elected bodies in school management while the role of district level bodies such as the DEO and the DEC be limited to performance of oversight and professional and political leadership responsibilities. It should be mentioned here that there are a number of other studies that have looked at educational decentralization in Nepal in whole or parts (see, for example, the study by Lamichhane et al. 1997). However, they are limited to describing existing processes rather than advocating new or alternative approaches.

Second, the discussion should also focus on how to achieve what we want to achieve. Decentralization without concomitant local capacity building may prove futile, as pointed out by Bienen, Kapur, Parks and Riedinger (1990), who found that local capabilities severely limited the scope and size of projects that could be managed by local institutions and concluded that decentralization appeared to have further burdened the system of information flows between the center and peripheral areas without any notable improvements in efficiency. If we focus on doing more of the same and pursue a strategy of using the education bureaucracy more efficiently and effectively, how do we deal with the issues raised by Justice (1989), Stone (1990), Bienen et al. (1990), Bista (1991) and Aitken (1998). They have all observed Nepal’s development bureaucracy to be characterized by inefficiency, lack of initiative, corruption, and guided by values that are antithetical to the rationale for its existence. If educational decentralization through the involvement of other grassroots organization such as NGOs and CBOs is the option, how do we explain or account for their sustainability given the situation whereby most of them depend largely on largesse from INGOs or other foreign funds?

However, answers to these questions will not emanate from the confines of the upper echelons of educational bureaucracy alone or from closed-door government – donor interactions. Rather, they will come from widespread consultations and debates with important stakeholders such as teachers, parents, school management committees, etc, something that our planners did when they produced the first education plan in 1956.

Mere hand over of added responsibilities to local or community bodies without adequate legislation, capacity building and resource mobilization is unlikely to yield successful results given the existing knowledge of educational decentralization. A successful decentralization strategy will emerge from a proper understanding of the weaknesses in our present system and from careful dialogue and negotiation among the stakeholders – the MOE and its line agencies, teachers, SMC members, parents and donors. At the very least, the government needs to reverse its current approach of designing policies and programs without consulting various stakeholders and negotiating their implementation when the opposition arises.

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