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1991/14

HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT IN SRI LANKA: CHALLENGES AND PRIORITIES*

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There is no doubt that limitations connected with the calibre of personnel constitute one of the most significant impediments in respect of rapid economic development in Sri Lanka. Many large companies and banks have disclosed in their annual reports that they have substantial capital available for investment but their industrial growth is generally hampered by the lack of managerial and other executive skills at the appropriate level.

The acuity of this problem is no less evident in the public and corporation sectors than it is in the mercantile sector. Although the public sector has increased phenomenally in recent years in terms of numbers, this growth has quite clearly not been accompanied by improvement in capacity. On the contrary, complaints are often made about the depth, quality and punctuality of the work output.

This has led to serious problems with regard to delegation of responsibility. Efficiency in business administration is largely dependent upon delegation of proper functions to competent officers. In particular, this is an aspect of effective time management.

In each of these areas the dearth of essential skills can be identified today as a fundamental disincentive to acceleration of economic progress.

It is, consequently, a matter of practical importance to adopt corrective action directed towards rectifying this deficiency. Some areas in which useful measures may be taken in the short and medium term may be indicated.

Increased Collaboration between Universities and Industry

Despite stringent constraints regarding material and other resources, reasonable facilities are yet available in Sri Lanka's University system for the study of traditional disciplines. However, the prevailing economic climate in the country accentuates the need for innovative programmes of instructions in the fields of business and commerce. Some recent initiatives have been adopted in this regard in several of our universities. Courses focussing upon elements of entrepreneurship are now available both as part of the undergraduate curriculum and at postgraduate level.

While the start has certainly been satisfactory, these courses require as a necessary condition for their effectiveness that a fruitful working partnership be established

* Paper presented at the Seminar on 'The Contribution of Social Sciences to Human Resource Development' in 1991 at NARESA.

between institutions of tertiary education, on the one hand, and the business community, on the other. Many of the courses leading to such qualifications as the Executive Diploma in Business Administration and the degree of Master of Business Administration are offered after hours on weekdays and at weekends. The objectives of these courses have, of necessity, a pragmatic orientation. The demand emanates from those who are already in employment and are seeking upward mobility in their chosen sphere of work.

These are areas in which those with a wealth of experience in business should make a vigorous contribution to the development of curricula in our universities in two ways. Firstly, leaders of industry should be persuaded to play a more active role in collaborating with full-time teachers of the universities in devising new courses of study and in advising with regard to emphasis and priorities. It is only in this way that the continuing relevance of courses throughout the spectrum of business studies could be ensured. Secondly, those who have worked in industry in crucial positions for much of their lives should actually participate in the teaching of some of these courses in order to bring to bear their practical insights and acumen on the training they offer. This kind of cross-pollination, as it were, will enrich the new programmes in a unique manner.

Meanwhile, there must be a smoother two-way flow of information between the universities and industry. Universities should provide industry with upto-date information as to the facilities and expertise they have at their disposal. Reciprocally, it is for industry to communicate their specific requirements to the universities, so that industry needs and university facilities can be productively matched.

Especially useful in this regard is the experience of institutions of tertiary education in India supported by the Tata and Birla group of companies.

Greater Flexibility in the Traditional University System

There is much in the structure of Sri Lanka's university system that is anachronistic and obsolete. The system was brought into existence more than half a century ago when social and economic circumstances were quite different from what they are today. If the university system is to serve at all adequately the needs of contemporary society and generate the kinds of skills which the economic development of the country so urgently calls for, it is essential to revamp the university system quite drastically. Provision must be made for a far greater measure of elasticity with regard to choice of subjects as part of the undergraduate curricula. Students of the humanities, law, and also the physical and biological sciences should be encouraged to select some management options together with the core courses in the disciplines in which they expect to major. This will necessitate the adoption of a course unit system characterised by a high degree of inbuilt resilience. Skills and aptitudes with regard to the use of computers should be imparted on a much more extensive scale.

The hierarchy of qualifications catered for by the university system should be restructured so as to bring it in line with modern economic realities. It is no longer feasible to expect the majority of undergraduate students in our universities to embark on full time study without having recourse to any form of employment. This is an ideal which, quite evidently, is no longer capable of accomplishment. It is, therefore, opportune to adopt a coherent policy which makes selective departures from the orthodox model.

The principal component of innovation should be the repudiation of insistence on continuity of the undergraduate programme of instruction as a compulsory requirement. A student in financial need should be free to leave the university after acquiring a diploma or other equivalent qualification at the end of an year or two of undergraduate instruction and to go out into the world in search of employment. When he is able to save sufficient money to support himself for the remainder of his undergraduate career, he should be entitled to return to the university to resume his studies with a view to acquiring a degree. The system should contain adequate flexibility to accommodate interruption of the undergraduate course of study for reasons predicated upon economic necessity.

There ought to be greater facility with regard to movement from one university to another within the Republic. Where, for instance, a student who has secured a diploma from the University of Colombo finds employment in Matara, he should be encouraged to read for his degree in the University of Ruhuna if he considers this course of action beneficial for him. As in the Federal Republic of Germany, a student, upon accumulating the requisite number of credits, should be able to supplicate for a degree from the university of his choice.

The University College System

The changes identified above will achieve cumulatively the result of making the university system more viable and sensitive to evolving social nuances. While this will greatly improve the existing position, it will not obviate the necessity for an expansion of facilities for higher education far beyond the parameters of the existing structures of higher education.

The basic challenge is that of access to education and opportunity. In Sri Lanka there is at present a grotesque imbalance between the disproportionately large number of students completing their secondary school education in comparison with the small number of persons for whom places can be found in the conventional universities. While approximately 33,000 students secure results every year at the G.C.E. (Advanced Level) examination which would satisfy the minimum requirements to secure admission to university, and approximately 20,000 actually apply for university placement, only about 7,000 can in fact be accepted.

To cater for the large number which finds itself outside the pale of the conventional system for reasons having to do with inadequacy of infrastructure and physical facilities, alternative avenues need to be devised as a matter of urgent priority.

The University College concept represents a response to this deeply perceived need. The compelling necessity here is to provide students with the type of education suited to the developing and refining of skills which will enable them to find employment and to live with dignity. The crucial consideration is the reciprocity between employment opportunity and the skills imparted during the course of educational or professional training. It is necessary first to demarcate the types of skills for which a significant social demand exists and then to provide, in university colleges, the kinds of training directed towards the development of the identified skills.

Traditional programmes of instruction endeavouring to imitate the university model should be discouraged in the university colleges. The emphasis should clearly be on pragmatic considerations. Training for a job ought to be the primary aim; nothing is more deleterious from the standpoint of social stability than the raising of expectations which cannot be fulfilled.

The university colleges are conceived of as regional entities. The expectation is that university colleges will be established in each of the provinces of the Republic. This structure has the beneficial consequence of mitigating the strains and tensions which are inevitably attendant upon the influx of enormous numbers of students into the larger universities in an environment typified by dismally inadequate facilities in respect of accommodation, transport, counselling, canteens and other essential facilities. The success of the proposed university college system will probably depend on the orientation of the courses available in these institutions and the calibre of the persons offering instruction in these innovative fields.

Vocational Training

It is plain that a clear focus on opportunities for vocational training should be provided for as an integral element of a perceptive policy for human resource development in Sri Lanka. The critical inhibition in this area is linked with prevailing social attitudes. The assumption is that vocational training is intrinsically inferior to academic training and is appropriate only for those who cannot realistically aspire to success in a professional or academic career.

Against this background, one of the cardinal merits of the proposed educational system is that parents are not called upon to choose between the academic and vocational streams at an early stage of the child's development. Few persons would be prepared to deny their children the opportunity of joining the academic stream as a matter of untrammelled choice. The psychology of the situation needs to be taken into account. The proposed system, therefore, nests on a psychologically sound premise, in so far as it rejects the necessity for an absolute choice between two parallel streams.

Instead, the system requires every child, during his secondary school career, to offer one or two vocational subjects, so that the child, whatever his expectations for the future, has had some degree of exposure to a vocationally oriented discipline. If it subsequently turns out that the child is unable to achieve success in the academic stream, he is able to fall back upon the vocational alternative for which he has already had some preparation.

It is quite possible to devise in the vocational sphere a hierarchy of qualifications capable of being matched tier by tier with the established steps in the academic stream. However, the dignity of the former has to be achieved not by pontification but by practical means. The most potent levers available for this purpose take for granted the approximate comparability of economic incentives. No amount of propaganda will make vocational instruction attractive, so long as striking disparities remain in respect of the emoluments which could be expected upon completion of training.

Facilities for the Study of English

Access to knowledge which is available only through the medium of an international language is clearly a crucial element of human resource development in our country at the present time. If Sri Lanka is to benefit in full measure from the unprecedented technological advances which are characteristic of our time, the upgrading of language skills is absolutely essential. In the Sri Lankan context English is obviously the international language available, and this is the practical reason why preoccupation with English language ability is inescapable.

This does not mean, however, that familiarity with the English language should be looked upon as a panacea for all our national problems. A selective approach is salutary in this regard. The fundamental question is whether English language skills are necessary to achieve quality and effectiveness in a chosen sphere of work. A member of the work force in a printing establishment would obviously find knowledge of English a distinct advantage, while this does not apply with the same degree of cogency to an employee in a garment factory.

There is in our country today no problem with regard to motivation in this regard. In all strata of the community, urban as well as rural, there is manifest eagerness to acquire a knowledge of English. This is amply demonstrated by the large numbers of tutorials and similar establishments which have come into existence in all parts of the country with the professed aim of imparting skills with regard to written and spoken English.

The difficulties, on the other hand, are connected with the unavailability of competent teachers of English in adequate numbers to go out into schools in rural areas and to serve the needs of children in Sri Lankan villages. The solution to this problem calls for a two-pronged attack.

In the first place, a determined effort should be made to have adequate numbers of our teachers trained to teach English effectively as a second language in schools. The assistance of foreign governments, including those of Britain, the United States, Australia and Canada, ought to be obtained as a matter of priority to achieve this objective.

Secondly, when a sufficient number of trained teachers is available, a coherent policy should be formulated and implemented to ensure that these teachers, instead of being confined to schools in Colombo and in the principal cities of the Republic, are prevailed upon to live and work for sustained periods in the rural sector. This can be achieved by a realistic basket of incentives combining both pecuniary and non-pecuniary elements. The monetary aspect envisages payment of attractive allowances or the provision of other suitable emoluments. But there is ample scope for other types of incentives as well. One of the strongest desires of parents in our country today is to secure places for their children in the leading schools; it is therefore logical to give a dedicated and conscientious teacher who has devoted a substantial part of his career to serving the educational needs of the rural community, preference in regard to admission of his children to prestigious schools in Sri Lanka.

The flexibility of some innovative mechanisms which have been recommended in this field are to be welcomed enthusiastically. One of the recent proposals of the Ministry of Education is that a child offering English Language as a subject at the G.C.E. (Ordinary Level) Examination should be able to secure a certificate of competence indicating satisfactory performance at a lower level such as the equivalent of the 7th or the 8th standard. He may thereafter be encouraged to improve his performance at subsequent examinations. In this way inhibitions in respect of acquisition of English language skills can be removed progressively.

Of great practical utility in this regard is the perceptive application of a system of rewards. English language skills, especially in the public and corporation sectors, can be rewarded by the payment of incentive allowances on a graduated scale. This is likely to achieve beneficial results within a brief time frame. Incentives offered to those who are industrious and enterprising are infinitely preferable as an instrument of government policy, to deterrents directed against those who are sluggish or unresponsive.

The "total immersion" approach to the study of English should be adopted as extensively as possible. Sri Lankan students embarking on ambitious programmes of study, including professional courses in universities and other institutions in Japan and Soviet Union, for example, have been known to acquire mastery of these languages within surprisingly short periods. This is because the environment compels them to learn the language without knowledge of which fulfillment of even basic needs is impracticable. To the extent that this is feasible, this system should be applied in our schools and universities as a vehicle for imparting English language ability within the minimum period possible.

The necessary expenditure, of course, should be incurred readily. Modern technological aids such as language laboratories and audio-visual equipment should be placed at the disposal of institutions having a vital role in this area. The commitment of funds, admittedly scarce at the present time, for this purpose is demonstrably worthwhile.

Moreover, refreshingly novel and pragmatic modes of providing instruction should be resorted to. Conventional methods of language teaching attended by heavy emphasis on rules of grammar and syntax, should succumb to more rapid and effective modalities specifically characterising linguistic skills as a means to an end. The quality and degree of the language skills sought to be inculcated should have an intimate interrelation with the requirements of the discipline in question. For instance, the method used for instructing law students in English will probably differ in a fundamental sense from those appropriate to teaching of students of physical science or medicine. These nuances should be catered for by the resilience of the methodologies exploited.

Provision of Credit and Other Necessary Facilities

In a situation where employment in the government and corporation sectors is rapidly reaching saturation point, and indeed diminution of these sectors by attrition and by other methods is looked upon as desirable, avenues for self employment have clearly to be nurtured and developed as a major thrust of human resource development plans in our country for the future. Indeed, it is interesting that a considerable segment of the youth who testified before the Presidential Commission on Youth expressed a distinct preference for self-employment and underlined the necessity for properly structured policy at divergent administrative levels in this regard.

If self-employment initiatives are to become a reality on a significant scale in the near future, the provision of adequate credit facilities is an irreducible requirement. The paramount need here is to devise appropriate modalities for the provision of credit without insistence upon collateral in the form of property pledged as security for the loan. The experiment of the Gramyn Bank in Bangladesh, for example, illustrates the feasibility of lending to the poor without collateral on the basis of scientifically planned and integrated policies. However, this can be a success only if co-ordination of a strikingly wide spectrum of activities is imaginatively undertaken. For example, if credit facilities are made available for agricultural enterprises, outlets and other facilities for marketing should be provided. All too often, in Sri Lanka, potentially viable agricultural pursuits have proved abortive because access to marketing facilities have received inadequate attention. Furthermore, the recipients of credit facilities will require information, advice and guidance in respect of suitable agricultural methods, soil conditions, use of water resources, application of fertilizer and the like. Credit alone, bereft of this know-how, will be of little practical utility and cannot vouchsafe the viability of an agricultural or other commercial undertaking. These divergent elements require to be developed and refined in juxtaposition with one another. The strength of the interlocking strands make the difference between success and failure. Against this backdrop, the

vigorous initiatives which may be anticipated as a sequel to the Banking Commission, whose work is already under way, are certainly promising.

The practical importance of the function of co-ordination is explicitly recognised as a feature of current government policy. The structural framework of the Janasaviya Trust may be cited as an example. While the Credit Fund constitutes the centerpiece as a source of capital, its thrust is continually complemented by two other Funds encompassing, respectively, rural works development and personnel development. The provision of capital cannot achieve the optimal impact unless priorities in the two latter fields are addressed in earnest. The Rural Works Fund caters for a miscellany of projects concerned with the construction of roads, the restoration of tanks, reconstruction of buildings and other aspects of development of physical infrastructure. Personnel development, on the other hand, addresses the upgrading of skills and aptitudes on the part of those centrally involved in the projects.

This function assumes undeniable significance in a social context such as that of Sri Lanka where capacity building in development oriented institutions represents a primary need. The philosophic underpinnings of the Janasaviya Programme take for granted that the Janasaviya Trust would interact with the ultimate beneficiaries not directly but obliquely, through intermediaries or partner organisations such as the banking sector, thrift and credit societies and non-governmental organisations. This structural framework which imputes direct beneficiaries and assigns to government instrumentalities and to the bureaucracy a merely ancillary or supportive role, presupposes that the Janasaviya Trust has a primary obligation to strengthen the capacity of intermediary organisations which are used by the Trust as a conduit for reaching the ultimate beneficiaries. Such bold and socially sensitive initiatives as the Praja Naya Niyamake scheme, which makes it possible for relatively unsophisticated layers of the rural community to secure access to credit facilities from banks, must necessarily depend for their effectiveness on the vitality of NGOs and other intermediary institutions.

Continuity and Internal Consistency of Central Policy

This is an indispensable prerequisite for structured human resource development over a sustained time frame. A potent disincentive in our country has been erratic reversal of government policy from time to time after changes of government and sometimes even after ministerial changes within the same government, in such crucial spheres as education, health, labour relations and investment policy. This zig-zag course results in an irretrievable erosion of confidence. Continuity of policy in these fundamental areas over long periods must necessarily be predicated upon a consensus reached among the major political parties. An adequately elastic consultative mechanism should be resorted to for the purpose of identifying the tenets of policy acceptable to the major political parties commanding the confidence of the electorate. Organizations such as the Institute of Policy Studies have a useful role to play in this regard.

Collection, Analysis and Co-ordination of Data

The quality of the decision making process with regard to human resource development is linked directly with the accuracy and the completeness of factual information on the basis of which competing priorities are assessed. Many decisions in the area of educational policy, for example, must necessarily be based on evaluation of manpower needs for the future. One of the existing difficulties, however, is that manpower projections in diverse fields are conjectural and speculative in the absence of reliable and up-to-date data. There is no doubt that this deficiency gravely impedes perception and sensitivity in respect of overall decision making.

These problems can be alleviated by the use of contemporary technology, particularly by having resource to the collection and storage of information in computers.

This will facilitate the task of co-ordination of data, which is also a serious problem in the Sri Lankan setting. It is frequently the case not only that meager and obsolete information is available but that the scanty information at the disposal of decision makers is locked in watertight compartments, with insufficient appreciation of the intrinsic linkages. Although this problem, by its very nature, is latent rather than patent, its repercussions are distressing and need to be rectified speedily.

Revamping of the Legal and Regulatory Framework

A much needed fillip to human resource development in Sri Lanka can certainly result from refurbishing and remodulation of the laws of the Republic in several fields. It happens quite frequently that there is a conflict of policy objectives pervading the foundations of the law in crucial sectors. It is necessary to identify with clarity, the goal sought to be accomplished and to devise accordingly the means best suited to achieving this purpose within as short a time as possible.

Two problems need to be addressed in this area. The first relates to the elimination of contradictions which impair the symmetry and cohesion of the regulatory framework. The second aim, which is no less important, has to do with simplification of administrative procedures by dispensing with self-stultifying formalities and red tape.

The first problem is exemplified by irreconcilable elements which are all too evident in Sri Lanka's laws governing investment and taxation. If vigorous participation by the private sector in the development of the economy is anticipated, the necessary incentives have clearly to be catered for. The laws and administrative procedures in force at present unwittingly discourage investment because the implications and the interlocking relationships among discrepant legal mechanisms embodied especially in the tax laws, have not been examined sufficiently. The prohibitive wealth tax on ownership of shares in companies, which significantly inhibited growth of Sri Lanka's fledgling capital market, has been removed only recently. There are many aspects of the country's labour laws and principles governing labour relations which operate, inevitably although

inadvertently, to dissuade the employment of larger numbers of persons. The right balance has to be struck between the competing interests involved, in the light of the priorities laid down for accelerating economic progress.

Instrumentalities such as the Free Trade Zone are constantly impeded by the multiplicity and the needless complexity of the procedures stipulated, for example, in respect of obtaining licenses and approvals. A unified central mechanism needs to be established to cut down delay, expenses and technicality. The lack of such a mechanism has proved a decisive drawback.

Continuing Education

This is a matter which deserves the highest priority. Gone are the days when the dividing line between education and employment was sharply and clearly drawn. In the increasingly sophisticated world of technology which we live in today, skills need to be upgraded continually if they are not to become anachronistic. Consequently, in professional life in particular, perennial exposure to contemporary developments is an indispensable condition of success.

Against such a backdrop, opportunities need to be offered for members of the learned professions and others engaged in similar activities to update their knowledge regularly. The Judges' Institute which has been recently established in Sri Lanka, and the Bar Association have initiated a series of timely initiatives in this regard, in relation to the minor judiciary and the legal profession respectively. Programmes of this nature require sustained and fruitful collaboration among instrumentalities of government, professional organizations and the Universities. A rudimentary mechanism already exists, but it requires to be strengthened.