

The Rural School and Development

The bias against rural areas in the allocation of national resources is apparent in its most acute form in our schooling system. The Small School, particularly the village school, is a symbol of this bias. Nearly 30 per cent of the schools in Sri Lanka today fall into this category. The Ministry of Education in its attempts to develop the potential and facilities in these schools has assigned the task to a Small Schools Development Unit within the Ministry. Recently the small schools problem was discussed at a UNICEF sponsored seminar

what surprising in view of the liberalised flow of imports which characterised the January-May period of this year. An analysis of the structure of imports reveals that the principal factor behind the failure of the overall import value to rise, following the import liberalisation, has been the sharp decline in the rice import bill. The Food Commissioner's imports of rice declined by 77 per cent in SDR terms (and 78% in physical terms) in relation to the imports of the corresponding period last year. The rice import bill of this period was only about 5 per cent of the total import bill as against 20 per cent during the corresponding period last year. In absolute terms this decline amounted to as much as SDR 44.3 million (equivalent to 16% of the total import bill during the period) and this saving proved sufficiently large to absorb the increases in other imports that resulted from the import liberalization without causing a rise in the overall import bill. As seen in Table 2, most other categories of imports have recorded substantial increases. The most noteworthy increases have been recorded in the categories of vehicles and transport equipment (a 222% increase) and machinery, mechanical appliances and electrical equipment (a 54% increase). Given the prospects of a higher paddy crop in both the Yala and next Maha seasons, it could be assumed that the declining level of rice imports will continue in the coming months of 1978 thereby providing an important offsetting factor to the expanding level of other im-

ports. Thus, some significant structural changes have characterised the import picture of the country during the first five months of 1978. The share of the Food Commissioner's imports (rice, flour and sugar) in the total import bill had declined from 41 per cent (January-May 1977) to 28 per cent (January-May 1978); and along with this change, the combined share of vehicles and transport equipment, and machinery, mechanical appliances and electrical equipment has risen from less than 10 per cent to over 21 per cent of the total import bill.

A statement on the discussion that "Slogans like 'equality of opportunity' ring down the corridors of most schools today, but the words

which sought to develop a plan to integrate "small schools" with the community at large. A regular theme at the discussions was that the impact of a small school on the total education of the country is relatively negligible. It thus attracts little attention from our elitist oriented society and the mass media does not therefore usually highlight its problems and modest achievements.

The decline recorded in the overall import value (by 6%) has resulted in a better balance of trade situation compared with the corresponding period last year. Although the balance of trade continued to show a deficit, the size of the deficit (SDR 3.9 million or 1.4% of the export value) was substantially lower than that recorded in the corresponding period last year (which was SDR 19.5 million or 7% of the export value).

It is clear, therefore, that import liberalization has coincided with two significant developments, namely (a) the sharp decline in the rice import bill and (b) the high level of export earnings which has continued since last year, and both factors have operated to keep the overall import value within manageable limits. However, once self-sufficiency is achieved in rice supplies, the scope for further decline in food imports gets restricted, and hence in the long-term a sustained increase in export earnings becomes crucial to support the liberalised flow of imports.

are often without meaning. Such rhetoric serves more to delude the less privileged into believing that they set off from the same starting line as their more privileged brothers", has much relevance in this context.

To the planners, administrators and teachers the small school is not a priority in their activities. On the contrary, it was considered a poor investment and even today it is the last choice for them as a place of work. (This in fact is a problem that needs attention at a higher policy level and as discussed in our Features section, in the concluding part of the article on the District Minister Scheme, the development of education, health and all other services and infra-structure facilities in the rural areas could probably be more effectively dealt with by a Minister in the District).

What of the small rural schools. As defined by the Small Schools Development Unit they are "schools without sufficient facilities, underdeveloped and with a small number of pupils". Most of these schools, with less than 100 pupils and a single teacher, are normally situated in isolated villages, cut off from the main road and surrounded by geographical barriers.

In Sri Lanka, schools of this type with student enrolment less than 100 are found mainly in the dry zone and in the hill country, generally scattered throughout the remote and arid areas of the N.C.P., Uva and Eastern Province. A few such schools are located even in urban areas. The existence of such schools is largely due to social imbalances and the poverty of the parents arising from persistent neglect and backwardness.

Out of a total number of about 9,000 schools in the island approximately 5,000 schools have a pupil enrolment of less than 200. Schools with a pupil enrolment of less than 100 amount to about 2,500. It is apparent therefore that almost 55 per cent of our schools have a pupil enrolment of less than 200 and nearly 30 per cent of less than 100; while about 10 per cent have less than 50. These are schools that have remained small as a result of the development of the bigger schools in the urban areas; logical-

ly, the big ones have been growing at their expense. The table below, compiled by the Small Schools Development Unit, is indeed revealing.

Distribution of Small Schools by Education Region or District

District/Region	Total No. of Schools	Percentage of Small Schools	
		No. of Small Schools	Percentage of Small Schools
1. Colombo (S)	252	11	4.4
2. Homagama	189	21	11.1
3. Gampaha	348	28	8.1
4. Minuwangoda	247	24	9.7
5. Kalutara	429	84	19.6
3. Kandy	637	120	18.8
7. Matale	270	90	33.3
8. Nuwara Eliya	267	70	26.2
9. Galle	508	135	26.6
10. Matara	412	77	18.7
11. Tangalle	276	39	14.1
12. Jaffna	568	179	31.5
13. Mannar	107	58	54.2
14. Vavuniya	184	118	64.1
15. Batticaloa	239	103	43.1
16. Amparai	82	19	23.2
17. Trincomalee	175	60	34.3
18. Kalmunai	153	43	28.1
19. Chilaw	478	135	28.2
20. Kurunegala	709	207	29.2
21. Anuradhapura	500	237	47.4
22. Polonnaruwa	135	41	30.4
23. Moneragala	169	48	28.4
24. Bandarawela	290	80	27.6
25. Ratnapura	490	160	32.7
26. Kegalle	559	177	31.7
	8,673	2,364	

(The above figures are based on a school census as on 1.3.1977)

Naturally, the smallest number of small schools had to be in Colombo. The percentage is what matters. In Colombo only 4 per cent of all its schools fall into the category of small schools. The neighbouring Education Regions of Homagama, Gampaha and Minuwangoda also have around 10 per cent only of small schools among their numbers. On the contrary in the Vavuniya region 64 per cent of all its schools fall into the "small" category. Other areas where there is a preponderance of small schools are Mannar (54%), Anuradhapura (47%), Batticaloa (43%), Trincomalee (34%), Matale (33%) and Ratnapura (33%).

Why have these schools remained small. Official findings have listed the reasons as firstly — scarce resources, meaning lack of facilities in schools for pupils, teachers etc., together with this is the

maldistribution and lack of services, particularly professional and para-professional. Another significant factor adverse to development of these small schools has been found to be the lack of commitment at village levels with hardly any involvement of the community in planning, designing and execution. For this the rural communities could not be blamed when the facilities they would like to have rarely come their way. The lack of a definite commitment towards the development of small schools is basically what has caused it all.

Other contributory factors responsible for keeping these schools small are the poverty of parents of the children who attend these schools resulting in lack of books, clothes etc., malnutrition of children and mothers; large families, housing shortcomings, lack of interest of parents — their conservatism, taboos, no aspirations etc., alcoholism, neglect by fathers, poor teaching and in the qualitative aspect the educational content is dull, uninteresting, meaningless and irrelevant to the area; great distance from home to school; drift from rural to urban areas; and rigid regulations; bureaucratic supervisors etc.

All these factors finally result in a high level of absenteeism, drop-outs and repeaters which often makes administrators feel that the small school does not require more facilities, in contrast to the bigger urban schools which they find more convenient and to their advantage to develop. The unfairness of the entire system comes out more sharply when we realise that while these disparities prevail the small school pupils too have to face departmental examinations which are more or less uniform throughout the island. It highlights the need for equality of educational opportunities.

The administrators have seen many problems in their path when trying to develop these small schools. From their point of view there are, as a result of the outlandish locations of these schools, problems that arise such as the difficulty of access, undeveloped environment and the difficulty of supervision.

This in turn leads to the problems of deploying dedicated teachers with appropriate attitudes; and problems that arise in obtaining the good-will and co-operation of the people of the area and in the co-ordination of a correct development

programme. Also problems arise through scarcity of equipment and lack of buildings and in relating the school curriculum to the needs of the community and its environment.

To put forward solutions is by no means a difficult task as the final recommendations of the seminar proved. To carry them through, however, is where the challenge lies.

What stands out clearly is that the dropout rate in these schools is extremely high. Such children are unable to develop sufficiently because of their economic and material shortcomings. But it is now accepted that around 80 per cent of our people live in the rural areas and they must be educationally catered for. Without their educational development there can be no development of the rural economy.

There is also a greater realisation today that education must be carried out in the context of the pupils environment. The child must be enabled to acquire knowledge, skills and aspirations to remain within his community and contribute effectively to its development. There can be no community development without educational development. In its final sessions therefore the participants at the seminar recommended:

"that in the selection of teaching personnel, attitudes to community service, involvement in community affairs and dedication to socio-educational principles be given high priority".

"that the school curricular, grading of classes, mechanics of the time table and the school calendar be relevant to the socio economic requirements of the community and that there should be high flexibility in educational organisation".

and "that educational activities organised in the school should cooperate and encourage those activities in connection with health, nutrition, recreation, collective economic activity, welfare of the mentally and physically handicapped—all within the religious-cultural traditions cherished by the community of each small school."

It is clear that in the final analysis the problems of the small school go far deeper than a mere providing of more teachers or classrooms and furniture. The problems are enmeshed in the system itself and closely connected to the socio-economic conditions of the community. Thus, a positive solution could only come with the total development of the community.