

A study of the role of Buddhist Dhamma school education in dealing with the issues of achieving millennium development goals in Sri Lanka

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Introduction

This paper is concerned with a serious issue that the United Nations conference in September 2015 has to address in consultation with all the member countries with reference to the universal and country level experience of working towards the achievement of millennium development goals. That is the adoption of sustainable development goals (SDG) with strategic mechanism to succeed the millennium development goals (MDGS). In the discussion on sustainable development goals, at least three aspects have to be addressed They are problems pertaining to the quality of the achievement of MDGs,

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requirements of setting new goals and the identification of new strategies capable of achieving the sustainable development goals. While discussing the issues in the achievement of MDGs in Sri Lanka, this paper focuses on the role that the Buddhism Sunday Dhamma school system can play in dealing with the existing issues in the achievement of MDGs and reinforcing their sustainability.

Research Problem

Even though, Sri Lanka has successfully achieved most of the millennium development goals well before the target year of 2015, and proved its strong capability compared to its counterparts in UN, it has to work hard to accomplish all the MDGs to the required level while addressing the issues pertaining to the distribution of the benefits of those achievement and their sustainability. In order to meet these requirements the country has to identify the potentials of social institutions and incorporate them to the development process. The Sunday Buddhist Dhamma Schools show a significant potentiality of contributing to deal with existing issues and sustain the achievement for the future generation. This study highlights some issues and the way Dhamma schools can deal with them.

Research Objectives

The study was carried out with the following objectives:

1. To identify and explain the issues in the achievements of millennium development goals.
2. To understand the capability of the functions of Sunday Dhamma School system in dealing with such issues.

Methodology

This study is predominantly based on information gathered from primary sources found in the Sunday Dhamma school system. A sample of 100 students with their parents (260) and 25 Dhamma teachers were interviewed to obtain data required for the analysis. The students were attending a Dhamma school in Colombo and the whole process of the school was observed while referring to text

books and other teaching and learning materials. Information on the history and organization of Dhamma schools, the millennium development goals and Sri Lanka's performances were gathered from secondary sources. They were carefully analyzed for the purpose of the study. The study was limited to the Sunday Dhamma schools and activities related or conducted under them. Even though Sunday Buddhist Dhamma schools are conducted in Buddhist temples, only Dhamma schools related activities were studied.

Establishment of Buddhist Dhamma schools

The Buddhist revival that started in the late 19th century and progressed in the 20th century introduced number of Buddhist institutions and organizations, which turned the traditional practice of Buddhism and Buddhist culture to a new direction emulating certain popular practices of protestant. (Bond.1991;65, Gombrich and Obesekera. 1998: 203). Establishment of Buddhist Sunday schools was one among them. As Grombrich and Obesekere explore "It was clearly Alcott's inspiration that led to the founding of the Young Men's and Young Women's Buddhist Associations and the Buddhist Sunday schools, which came to be held in almost every village (Gombrich and Obesekere,1988.205). Accordingly, Sunday schools were conducted in village temples under the leadership of the chief incumbent monk of the temple. The school had 10 classes and those who pass them were further qualified by a high level Dhamma examination and awarded the title of "Teacher of Buddhist Doctrine". The Young Men's Buddhist Association conducted the examinations. It was so popular in the 1950s, 16800 sat for the examination in 1956. (Bond, 1991;65). Earlier, the Department of cultural affaire was responsible for the Dhamma school. At present the ministry of Buddha Sasana looks after them under a separate division. Evaluation of the education of Dhamma school students, printing and distribution of Buddhist text books, granting library allowance for the teachers, issuing of identity cards and service certificates, conducting examinations for students and teachers are the major functions carried out by the division to facilitate proper functioning of the schools. As is evident from the statistics, there are 9582 registered Dhamma schools throughout the island and 122084 volunteer Dhamma teachers. Over 1968093 Buddhist children attend the Dhamma schools. This information

helps to understand the magnitude of the system of Dhamma school and commitment of Buddhist monks and laity to operate them effectively. Classes are conducted in the morning from 8.00 to 12 for primary level students and an additional hour for students over grade six. In most of the Dhamma schools students are provided with a nutritious drink. Classes are started after worshipping Lord Buddha and meditation for half an hour. All the students are supposed to observe “Sill” (The eight precepts) on the poya day (full moon day) and actively participate in any religious activity conducted by the temple or the Dhamma school or both (Department of Buddhist Affair:2013).

Capacity of Sunday Dhamma Schools.

The study focused its attention to the identification of the major aspects of the capacity in contributing to the achievement of MDGs. They can be summarized as follows:

State involvement in the Dhamma School program.

Sri Lankan Government has a separate Department of Buddhist affairs under the Ministry of Buddhasasana which facilitates the functioning of Dhamma schools in the country. It has a separate division and its major functions are as mentioned below.

1. Skill evaluation of Dhamma schools students at regional Sasanaraksaka Bodies, district levels, and all island level.
2. Printing and distribution of Dhamma school textbooks for grade 1- 12.
3. Granting library allowance to Dhamma school teachers.
4. Issuing of identity cards and service certificates to Dhamma school teachers.
5. Conducting the Dhamma school teacher Certificate examination.
6. Conducting examinations for grade 6-12 in Dhamma schools.
7. Revising Dhamma school texts.
8. Providing Uniforms to Dhamma School teachers.
9. Implantation of Dhamma school projects.

Organizational capacity of Dhamma schools

The Dhamma school system has a higher organizational capacity with 9582 schools and 122084 Dhamma teachers. The Dhamma schools are conducted in Buddhist temples and Buddhist schools known as Pirivenas. The regional level and district level Buddhist organizations are actively involved in administrating and managing the System of Dhamma schools. It is a system capable of undertaking well organized Dhamma education and a set of Buddhist cultural activities for 1968093 students throughout the country (Department of Buddhist Affairs:2013).

Strong leadership

Leadership for the Dhamma schools has been provided by Buddhist monks and laymen at different levels. Usually the chief incumbent of the temple acts as the official leader but the tasks are always decentralized to Dhamma teachers who work in the capacities of principle or class heads. Retired government school teachers and executive level employees dominate among the lay leaders who make use of the ex-official social networks for plying their role effectively.

Qualified staff

The Dhamma schools are run by a qualified staff of teachers who have the prescribed qualifications of general education and Buddhist education with long-term experiences in working and teaching. Not only the retired School teacher but also teachers working in the capacities of university lecturer, engineer, accountant, medical doctor, manager, security officer and community work are found among the staff members. The Department of Buddhist affairs has implemented number of projects to enhance the quality of teachers, The Dhamma Sarasaviya project trains Dhamma school teachers with the collaboration of University of Sri Jayewardenepura and awards a Diploma in Buddhist Dhamma Teacher. The Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka also conduct the training programs for them. More than 4000 teachers have been trained by them so far. Training programs are carried out in all the relevant districts in the country. In 2013 they have conducted 38 regional workshops in 17 districts (Department of Buddhist Affair:2013).

Active community support and cooperation

The Dhamma School system enjoys an active community support and cooperation for its successful operation. In particular, parents of students participate in the meetings and the common activities while providing financial assistance. Groups of parents volunteer on each Sunday to prepare herbal drinks to the students in some schools and even providing the protection for the students. Almost all the temples have the financial and other materials support of important lay people and organization in the area.

Sate recognition of the Dhamma school qualifications

The state has attributed due recognition to the Dhamma certificate issued by the Dhamma school and the department of Buddhist affairs. In certain interviews for recruiting people for jobs the Dhamma certificate is considered as an additional qualification. Recently it was considered in interviews held to select teachers for government schools.

Strong resource base

As the Dhamma schools are conducted in temples and Buddhist schools, the material resources available in them are used for conducting classes. Sunday is a holyday for normal Buddhist schools. Therefore, those facilities are available for the Dhamma schools. The state patronage and the community cooperation always enable most of the Dhamma schools to have sufficient space for classes in required quantity. As observed in number of temples attractive learning environments are maintained with annual maintenance of buildings with renovations. In some temples multi storied buildings have been constructed for the educational purposes. Teaching materials are provided by the states and private sector organizations.

Regular operations of programs.

Another important aspect of the Dhamma education is its regular operation of the programs. Except for special holydays and poya (Full moon day) days, the Dhamma school is held in each Sunday

according to the time tables. On poya days the students, teachers and parents observe the Buddhist Eight precepts (Atasil), participating in number of common religious rituals. Those enrolled to the grade one of the Dhamma school shall continue up to grade twelve until they take the final examination. The Dhamma school students volunteer to continue their education as the teachers regularly supervise their performance and motivate them to proceed. Usually the academic year of Dhamma schools starts in January and ends in December giving some weeks for vacation in parallel to the general schools in the country. The Y.M.B.A also assists the Dhamma school to conduct their common examinations regularly.

Social service and Welfare

In addition to the religious programmers, the Dhamma schools organize social welfare and development programs for the benefit of people suffering from poverty, malnutrition, disabilities and problems caused by disasters. The schools organize donor collections from parents and distribute them to affected people in different areas. After the Tsunami disaster and number of other natural disasters Dhamma schools played a vital role in assisting the affected families throughout the country.

The realization of MDGs, Issues related to them and the role of Dhamma schools in dealing with them.

Buddhist Dhamma Schools are not in a position to address the problems of all the MGDs. Depending on the capacity of Dhamma school system, they are capable of addressing certain problems of the MDG goals such as the alleviation of poverty and hunger, universal primary education, gender equality, combating HIV/AIDS and environmental sustainability.

MDG.1 Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

According to the available statistics, Sri Lanka has already achieved the first goal of eradicating extreme poverty reducing to 7% by 2010 from 26% of poverty in 1990 (Central Bank of Sri Lanka: 2011) Even though the overall achievement is attractive, the Provincial, District

and areal distribution of rates of poverty are not attractive for certain reasons, as they still remain at a higher ratio. Whereas western province has 8% of poor people, the Uva province and Sabaragamuwa province have 27% and 24% poverty respectively. Colombo district has 5% of poor people and Monaragala 33% (Central Bank of Sri Lanka: 2011)

Issues pertaining to the above goals are identified based on Millennium Declaration adopted by the United Nations. As it asserts, every individuals has the right to dignity, freedom, equality, a basic standard of living that include freedom from hunger and violence. The regional disparities of poverty definitely deprive the poor people of their above rights. As a result the problem of meeting the nutrition MDG still affects people. It is reported that 27% of children were malnourished (Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka: 2010)

Culture of poverty.

Even though the Dhamma schools cannot solve the poverty through direct involvement, it can address the culture of poverty and educate the young generation changing their negative attitude that perpetuates poverty as a cultural production. In particular, the food culture of Sri Lanka has been narrowed down to limited number of items sold at the market excluding hundreds of local types of food on irrational ranking of prestigious and non prestigious types. Economic inflation directly affects the poor as they used to go to the market ignoring types of food available in their home garden and fields. The sustainable solution to the increasing prices of food is the expansion of food culture to include local types of food, which our forefathers used to consume. The Sunday Dhamma School can play a vital role of changing the negative attitudes and practices of young people and thereby motivating to enrich the food culture with local things and nourish themselves with families. Some teachers of Dhamma schools had changed some families through children to overcome poverty in that manner.

Problems of good governance.

Problems of good governance seem to have a serious impact on the regional disparities in the rate of poverty. Even though Sri Lanka has

overcome some problems of good governance and restored peace and order, still there are some problems to be solved with reference to the accountability of public servants, corruption and bribery in the political and bureaucratic systems and the rule of law. As the general education has been confined to the knowledge and technical skills, young people are socialized without proper inculcation of social values that encourage virtues life and discourage deviance. If poverty is to be solved as envisaged, the above mentioned problems of good governance should be systematically addressed socializing future bureaucrats, politicians, managers, and executive officials in terms of good values and norms. It is in this social context the Dhamma schools can contribute to develop good characters. As Dhamma schools are not supposed to pursue knowledge alone, but virtues it seems as an ideal institution to be used in a systematic approach.

MDG 2. Achieve universal primary education

Sri Lanka has performed well in achieving the goal of universal primary education. The enrollment rate of primary schools reached 97.5% in 2011 (Department of Census of Statistics: 2011). Even though Sri Lanka is proud of this achievement, the quality of primary education compels to have reservations on it. Because of a particular trend of selecting only national schools to educate children, parents in urban and rural areas refuse to enroll their children to the primary schools located very close to their houses. They do their best to enroll children in urban national schools of high grade. They tend to get it done even resorting to fraudulent practices and corruption. This trend is well evident in the decrease of government schools as a result of closing schools in rural areas as the villagers surpass village school and find an urban reputed school. In 2007 there were 7100 government schools providing either primary education or primary and secondary education in the country and that number decreased to 6737 by 5.1% by the year 2009. In other words, 363 schools providing at least primary education have been closed within three year period (Department of Census of Statistics: 2011)

Negative affects of leaving local schools and attending national schools in urban areas.

In this trend, number of problems stem from the long distance that the pupils have to travel in the morning and evening. Some travel even 30 Km. to reach the school and for that purpose they are wake up early morning around 4.00 a.m. as they have to take more than two hours to travel through traffic on the road. As a result, more than four hours are spent on the road and they lack time for homework, leisure and recreation at all. Sri Lanka's primary school pupils are not having sufficient sleep and leisure and starve in the morning skipping the breakfast as they leave home too early. This behavioral change contributes to the malnutrition and other problem of children. Children rights are not guaranteed in this social trend.

The issue of grade five scholarship examination

Primary education in Sri Lanka has been concentrating on the scholarship examination held in the grade five. Those who secure highest marks are entitled to enroll in prestigious school in Colombo or in the main city of their district. Almost all the parents strive to prepare children for this examination and provide them with private tuition in addition to the school education. This has become a burden to the children, as they have to spend the whole year in the school and in private tuition classes without any rest. This irrational competition makes children ill. The parents are so desperate over this examination, one father severely injured his son by burning him for getting lower marks and being ineligible to enter a higher school in the city (Sri Lanka Police: 2013). Children are compelled to learn for the examination and corporal punishment is imposed by parents when they fail in their endeavor.

The Buddhist Dhamma schools are capable of containing the stress of primary school pupils providing them with an environment completely different from that of school. As the Dhamma school is located in the same village of children, they can leisurely walk to the school and spend the day involving religious and other simple educational activities. Dhamma schools are conducted without exerting any burden on the children in most of the temples.

MDG 3. Promote gender equality and empower women

The third goal of promoting gender equality and empowering women has been achieved in the field of education. "Sri Lanka has reached gender parity with ratio of girls to boys in primary education reaching 99% in 2006" (Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka.: 2010) Men and women are equally represented in the school enrolment and educational completion, though women perform better than men in most of the disciplines.

Women's social participation

However, women's participation in employment, political and other social organizations has to be increased. Women's participation in parliament remains at 5% (Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka.: 2010). Only 37% of the eligible women are employed (Department of Census and Statistics: 2011) As the domestic violence, wife battery, discrimination in the work place, lower salaries are concerned Sri Lanka has to do more for the sustainable gender equality.

The social values and norms taught and practiced in Dhamma schools introduce children to great personal qualities. According to parents, Buddhist social values are of great importance to enhance gender equality and even empowering women. The values are inculcated in children through the Jathaka stories of Buddhist literature and some poetry specially composed for teaching Buddhist virtues (The Lowada Sangarawa and Subahashithaya). Children are supposed to recite them in the class room and at home. The Jathaka stories tell about the previous life of the Lord Buddha. All the textbooks used in the Dhamma schools have been carefully written including the important knowledge and values.

MDG 6. Combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other diseases.

Even though, Sri Lanka is happy with the limited number of people having AIDS or HIV positive, it has to look beyond the official fingers

and explore the real situation. Only 266 cases had been reported by 2010 (Ministry of Health: 2011).

The issue of social value conflict in the sexual aspect of life.

This particular disease has spread very slowly in Sri Lankan social context due to the cultural restraint on sexual relations. The Victorian social values, with all the criticisms against them for depriving young people of sexual contacts without marriage, have slowed down the rapid spread. However, the conflict between traditional social values and modern social values pertaining to sexual life may not exist for a longer period unless such values are reemphasized as preventive measures. The traditional social values of controlling sexual life until the marriage and being confined to husband and wife are being challenged by increasing premarital and extra marital sexual relations in the country.

The issue of pornography and other means of sexual arousal

Sri Lanka's low rate of HIV/AIDS is challenged by the rapid spread and use of pornography and other means of sexual arousal in the contemporary society. Sri Lanka ranked first for the last three consecutive years as a country with people searching information under the word sex according to the Google revelations. As such, a trend is assuming considerable proportion Sri Lanka has to pay special attention to prevent HIV/AIDS in the modern social environment. The issue is that whether the Government alone is capable of dealing with it. Not only the state mechanism but also the other semi state and civil organizations must be integrated to have a concerted effort to protect the nation from AIDS

The issue of ignorance or lacking proper knowledge of HIV/AIDS and other diseases.

Even though the words of HIV/AIDS are popular considerable portion of the population have no proper knowledge of these diseases. Even the educated generation has this problem of poor awareness. According to the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka, only one third of the people between age 15 and 24 in Western provinces has

a proper knowledge about HIV/AIDS. Whereas 42% of young people in this age range in Galle district have such an understanding, the percentage in Nuwaraeliya District is 28. Such a regional disparity in the knowledge exists in Sri Lanka and this issue should be properly addressed to protect the people.

As explained by the teachers of Dhamma schools, education of social values as well as preventive information protects young and adult people from getting AIDS. Norms of chastity and fidelity are emphasized under Dhamma education in the classroom and the religious restraint they develop is very important for the young peoples' self-discipline and self-control.

Among all the possible solutions, much more effective would be the self-control and to develop it they must learn the necessary social values. According to the experience of Dhamma teachers self control is effective with the social integration they develop with the children. In normal schools, the larger number of students exceeding forty-five in a classroom provides fewer opportunities for the social integration with the teachers and the institute as a whole. Higher integration in the Dhamma schools enables the self control and thereby protects the person from HIV/AIDS. With those sociological and psychological views, they emphasized the importance of Dhamma schools to achieve the MDG of combating HIV/AIDs and other diseases.

The capacity of Dhamma schools in protecting teenagers from getting HIV/AIDs should not be under estimated in a society where the family is busy with work and school is concentrating merely on examination-based teaching of subject's knowledge, The Dhamma schools are the one and only institutional arrangement available for catering to the needs of those teenagers. In Sri Lanka the Dhamma schools is not confine to the learning and teaching of Buddhism. While teaching Buddhism the Dhamma schools perpetuate the Buddhist culture still effective in bringing about a social control among people.

The issue of social stability

The achievement of MDGS should be sustained while addressing the critical issues, which always tend to hamper the development

and reverse the outcomes. In particular, Sri Lanka has to find long lasting solutions to the ethnic problem that caused a serious impact on the progressive development and the harmonious social order of the country. The Dhamma schools, observed for the study have teachers who evinced advanced social thoughts and personality qualities required for socializing the Buddhist children for a harmonious life in a multicultural and multiethnic society.

Conclusions

The system of Sunday Dhamma school is capable of playing an instrumental role in dealing with selected issues of the achievement of millennium development goals and their sustainability. The system encompasses the whole Buddhist population of the country and functions without serious interruption under the necessary support of the government. The textbooks and the examinations maintain the higher quality and the uniformity of Dhamma education while encouraging each school to have its practical programs with reference to Buddhist culture. Dhamma schools in the country play vital role in the transmission of Buddhist cultural values and rituals from generation to generation. They effectively integrate the children into the main stream of Buddhist way of life and strengthen the solidarity of Buddhist communities. Such a social institution should be strategically incorporated to the mechanism adopted to realize MDGs and sustain them. The capacity of Dhamma schools producing personalities required for the development of the country remains at a very high level as Sri Lanka finds no such a system running throughout the country. The Dhamma teachers are a particular group of educators who regularly work without any payment for the well-being of the nation. The voluntary work history of most of the Dhamma teachers is a lifelong service rendered at their own cost. Having considered these characteristics it is concluded that the strategic mechanism adopted to achieve and sustain MDGs in the future shall integrate it with due recognition and appreciation. In the Sri Lankan social context the system of Dhamma is capable of playing a vital role in addressing the issues discussed in the study.

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