

**Issues of organisational capacity in a devolved system of governance:
The case of general education in Sri Lanka**

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General education in Sri Lanka has been a devolved subject since the introduction of the Thirteenth Constitutional Amendment in 1987 which led to the establishment of elected Provincial Councils as a means of power sharing. This brought about a significant change in the structure of management of the general education system shifting the responsibility for managing general education from the central ministry and the department of education, which had a fairly coherent regional network, to a Provincial Education Authority (PEA) consisting of four tiers. Currently the government spends about 3 per cent of the GDP on general education provided through a network of over 9000 provincial schools and 328 national schools that deliver primary, junior secondary and senior secondary education to a student population of 3.8 million employing over 185,000 teachers.

Although the subject of general education has been devolved to the provinces, the Ministry of Education has established and nurtured national schools as a distinct category, which has apparently led to a polarization of general education. The responsibility for managing general education is currently shared between the Provincial Councils and the Ministry of Education, which provides policy guidance and a multitude of services that impact on the quality of education as well as the organizational capacity of the provincial education system. It has been observed that the quality as well as performance of general education in terms of student achievement levels has deteriorated since the devolution of power. This also raises doubts about the managerial capacity of the PEAs and the efficiency of the Ministry of Education in playing its role as a facilitator of education development.

A study conducted during the latter part of 2005 covering national and provincial level educational authorities including a sample of national and provincial schools revealed that there were serious capacity gaps in the provinces with regard to human and physical resources as well as the managerial competencies at all four levels of the provincial education system. The linkage between the central ministry and the provincial education authority was found to be top-down and hierarchical. In addition to observed lack of coordination between the centre and the provinces, the present linkage had also

led to a dependency relationship, which appears to have had adverse implications for developing institutional capacity of the provincial education system.

In terms of the capacity to deliver quality education, there were marked differences between the national schools and the provincial schools located within the same educational zone. The prevailing management practices and procedures did not allow the weak provincial schools to benefit from the available resources of the national schools located in close proximity. The provincial schools faced serious limitations in regard to both physical and human resources while the PEAs were found to be vulnerable to political influence on the one hand and poor managerial skills and leadership of the administrators on the other. Thus, there was a felt need for structural as well as policy reforms for improving the performance of the PEAs.

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