

End of project popular science description

Introduction

Martin Chautari (MC), in collaboration with Kathmandu University, School of Education (KUSOED), and School of Education, Copenhagen Campus, Aarhus University, Denmark jointly implemented the research project titled ‘Locating Public Finance Dynamics in Education Sector in Nepal’ since 2015. The project was funded by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and was administered by the Danish Fellowship Centre.

The main objective of this project was to enhance understandings of the causes of corruption within the school education sector in Nepal by analyzing the manner in which differently located social actors interpret meanings and measure moral and legal claims, practices and behaviors tied to corruption in the context of local standards and practices. Another objective was to strengthen the research capacity at the partner institutes through PhD study programs, training, and engagement in research activity.

Results

The project has added new insights on the dynamics of public finance in Nepal from at least four different perspectives. Firstly, it contributes to understanding of **the actual financing of education** in Nepal in a context of increasing privatization of the public education system. More specifically it shows how pupils, parents and schools through hidden costs—and despite the state’s legal obligation to provide free and compulsory school education—shoulder the financial burdens of education by employing a plethora of strategies. These include, for example, selling of privately published textbooks at an additional cost, relying on supplementary private donations from local communities, charging students (parents) admission, exam and other fees, or using school resources to generate income. The school authorities also use ‘innovative’ (read, extra-legal) ways to use earmarked funds to pay the salaries for teachers and non-teaching staff.

Secondly, the project provides important evidence of the **bureaucratic structures and modes of operating** that are both essential, but at times also detrimental for effective and just financial governance of schools. Sub-studies in the project demonstrate, among others, how ‘accountability’ is not just a discourse, but a performative act that school leaders need to master to prove ‘good governance’; how decisions regarding, for example, vacancies and related selection processes are being ‘fixed’ informally; and how the distribution of scholarship programs are regulated by complex bureaucratic mechanisms and selective procedures, working counter to the idea of the program. Likewise, school leaders, teachers, and School Management Committee (SMC) do not always comply with the state’s financial rules, regulations and directives, but in certain cases use the resources thus generated (i.e. by bending laws/rules) in making their school a better one.

Thirdly, the project adds new knowledge on wider contexts of finance management by pointing to **social, cultural and political factors** that impinge on practices and decision-making within schools. This includes findings on the role of gender in resource allocation through a focus on women’s participation in SMCs and on the role ascribed to teachers, including cultural values associated with the profession of teaching. Moreover it shows how state formed policies and elite-based power structures in public institution governance continue to clash with cultural norms, values and practices especially in the rural areas.

Fourthly, public finance management in education ultimately provides a lens through which to look at **the state and its relational dynamics** partly because of the enormous amounts of money invested in the education sector, and partly because of the role that national education systems are seen to play in fostering national identities. The project therefore also extends existing scholarship on the relationship between formal education, nation-state building and development in Nepal by, among others, demonstrating how schools create spaces for developing ethnicity-based counter-identities and how infrastructures and materialities of schools can function as affective reflections of an ‘efficient’ state.

Output-wise, the project has outperformed—the number of books, research articles, etc. published is more than what was planned initially. One of the objectives of this research project has been to strengthen the research capacity of the partner institutions through PhD study programs, trainings, and by immersing junior researchers in project related research activities. The selected students have earned their PhDs and the junior researchers have acquired newer knowledge and skill-sets and have become published authors of a number of research articles or edited volumes. Institutionally speaking, the lead partner Martin Chautari is now equipped with improved facilities to both hold/organize various education related events and to conduct research on education related areas. MC is now further recognized as a social research institute of a very good repute, when it comes to researching about Nepal's social issues and complexities.

Conclusions

Previous scholarship on education governance in Nepal has critically scrutinized processes of decentralization, leadership and politicization. Through robust empirical studies and an interdisciplinary approach, this project has added to the existing literature by bringing to the fore the complexity of relationships—economically, socially and politically—involved in public financing of education in different contexts ranging from school management committees, scholarship distribution processes, construction/improvement of school infrastructure, etc. While the project initially took its point of departure in 'corruption' and 'corruptive practices,' a major conclusion is that it is both analytically and methodologically problematic to use this as an a priori category due to its normative character. Rather, it is more productive to approach 'financial behaviors' in a broader perspective that can open for a spectrum of individual and collective practices, some being perceived as 'problematic,' others not, and often taking place in blurred fields of legality/illegality.

This project was led by an academic institution based in the global south, with two other universities—one each from the global north and global south—being the other partners. Its successful completion (with more outputs than initially planned) also demonstrates the increased capacity of organizations based in the global south.

Recommendations

While understanding the public financial dynamics in such a complex and value-laden area as education in the global south, which often takes place in a blurred fields of legality/illegality, a more effective approach is to view 'financial behaviors' from a wider perspective. Focusing merely on 'corruption' will lead nowhere.

If the aim is to both understand the phenomena occurring in global south and to help improve the capacity of the individuals and organizations based in the global south, the best option is to trust the capacities of institutions and individuals based there and let them flourish to become as competitive and successful as similar entities of the north.