



CUBAN EDUCATION SYSTEM: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND PRESENT SITUATION

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Abstract: The Cuban Education System is considered as one of the best performing education systems of the world and many global education monitoring reports attest this fact and praised Cuba for achieving all the global goals without any international financial assistance. However, there are many studies which indicate that this claim lacks credibility. There are many questions and doubts regarding the Cuban Education System especially after American President Barack Obama and Senator Bernie Sanders praised it. This article highlights the historical development of education system in Cuba and also discusses its present situation. This analysis has been drawn from policy documents, international reports and secondary research. From the analysis, it has been observed that the revolutions to ensure free and compulsory elementary education for all have been marked by specific improvement initiatives taken by the government to deal with the economic and social crisis of that time. And even at present, the government spend high percentage of public expenditure on education as compared to other countries. But, the education system of Cuba needs to be studied in detail and without any government interference to reach any conclusions regarding his performance.

Index Terms – Education for All, revolutions, public expenditure, global goals, learning outcomes

I. INTRODUCTION

Cuba is an island country in the Latin America with an area of 110,860 square kilometers and having a population of approximately 11 million inhabitants. The population includes 64.12 percent whites, 26.62 percent mulatto and 9.26 percent black as per the population and housing census 2012. The country was a colony of Spanish until 1898 and after that it was occupied by United States. In 1959, under the leadership of Fidel Castro, a communist rule was established and even today Cuba is one of the few Marxist-Leninist Socialist States. The Human Development Index of the country was far ahead of its income rank which means that the country has made judicious use of income to improve the capabilities of its people (UNDP, 1994). The education system of Cuba has enjoyed a reputation of high quality with almost universal enrolment and completion rates, almost universal adult literacy rates, equal participation of females in all levels of education and high achievement scores in international assessments. The compulsory schooling in the country is for nine years from primary school to basic secondary. However, education at all levels is free. The social performance of Cuba has been praised by almost all international organizations such as UNESCO, World Bank, WHO, various UN agencies etc. Cuba is the only country in the Latin America and the Caribbean that has achieved all the measurable objectives of education with EFA Development Index (EDI) value of 0.981 (Johnstone, 2008; UNESCO, 2015).

The goal of 'Education for All' has continued to dominate the international developmental agenda since the recognition of Education as a fundamental human right of all in 1948. A significant expansion of in the access of education for all has been noticed in the recent years, however, the quality of elementary education in many developing countries remain a serious concern for the policy planners at international and national level (UNDP, 2016; World Bank, 2018). In Cuba, education is considered as a social good and education goals along with other social goals drive the political economy as compared to other countries where education is being shaped by the demands of political economy (Griffiths & Williams, 2009). The recent report on the Sustainable Development Goals in the country revealed that the goals of SDG 4 have been already fulfilled and the country is working to improve the quality of National Education System and also to raise the quality of teaching. With the help of data from the Population and Housing Census 2012, the report highlighted that the illiteracy rate for the persons aged 10-49 was only 0.2 percent. The enrolment rates in primary education for the years 2010-2011 was more than 99 percent and besides this the country has achieved gender parity in education at all levels. The retention rates in primary and secondary education were 99.7 and 93.6 percent respectively in the year 2017-18. The 96.8 percent students of Grade 2 and 99.2 percent of students of Grade 3 performed satisfactorily in Reading and Mathematics. Approximately 98 percent of the students have acquired minimum level of Reading and Mathematics Competencies at the end of teaching at Grade 9. Similar level of expression in learning was reported in both sexes (AÑO, 2019).

The EFA Global Monitoring Reports ranked Cuba among the one of the four countries that have achieved high standards of educational quality. Cuba has been considered as a star performer in Latin America and the Caribbean region for its successful education system (UNESCO, 2004; Bruns & Luque, 2014). The Cuban Education System is considered as one of the best in the world and this is quite important that without receiving any aid from the World Bank for education, the State has managed to perform best in the education (Bredlid, 2007). The impressive educational achievements in Cuba include universal enrolment and attendance, equality of basic educational opportunity, almost universal adult literacy, extensive pre- and in-service training of teachers etc. (Benavot & Resnik, 2006). On the basis of educational statistics of the country, it has been concluded that country is not only providing education for all but it provides quality education to all to its future citizens. It has also been reported that some of the official statistics reported by the country were found to be unreliable, but the educational statistics of the country reported by UNESCO were reliable. The government of the country put vigorous efforts in education of its citizens (Aguirre & Vichot, 1998).

II. METHODOLOGY

The main method of the study was Document Analysis. Documents serves as important sources of data in various kinds of investigation. Document analysis means a systematic procedure for examining or reviewing of documents related to the project or study and then interpreting these to understand the underlying concept (Bowen, 2009; Akanmori, 2011). However, in this case, the official documents were not easily available and so the main documents used in this study were the international reports and secondary sources. The international reports such as EFA Global Monitoring Reports, Human Development Reports, and Reports by World Bank in addition to other secondary sources regarding the Cuban Education System have been studied and on the basis of these documents, the development of Cuban Education Revolutions has been traced.

III. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF CUBAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

The first period of education development starts in 1961 after the Revolution of 1959. However, the literacy rate of population even before this revolution was impressive. After the revolution in 1959, there has been a period of rapid expansion of education till 1970 and this period is known as 'First Educational Revolution'. The new government under the leadership of Fidel Castro has education and health as their priorities and 1961 was termed as 'Year of Literacy'. In 1960, the 'Law of Nationalization and Free Education' established that State has the responsibility to provide education to the entire population and free education. The literacy campaign of 1961 played an important role in reducing illiteracy to a greater extent but it also faced a lot of revolt and opposition from some sections of the society. The campaign was the government's first national undertaking and it has been considered as a central state apparatus for providing free, compulsory and quality education for all. Besides providing knowledge about literacy and numeracy, the rural population were simultaneously inculcated in revolutionary ideals of equality and uncompromising support for new government (Kempf, 2014). The campaign was successful in eradicating illiteracy from the island and in a single year more than 700,000 people became literate (UNESCO, 2005). In 1965, a project known as 'school goes to countryside' was implemented in Camaguey province and later this project was extended to all other provinces. The main principles of education system were to combine education with the community and economic development (Cheng & Manning, 2003).

The second revolution of education system of Cuba was the product of Fidel Castro. Castro in 1977 admitted that regime has made a major mistake in education in 1960s by introducing some unrealistic projects that hampered the economic growth of the country. And so, the focus of education system shifted from integration of work with study to quality of education and also to education for development. The government launched 'battle of quality' with the establishment of new elite schools in 1980s to improve the quality of education (Cheng & Manning, 2003). The state has managed to provide schooling facilities to all children in the country in 1970s, but the problems of grade repetition and drop-out were also quite prevalent at that time. In addition to these problems, the teacher shortage and reliance on young teachers known as *maestros emergentes* trained after grade 9 was also a challenge. All these problems were highlighted in First National Congress of Education and Culture in Havana and so Ministry of Education revised its plan and get it approved from the First Cuban Communist Party Congress in 1975 (Cruz-Taura, 2008). The country entered a period of 'Second Education Revolution' and the 'Improvement Plan for the National Education System 1975-76' was launched. It provided guidelines to improve the quality of education to achieve economic and ideological goals in the country. The plan involved a change in the subsystems of National Education System and there was change in the school curricula, programs, textbooks and school supplies. In addition to these changes, the plan addressed the issues of retention and promotion rates among students. Teacher training was also emphasized by the plan. The plan was followed by Second Improvement Plan which was implemented during 1986-1990. This plan focused on the changes needed to modernize and introduce some flexibility in the school curricula and programs (Rodríguez, 2011).

The main economic partner of Cuba was Soviet Union and with the collapse of Soviet Union in 1991 lost all his assistance and country faced a lot of economic hardships after this loss. This period of economic crisis was known as 'Special Period in Peacetime'. The country faced a lot of economic difficulty, but even then, no educational institution was closed down and the educational development at all levels was retained. Even during this period of economic crisis, important efforts were made to maintain educational services in the country (Mulot, 2004). The government continued to promote Marxist-Leninist ideology in the education and also allocated 10 percent of Gross Domestic Product to education sector during this period. Till 1996, the budget of education faced a downward trend due to reduction in the national budget, but after 1996 education expenditures have risen (Cruz-Taura, 2003). After the loss of subsidies from Soviet Union, the government introduced a series of measures similar to structural adjustment programs of International Monetary Fund (IMF). And due to this, a number of experienced teachers left the teaching profession and joined tourism industry to improve their economic conditions. In addition to exodus of teachers, the education system also suffered in a lot many ways such as the school lunch programme was indefinitely suspended and there was reduction in the school supplies and textbooks. Besides these negative effects, there was decrease in the enrolments at all levels of education especially in the postsecondary schools. The physical condition of the schools was deteriorated (Uriarte, 2004). It has also been considered that tourism has created a lot of economic inequality

among the population of the country (Uriarte, 2004; Dieudé, 2016). Despite these economic difficulties, the government has maintained education as a top priority and took measures to improve its quality.

The economy of the country has started to recover by the end of 1998 and so the investment to education also started to increase. During 2000 to 2002, the expenditure on education increased rapidly and it has been reported that expenditure on education in 2002 was 84 percent more than it was in 1998. In the year 2001, the government has launched new educational reforms known as 'Third Education Revolution'. The main aim of this policy was to improve the quality of basic education. The schools were painted and required infrastructure was provided to all schools (Uriarte, 2004.). These reforms were based on the pragmatic and ideological considerations and it has been admitted that exodus of teachers from the profession and lack of revolutionary spirit among youth were the main factors behind the restructuring of the system.

The Fourth Education Revolution started when Raul Castro Ruz was made President by the National Assembly in 2008. The two major challenges for Cuban economy in the year 2008 were the global economic crisis and the destruction caused by the Hurricane Gustav. However, in this year, the fourth educational revolution of the Cuban Education System began. The rural schools were closed and greater flexibility in the design of curriculum was introduced. All levels of the education system were covered in these initiatives. More emphasis was put on expansion of technical and vocational programs (Ginsburg & Batista, 2019). During 2009-2010, the Ministry of Education implemented a comprehensive plan to improve the quality of education so that students are prepared to face the challenges generated by new developments. Besides preparing their future citizens for the developmental challenges of this new era, the Ministry of Education also aims to sustain the fifty years old revolutionary spirit among its students with this comprehensive and transformation plan (Lopez, 2011).

IV. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

The education system of Cuba has been criticized by many due to its forceful imposition of hegemonic discourse, shortage of experienced teachers due to growth of tourism industry, dominance of Marxist-Leninist ideology in the curriculum, ideological repression, distortion of educational statistics by the government etc. Recently, when the United States Senator Bernie Sanders invoked Barack Obama's claims regarding the education system of Cuba, this started a new debate in educational ecosystems regarding the excellent performance of Cuban Education System. Peterson (2020) pointed out that Cuba usually avoids international testing of its students and even sometimes, it withdrew itself from the testing at the end moment. The study further points out that as compared to other progressive countries, the teachers in Cuba assigned homework to students and teachers are usually compelled to report that they have assigned homework to students. Regarding the classroom behavior of students, the reports on classroom fights in Cuban schools are dubiously low as the teachers usually avoid reporting about the misbehavior of their students. This study even suggests that teachers corrected students answers so that perfect score should be reported in assessment surveys. The test scores of students from grade 3 and grade 4 almost appear same which indicates that students learn quite low in one year. Beyond superior performance of Cuban students in some of the assessment surveys has raised many doubts and questions regarding the credibility of their education system.

Despite of this criticism, the Cuban Education System has sustained its reputation of outstanding performer from the last sixty years. From the study of these revolutions, it can be concluded that strong political commitment towards education is the most important factor for the success of the Cuban Education System. Besides this, high level of public expenditure on education, collaboration of theory with practical work, emphasis on teacher training, reduction in class size, legal protection of the right to education and other specific education reforms taken by the State to ensure quality education for all have played a critical role in the maintaining high quality education in the country. The strong political commitment of Cuba towards education and its educational achievements have been respected across the world. The experiences and evolution of Cuban Education System are really inspiring and instructive for the developing countries struggling with the goal of quality education for all. It has been reported that by 2010 approximately 30 countries from different continents have adopted the literacy methods of Cuba and millions of people have learnt to read and write by the use of these methods. Hence, it has been suggested that the experiences of Cuba can be implemented to achieve the new literacy target set by Sustainable Development Goals especially when more than 700 million adults in 2016 were illiterate across the world. But there is a need to study this education system in more detail and without any government interference.

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