

Kathmandu, 14th June 2010 - Millions of children from marginalized ethnic families in Nepal are drifting out of education because not enough is being done to keep them in school, aid workers warn.

“Enrolling them in school and simply providing scholarships is not enough to ensure they continue going to school,” said Bhaya Ram Yadav from the Jana Jagran Yuba Club, an NGO that works with disadvantaged children in Bara District, 200km south of the capital Kathmandu.

Bara has one of the worst literacy rates in the Himalayan nation, with only 27 percent female and 53 percent male literacy, well below the national averages of 44 and 68 percent respectively, according to the Department of Education.

All over Nepal, marginalized families cannot afford to keep their children in school and most students from disadvantaged backgrounds will drop out before grade two.

A generation in need

There are more than 100 ethnic groups in Nepal, half of which are indigenous and regarded as marginalized, while 22 are classified as “extremely disadvantaged”.

They make up about 40 percent of the country’s 29.3 million inhabitants, while almost one-third of all Nepalese live below the poverty line on less than US\$1 a day.

“These groups also have the lowest number of children in schools,” said education specialist Helen Sherpa from World Education, an international NGO working with disadvantaged children.

World Education has supported more than 150,000 children by rescuing them from exploitative work conditions, providing scholarships and helping parents find income-generating activities.

“They all come from the most exploited communities who are impoverished, suffer from social inequalities and most children have dropped out of school to work in risky situations,” Sherpa said.

More than one million children in Nepal work as domestic servants, porters, carpet weavers, bricklayers and miners, according to the International Labour Organization (ILO), which estimates there are about 55,000 children working as domestic servants and more than 16,000 in adult establishments, such as massage parlours and dance restaurants.

Nepal has 7.3 million students in the school system at primary, secondary and high-school level, according to the Department of Education, but only 116,000 are from marginalised backgrounds.

Incentives not enough

To combat the problem, the government has a programme of community schooling, whereby local communities take over management responsibilities at schools; 60 percent of the funding comes from the government and the rest from the communities.

But observers are not convinced the initiative is having the desired effect.

"This is a good idea, but it does not solve the problem of equality issues in diverse communities in Nepal, as not all communities are capable of managing schools, especially in low-literacy areas," said education specialist Sumon Tuladhar from the UN Children's Agency (UNICEF).

These low-literacy areas cover about two-thirds of the country.

The government has provided 2.4 million scholarships over the past 10 years for students up to grade eight, but NGOs say the impact has been minimal because the scholarships are only \$5 per child annually.

"That amount does not even cover the school fees in most public schools," said Prakash Adhikari, executive president of the [Innovative Forum for Community Development](#).

A comprehensive, integrated humanitarian approach, including food aid, nutritional support and economic aid to families, is needed to help these children, he said.

"The reality is that unless we start a special integrated package, the problem of children leaving the school system will always be there. We admit that the government needs a different approach," said Hari Lamsal, deputy director of the Department of Education's planning division.

Although Lamsal's department has a limited mandate, he said he has been raising the issue of an integrated package with other ministries, especially the Ministry of Local Development.

"We definitely need a special integrated package that should include agricultural and income-generating activities for parents."

Source: [IRIN](#)