



## Quality and Equity Issues in Investing in Basic Education in Light of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community

Tereso S. Tullao, Jr., PhD<sup>1</sup>, Miguel Roberto V. Borromeo<sup>2</sup>, and Christopher James R. Cabuay<sup>3,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Angelo King Institute for Economic and Business Studies, De La Salle University

<sup>2</sup>Asian Development Bank

<sup>3</sup>Angelo King Institute for Economic and Business Studies, De La Salle University

\*Corresponding Author: christopher.cabuay@dlsu.edu.ph

### Abstract:

The paper surveys the role of basic education in society. Basic education promotes social cohesion, cultural appreciation, and civic consciousness, and bestows economic benefits to individuals and society. Although basic education does not fit into the strict conditions of public goods, governments are willing to finance and even directly operate schools because of its extensive spillover effects. Thus, it can be considered as a public good by design. The paper reviews the quality and equity considerations in the provision of basic education in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as well as the regional and national initiatives in addressing universal access and improving quality of basic education. The paper will provide a discussion on the major issues confronting basic education and recommends the improvement of participation rates and survival rates by using developments in information and communications technology (ICT) and alternative mechanisms of financing and delivery. In addition, avenues for regional cooperation in improving quality of basic education can be done through capacity building and sharing of best practices rather than efforts towards standardization.

**Key Words:** ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community; education quality; education indicators; public-private partnership in education

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A major component of the socio-cultural pillar of the ASEAN community is human resource development. As a region of more than 600 million people, the development of people in the ASEAN can serve as a major input that can further fuel economic dynamism and material prosperity. Human resource development can prepare people not only to become productive workers but also to become prime movers of society. Thus, human resource development covers various components including health, nutrition, education, and employment.

The paper deals with basic education as a major component of human resource development. The foundation of human and social capital starts with the family and transcends to basic education. Basic education is not just for the development of human capital but also for building a civil society, and the inculcation of an appreciation of one's culture that is handed down from generation to the next. For social development, the roles of

individuals in societies are learned in basic education. In the light of the importance of basic education in human resource development and as a major tool in the socialization process that ultimately contributes in building the socio-cultural community of the ASEAN, the following are the objectives of the paper:

- Examine the role of basic education in the socio-cultural development of a country;
- Analyze the role of government in the provision of basic education;
- Investigate the quality and equity issues in the provision of basic education in the ASEAN;
- Inquire into the role of technology in addressing quality and equity issues in basic education in the ASEAN; and
- Propose various measures in addressing quality and equity issues in basic education in the ASEAN.

## 2. ROLE OF BASIC EDUCATION IN SOCIAL AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

### *2.1 Education is a social mechanism for social maintenance, differentiation, and development*

Education provides a myriad of benefits to a person, his household, his community, and ultimately his country. Education raises the productivity of a person because of the increase in his knowledge and skills, which in turn increases his earning capacity and improves income distribution (Tullao and Cabuay, 2013; Mincer, 1974; Becker, 1964; as cited in Tullao, Cabuay, and Hoflena, 2014). Economic studies primarily focus on the role of education on a person's productivity and hence his employability. But the role of education is initially geared towards personal development. The personal development of an individual, according to Plato in the Republic, focuses on building his character as much as his intelligence so he may contribute not only to the growth of the economy but also towards the foundation of a just society (Young Adult Learners Partnership [YALP] 2003). Education enables a person to become a responsible and productive member of society. This is the primary reason governments provide individuals access to capital for primary and secondary education, because the gains from education not only accrue to the individual or his household, but also to society (Friedman 1955).

Haveman and Wolfe (2002) write that the effects of education are not only reflected in terms of improved labor market returns of the schooled individual and that looking solely at this view neglects the 'external and public-good-type benefits' of education (p.103). They list the following as pure public benefits due to schooling (p.106): technological change, social cohesion, and crime prevention. At the same time, the following partly external and public outcomes were observed to have improved due to education (pp.104–106): intra-family productivity, level of education and cognitive development, health, fertility, consumer choice efficiency, and savings. The social capital in a country is made up of 'social and community networks, civic engagement, local identity, a sense of belonging and solidarity with other community

members, norms of trust, and reciprocal help and support' (YALP, 2003). Social capital may be instilled and generated through younger people as long as they are well-informed, that is, they are educated in the ways of norms and sanctions, trust, and the importance of keeping networks and relationships. Education helps form social capital and helps develop culture, a norm or a network that binds people together.

### *2.2 Importance of basic education in building the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community*

Governments have an important role in promoting access to basic education as this provides the minimum degree of literacy and knowledge needed by individuals to become good, productive citizens (Friedman 1955). The gains of education accrue not only to the child but also to society through a neighborhood effect. Not only will their knowledge and skill give them higher earnings, thus narrowing income gaps and alleviating poverty, but their better character and attitude will lead to the promotion of peace and harmony amongst societies. These educated citizens are integral to the success of the ASCC.

## 3. THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT IN PROVIDING BASIC EDUCATION

### *3.1 Motivations for the public provision of education*

Boli, et al. (1985) write that aside from an individual's nationality, education is perhaps the most significant contributor to his or her social status and life chances. The rise of mass education was also due to the perceived notion that education was the panacea to the societal problems that emerged in the drive towards industrialization (Menashy, 2011). With the rise of the human capital theory proposed by Becker (1964, 1993), countries started to pursue the widespread provision of education with a view towards increasing national productivity and shifting economic development onto a higher plane.

### *3.2 Education as a public good*

The motivations for the public provision of education cited above are rooted in the theory of public goods and how this has evolved to the

modern concept of 'global public goods.' As a result, the provision of basic education may be insufficient if left to private individuals, thus necessitating government intervention if its social benefits are to be reaped. Because of the benefits accruing to society due to expanding the provision of education, it may then be viewed as a public good (Levin, 1987). Of course, this definition only applies if education were to be looked at from a broader perspective, that is, if one looks beyond the traditional definition proposed by the theory and considers those who are affected by the provision of education.

Recent pieces of research have thus begun to broaden the classical definition of a public good. Kaul and Mendoza (2003) write that society can actually modify the benefits of a particular (say, private) good through policy decisions to imbibe it with a public good character. From being a private good to educated individuals, various governments around the world have adopted policies to make education non-exclusive (thanks to the goal of EFA) in order for society to benefit in terms of increased growth and better potentials for development. The former situation may be described as 'rival goods made non-exclusive' whilst the latter as having the characteristics of a 'pure public good' (Kaul and Mendoza, 2003, p. 83).

Finally, Menashy (2011) writes that education may be described as a global public good particularly because the forces of globalization have led to the benefits of education transcending borders. The author writes that because of this, international policies such as the EFA movement and the MDG on achieving universal public education 'aim to make education a global public good' (p. 99).

#### 4. QUALITY AND EQUITY IN THE PROVISION OF BASIC EDUCATION

Table 1 shows the average number of teachers in basic education as well as the average pupil-teacher ratios for primary and secondary education in the ASEAN for the period 2000-2012. The number of teachers increased significantly over the period although there is still much variation across countries depending on the size of the population (UNESCO Institute of Statistics [UIS], 2014). Pupil-teacher ratios for primary and secondary education, on the other hand show that

the spread has decreased over the period except in the Philippines and Myanmar where it is still over 30 (UIS, 2014). This indicates that for most ASEAN countries, the spread of teachers over students have improved especially with the increase in the number of teachers.

Table 1. Teachers in ASEAN

	Ave. # of Teachers in Basic Education 2000-2012	Ave. Pupil-Teacher Ratio in Primary Schools 2008-2012	Average Pupil-Teacher Ratio in Secondary Schools 2008-2012
BD	10,333	12	10
CM	292,884	51	23
IN	3,698,620	19	13
LP	67,490	30	23
ML	350,811	16	16
MY	240,278	31	32
PH	1,196,460	34	36
SG	30,178	19	16
TH	750,753	18	22
VN	352,817	23	

The different AMSs have various ways of ensuring the quality of teachers. One avenue by which quality could be ensured is via the pre-service training of potential teachers. All of the AMSs have specific bodies that are responsible for the development or revision of teacher education programs in their countries, all of which are Cabinet level ministries. This is not surprising since the governments of these AMSs are the largest employers of teachers in basic education in their countries. These bodies are typically established or designated by law. Quality is also signaled through the accreditation of teacher education institutions or teacher education programs.

Whilst the more affluent AMSs like Brunei Darussalam and Singapore do not experience shortages in school infrastructure, the lack of school buildings and classrooms with adequate facilities still plague most of the other AMSs (Sadiman, 2004). In the relatively less developed AMSs like Cambodia and Myanmar, the lack of school infrastructure is especially noticeable. In Cambodia, many primary schools face classroom

shortages necessitating the holding of classes in three shifts (Japan International Cooperation Agency [JICA] 2013). In Myanmar, it was observed that many children study in classrooms without roofs or walls, and that this situation is more conspicuous in locations outside the urban areas of Yangon and Nay Pyi Taw (Nippon Foundation 2013). In Viet Nam, infrastructure development is hobbled by lack of funds (Viet Nam News, 2014).

Table 2 reports the average net enrolment rates in primary and secondary education as well as the average proportion of enrolment in private institutions for the period 2000-2012. It may be seen that enrolment in primary education has become quite high over the period, especially with global efforts in committing to the first MDG, but the picture is completely different for secondary education where most AMS (except for Brunei Darussalam) where the enrolment is very low. In terms of the percentage of enrollees in private institutions, it may be seen that most students in the AMS are in public institutions, with the largest proportion in private institutions in Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand, and Brunei (UIS, 2014).

Table 2. Net enrolment and enrolment in private institutions for primary and secondary education

	Ave. Net Primary Enrolment Rate 2000-2012	Ave. Net Secondary Enrolment Rate 2000-2012	Ave. % of Primary Enrolment in Private 2000-2012	Ave. % of Secondary Enrolment in Private 2000-2012
BD	92.78	90.206	36.44	12.99
CM	97.00	26.755	1.40	0.54
IN	93.44	67.695	16.59	42.55
LP	87.56	36.04286	3.16	2.18
ML	97.42	66.33667	1.11	4.22
MY	...	42.36	...	...
PH	88.26	60.35	7.79	20.07
SG	...	...	7.21	6.17
TH	95.12	78.11	17.47	15.56
VN	96.94	...	0.50	...

Table 3 summarizes the survival rates among AMS. It may be seen that the survival of primary and secondary level students, that is whether or not they complete the educational program, has remained low for most AMS with the exception of Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore and Viet Nam (UIS, 2014).

Table 4 summarizes the proportion of the population aged 25 and older with specific levels of educational attainment. It may be seen that there is large variation in terms of the distribution of educational attainment among the population. Singapore is reported to have the highest proportion with tertiary graduates followed by the Philippines, whereas the Philippines has the highest proportion in both upper secondary and primary followed by Malaysia for upper secondary, and Indonesia for primary education (UIS, 2014).

Table 3. Survival rates in basic education

	Ave. Survival Rate in Primary 2002-2011	Ave. Survival Rate in Secondary 2002-2011
BD	96.50	96.12
CM	57.10	65.43
IN	86.44	92.30
LP	65.90	76.28
ML	95.82	89.69
MY	70.06	72.57
PH	73.11	83.20
SG	98.68	99.66
TH	...	...
VN	92.13	84.33

Table 4. Educational attainment in proportion of population aged 25 and older

	Primary	Lower Secondary	Upper Secondary	Tertiary
BD	...	...	...	...
CM	20.1	9.2	4.2	...
IN	30.15	15.25	20.63	7.8
LP	...	29.7	...	...
ML	22.7	17.4	32.5	20.1
MY	...	...	...	...
PH	31.7	...	35.1**	24.2
SG	22.6	9.7	19	39.6
TH	21.8	11.2	14.2	11.8
VN	28.3	39.3	13.6	6.7

## 5. THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN ADDRESSING ISSUES OF QUALITY AND EQUITY

UNESCO (2014) writes that AMSs have adopted alternative (or non-formal) learning systems (ALS) in order to expand access to education, particularly to those who have been excluded from the formal education system due to gender, ethnicity, poverty, geography, and other reasons. Initially introduced as distance education programs, developments in ICT have practically gotten rid of the problem of physical separation (Soekartarwi, and Librero, 2002).

Meanwhile, MOOCs are relatively new educational innovations. Although originally created by higher educational institutions to provide online delivery of various courses, K-12 educators and administrators have already begun to experiment with MOOCs (Jackson 2013). One of the uses for MOOCs is in blended learning, where face-to-face meeting sessions are complemented by the students' enrolment in MOOCs. Enrolment in these courses allows high school students to experience areas and courses that are not typically available in the high school curriculum. Finally, the author adds that MOOCs allow students who are so inclined to augment the education they receive in school.

With the advancement of technology comes newer solutions to increasing the access of students to primary education and hence equity. National initiatives are no longer limited to just scholarships, grants-in-aid programs, or feeding programs. With technology and ICT, innovative solutions are possible such that distance, or financial constraint, or employment may no longer be a hindrance to getting an education.

## 6. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

### *6.1 Differing orientations in basic education*

Because of the difficulties in the identification and measurement of educational outcomes, many analysts tend to focus on education inputs instead. Borrowing from the lessons on production functions, many economists consider education as a product that has to be produced with educational inputs. Thus, whatever outputs are

being produced in schools, the assumption is that improving education inputs will make better and improved outputs. The theory of productivity may be at hand here. It is not important what outcomes we want to pursue, but improvement in inputs can result in better outputs.

### *6.2 Education as a tool for regional integration*

As part of building a socio-cultural community, basic education is included under the human resource development dimension that ultimately ends with employment. In this light, it is important to look into the primary purpose of enhancing the quality of basic education. On the surface, it appears that it is meant to improve labour productivity and ultimately contribute to the mobility of workers that can enhance the competitiveness of the ASEAN region in the future. However, education is not only for employment purposes but also for personal, social, and cultural development.

### *6.3 The potentials of public-private partnership in the provision of basic education*

Since education has failed to fit the strict criteria of non-rivalry and non-exclusivity, it cannot be classified as a pure public good. However, because of its enormous social benefits, it can be considered a public good by design (Levin 1987; Kaul and Mendoza 2003). Thus, governments have committed enormous resources to make basic education universally accessible. Although the public sector can make education non-exclusive, there are private individuals who may want and who are willing to finance the basic education of their children, fully or partially, to enhance their private returns. The expansion of the role of the private sector in the provision and operation of basic education is meant to improve the quality of education and provide families more freedom in their choice of schools. There are complementary roles for these two sectors in education, particularly in terms of the private sector being used as a means to ease the reliance on the state.

#### 6.4 Enhancing the role of teachers in achieving quality basic education

The need to improve the quality of teachers is based on the recognition that the teacher is considered the most important input in the process of education as well as the main predictor of student academic performance (Vegas 2012). Oftentimes, the quality of teachers is indicated by their academic credentials and classroom management. However, it can also be revealed by the ways teachers interact with their students. In the light of the non-market dimensions of basic education and the formation of a socio-cultural ASEAN community, one may ask which quality of teacher is more important: the knowledgeable teacher? Or the caring one? Pre-service training may be considered as a necessary condition to attain quality whilst in-service training may be the sufficient condition to maintain the quality of teachers. Although most of the AMSs have some form of in-service training programs for their teachers, they vary in terms of delivery and intensity. Improving the quality of teachers is also important in the light of the differences in the qualifications of teachers in the region. This unevenness needs to be addressed by a regional convergence of qualifications requirements.

#### 6.5 Regional cooperative measures

Notwithstanding these issues, there is a need to explore the opportunities offered by regional cooperation. Aside from regional initiatives on the improvement of educational outcomes, educational inputs, teacher's quality, and the delivery of instruction, AMSs can also share best practices in the delivery of basic education. The ASEAN, by design, is an association for regional cooperation amongst its member states, with the ASEAN Declaration explicitly providing for assistance to each other in the form of training and research facilities in the educational, professional, technical, and administrative spheres. Education is a key area in terms for cooperation amongst the AMSs. The sharing of best practices is a key objective of the ASEAN especially in light of committing to Education for All in 2015. The educational services sector is expected to benefit in terms of freer flow and increased investments through the continuous expansion and deepening of liberalization in services leading up to the

establishment of the AEC by 2015 and through the AFAS.

### 7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study is culled from an Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA) discussion paper, Framing the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Post 2015: Quality and Equity Issues in Investing in Basic Education in ASEAN, Discussion Paper 2015-65. The full version is available at [http://www.eria.org/publications/discussion\\_papers/DP2015-65.html](http://www.eria.org/publications/discussion_papers/DP2015-65.html).

The authors would like to thank ERIA and the De La Salle University Angelo King Institute for Economic and Business Studies (DLSU-AKIEBS) for the support throughout the duration of the project.

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