The Philippines: Development issues and education

“Ang sa taong karunungan kayamanan di manakaw”

[Learning is a wealth that cannot be stolen]

Tagalog Proverb, quoted in Cortes 1980, 145

Introduction

This essay aims to consider the major development problems faced by the Philippines today and discuss how these impact on, and have been influenced by, educational policy and provision. It will begin by providing background information on the Philippines, before proceeding to introduce the education system, both formal and non-formal. After brief discussion of the difficulties of prioritising development problems, the relationships between them and different understandings of the term ‘development’, four major issues will be considered: Corruption, Inequality, Conflict and Unemployment/Underemployment. Within each it will discuss the relationship between the problem and education in the Philippines. It will conclude with a brief summary and some comments on the role of education in the Philippines.

Background Information

Located in South East Asia, the Philippines is an archipelago made up of 7,107 islands of which eleven account for over 90 per cent of the total area and are inhabited by the majority of the population of over 82 million (BBC 2007; World Guide 2005). These come from over 40 ethnic groups who use more than 80 dialects (Cortes 1980, 147). The Philippines has a long and colourful history and because of its strategic positioning on oceanic trade routes has been occupied by the Spanish, Americans and Japanese. Clearly this has had significant influence. Alongside Filipino (largely based on the Tagalog dialect), English is an official language, while Catholicism is by far
the most widely practiced religion (83 per cent). Other religions include Islam (5 per cent) and Protestant Christianity, including independent Filipino churches (5 per cent) (World Guide 2005).

For administrative purposes the country is divided into twelve regions, which are in turn sub-divided into 73 provinces. Rapid population growth and rural-to-urban migration has led to over 60 per cent of the population now living in towns or cities. Manila, the capital, has over 10,000,000 occupants. Major industries in the Philippines include electronics assembly, garments, footwear, pharmaceuticals, chemicals, wood products, food processing, petroleum refining and fishing (World Fact Book). Until recent years agriculture was the main occupation of the labour force, but recent growth in the service sector has made this the most common (at almost 50 per cent) (ibid).

The Philippines has struggled with natural disasters, including earthquakes, volcano eruptions, typhoons and mud slides. It also faces problems related to pollution and deforestation, particularly with regard to food production. National debt is a huge problem; “Debt service for 2002 was 24 per cent of the National Government Budget, not including principal payments. Indebtedness has been increasing steadily since 1981. Government borrowing in the last two and a half years of the Macapagal-Arroyo Government has broken all records and Filipinos now owe about USD 726 per capita” (Serrano 2004). According to UNESCO’s definition of living on less than two dollars a day, 47 per cent of the population live in poverty (UNESCO 2004).

**Educational system**

The respect given to education by Filipinos is made clear in a Tagalog Proverb cited by Cortes, translated as “*Learning is a wealth that cannot be stolen*” (Cortes 1980, 145). This hunger for learning, and the recognition that “*families will make any sacrifice to get their children to school...they'll move heaven and earth to achieve it*” (Doyle 2005), go some way towards explaining the great successes the Philippines has achieved in literacy and school enrolment. Illiteracy has fallen rapidly: from 79.8 per cent in 1903 to 27.9 per cent in 1960 (Cortes 1980, 148). According to UNESCO (2004), literacy rates are currently over 90 per for adults (aged 15+) and close to 98 per cent for youth. Tan and Leonor (1985, 124) observed that “*Philippine educational experience after the Second World War has been notable for …the fast growth of enrolment at all*
levels”. By 2004, 97 per cent of children completed a full course of primary schooling, while 67 per cent of girls and 56 per cent of boys attended secondary school (UNESCO 2004), although this rosy picture masks issues concerning quality and inequality that will be discussed later.

The Philippine educational system has been heavily influenced by the colonial history of the country. Until the Spanish conquest (initiated in 1521), education “consisted mainly of the young learning indigenous Filipino tribal customs and vocations through informal instruction and observation” (Cortes 1980, 145). As in most colonial countries, education (alongside religion) was used as a tool for controlling and profiting from its people and resources. Schools were not formally set up until 1863, and even then had the main function of teaching religion to an elite few. The use of Spanish as the language of instruction and the huge geographical disparity caused by the difficulties associated with travelling across mountains and islands led to further educational inequality. As we shall see later this is not a purely historical problem.

Education collapsed during the revolution of 1896, but was quickly reintroduced by the new colonial power. Under the US the educational system became patterned after the American one: the medium of instruction became English and textbooks, resources, curricula and even some teachers were imported. Since the eventual independence of the Philippines in 1946 “Philippine education has undergone a long, slow process of weaning itself away from its strong American orientation…in the process, the educational system has moved towards a more Philippine-based and more practical approach to learning” (Cortes 1980, 177). One result is that, since the new constitution of 1987, both English and Filipino are official languages of instruction, with Filipino commonly used in private schools at all levels and in all schools from higher primary level onward.

Today, the education system is the responsibility of the Department of Education (commonly referred to as the DeptED). Historically, the government has focused its resources on primary level education, resulting in the “essentially private character of post-primary schools” (Tan and Leonor 1985, 124). This continues today, with nearly 60 per cent of government spending on education going to the primary level (UNESCO 2004). As a direct consequence of this, 90 per cent of primary enrolments are in public institutions, compared to around 30 per cent and less than 20 per cent for secondary and tertiary levels respectively (Clark 2004). Many of these private institutions are
religiously, dominated by the large Catholic education sector, which continues to have significant influence on the nation: “This is reflected in the fact that 75 per cent of Filipinos over the age of 10 have learnt to read in institutions dependent on the Catholic Church” (World Guide 2005). It should be noted that ‘private’ in this sense does not necessarily mean ‘for the rich’. Although many schools and colleges are financially exclusive, others are provided by religious orders and NGOs for the less privileged.

The formal education system in the Philippines is “one of the shortest in the world” (Clark 2004). It has a ‘6-4-4’ structure (i.e. 6 years of primary, 4 years of secondary and typically 4 years of tertiary to obtain an undergraduate/bachelor’s degree). The academic year runs from June to March. Non-formal education was recognised in the Five-Year Development Plan (1982) with the following objectives:

- “to provide opportunities for the acquisition of skills necessary to enhance employability, efficiency, productivity and competitiveness in the labour market”
- “to ensure functional literacy, numeracy and general education”
- “to improve the quality of family and community life”

Cortes 1980, 160

It has continued in this role, focussing particularly on those who ‘fall through the cracks’ in the formal education system and on adult learners. Today, technical and vocational schools offer a huge variety of courses, including agriculture, fishery, service skills, machine operation and tailoring. It is seen as an answer to the problems of unemployment and underemployment; “a solution to the job mismatch in the workforce” (DepED Secretary Lapus, quoted in Department of Education 2006), although this suggestion will be questioned later.

Major development problems and their impacts on education

It is important to note that, as in any country, many of the development problems in the Philippines are interrelated; it is slightly artificial to attempt to separate them. However, to address them it is necessary to do so. It is also crucial to note that the term ‘development’ has no one defined meaning; there are a variety of understandings. For this reason, although the ‘major development problems’ identified in this essay would be generally accepted as such, there may be dispute as to whether they
are the most ‘major’ or pressing issues. Certainly different actors in the development ‘field’ may have differing priorities; USAID may focus on peace-building in areas of conflict, while a Manila slum-dweller may call first for reform in health services and land tenure. Issues such as national debt, which spiralled after the 1974 OPEC shocks (Tan and Leonor 1985, 111), must be understood to be under-writing many of these problems: “The debt trap has severely limited the Philippine government’s ability to confront its many problems. Servicing the debt places tremendous demands on its budget and foreign exchange earnings” (Goodno 1991, 222).

The selection of development problems presented here (Corruption, Inequality, Conflict and Unemployment/Underemployment) has been made after research of the available literature and experience of life in the Philippines.

**Corruption**

One broad definition of corruption is “the violation of norms of duty and responsibility for personal gain” (Angles 1999, 3). It has certainly been a major stumbling-block in the Philippines’ development. In 1991, following the end of Marcos’ period of martial law, Goodno observed that corruption “may well be the most serious problem in Philippine culture” (1991, 260). This was written even before President Estrada was removed from power in 2000 following revelations that he had hundreds of millions of dollars in bank accounts under false names. The current President, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, has said that corruption is “strangling” the nation (Javellana-Santos 2004) but has not been immune from accusation herself. Corruption in the Philippines has been described as “the root cause of continued poverty” (Azfar and Gurgur 2000, 3), “pervasive and deep-rooted” (World Bank 2000, ii) and a crippling hindrance to the economy and efficient governance (The Asia Foundation 2006, 1). It exists at many levels, from the relatively small-scale and local to the offices of the most powerful.

There is no doubt that corruption has had a negative effect on education. Lewin (1997, 4) draws attention to Rao’s observation that the effectiveness of educational investment depends upon the stability of the economic environment and the efficiency with which “public institutions mobilise the resources they have and capture private contributions” (Rao 1995). Alongside other factors,
corruption has certainly played a part in limiting stability and efficiency. At a national level, the Department of Education has been accused of misappropriating funds, while at a local level many local schools have remained under-financed.

Education must also play a part in efforts to end corruption. President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo has observed that Filipinos must “employ education to change the culture of corruption” (Gov.Ph News, 2004). Although still limited, this can be seen in attempts to educate students about corruption and ethical issues in schools and higher education (ADB/OECD 2000, 55).

**Inequality**

In 1988 the World Bank stated that the Philippines “has one of the most unequal income distributions among middle income countries” (World Bank 1988 quoted in Goodno 1991, 110). Inequality in the Philippines begins with geographical location; throughout history, people far from the power base have often missed out. During the Spanish period, the education of a select few “helped to create an enormous gap between the mass of Filipino people and the educated elite” (ibid., 261). The power of these elite, based largely in Manila, grew over the years, supported by corruption, American and religious political intervention and inequitable land laws, leading to geographical disparity: “some adverse consequences of this situation are uneven development and unequal distribution of population, government resources, and opportunities for social and economic advancement” (Cortes 1980, 146). One outcome of these depressed rural areas has been conflict (particularly in terms of anti-government rebel groups). This will be discussed under a separate heading.

Inequality is not only between urban and rural. Today’s Philippine cities contain gated private estates for the rich, but also slums, a “physical manifestation of poverty, inequality and social exclusion in urban areas” (DFID 2004, p1). Education plays a part in the growth of such areas: “with the spread of education, migration continued unabated, depleting the rural areas of the educated people while causing congestion, open unemployment and related problems in the city” (Tan and Leonor 1985, 110). The issue of unemployment will be discussed later. In addition to rapid rural-to-urban migration, the Philippines faces population growth; it “has the highest birth rate in
Asia, and forecasters say the population could double within three decades” (BBC 2007). Clearly this causes difficulties for the education system. Although the Philippines appears to be extremely successful in terms of school enrolment, “the devil is in the detail” (Doyle 2005). Public schools have struggled to manage the large numbers of pupils, while often also suffering from less than adequate budget; in many areas quality has had to give way to quantity.

- “Official government data show that school facilities in the country are insufficient to cover the entire school-age population” (Philippine Star 2006).
- “There are large-scale shortages of classrooms, teachers, desks and chairs, textbooks and audio-visual materials. Over-crowding of classrooms is standard with class sizes averaging about 80 students per class” (USAID 2007, 1).
- Public high schools in densely populated areas are sometimes resorting to running two institutions using the same facilities: ‘day’ and ‘evening’ high schools.

Development interventions such as USAID’s Education Quality and Access for Learning and Livelihood Skills (EQuALLS) attempt to address these problems through providing resources and training (USAID 2007, 2). For the poorest of the poor, even lower quality education may be difficult to access. “Although education is theoretically free, some poor families still cannot send their kids there” (Doyle 2005). ‘Hidden costs’ such as uniform, books, transport and food can prevent attendance, particularly if the child could be involved in some form of income generation.

Evidently this lack of quality does not affect the education of the rich. As was noted earlier, private education plays a large part in the Philippine education system. Lewin notes that this has an obvious adverse effect on the poor; they are unlikely to be able to access education if they are required to pay for it: “access by the poorest may suffer because they have the least income, the largest number of school age children, and are likely to be most risk averse in investing” (Lewin 1997, 21). Thus inequality in income leads to inequality in education, which leads to inequality in income, and so on.

Although attempts have been made to address this problem through educational policy, including “the expansion of state [public] colleges and universities, and increased allocations for loans and scholarships” (Tan and Leonor 1985, 132) they have met with only limited success. The growth of inequality in the Philippines shows no signs of slowing down; “in the country as a whole income
disparity is widening: in 1988, the average income of the richest 10 per cent of the population was 17.6 times that of the poorest tenth; it grew to 23.7 times in 2000” (Serrano 2004).

Conflict

Inequality and corruption, both discussed above, are often factors in causing conflict. This has certainly been the case in the Philippines, where anti-government rebel groups have often been rooted in depressed, rural areas, particularly during the period of martial law under Marcos. Conflict can be understood as a development problem in that it discourages foreign investment, causes economic and social instability and is a large cost in itself.

The most significant area of conflict in the Philippines today is Mindanao, the archipelago’s southern-most island. Currently populated by around 12 million Christians, 4 million Muslims and 2 million indigenous peoples, it is “a region long characterised by conflict between multi-ethnic and religious groups” (Neufldt, McCann and Cilliers 2000, 3). A key factor in the on-going conflict between Christians and Muslims “was the government resettlement effort between the 1920s and 1950s, when mainly Christian landless farmers were relocated from other areas in the Philippines to the resource-rich and under populated island of Mindanao” (ibid.). Since that time, over 120,000 people have lost their lives and over 1.5 million people have been displaced, resulting in deep-seated tension and prejudice, which has not been helped by the government’s often heavy handed approach, particularly since joining the US-led ‘War on Terror’. USAID notes that development problems are now “particularly acute in the conflict-affected areas of Mindanao” (USAID 2007, 1).

Education is playing a key role in peace-building efforts. It is generally recognised that ‘othering’, the process of protagonists separating into ‘them’ and ‘us’, plays a huge part in intra-national conflict. To bring peace therefore involves more than simply disarming; in addition “both participants must see themselves and each other for what they really are as human beings” (Curle 1971, 215). To prevent future re-ignition of conflict and in the hope of finding a common ground, “increasingly, it is considered essential to focus on the younger generation to regenerate societies in transitions from violent conflict to relative peace” (Pupavac 2000, 134). This theory is being put into practice in peace education programmes such as ‘Building Bridges of Understanding and Peace’
(Hague Appeal for Peace 2005, 3) which involves ‘twinning’ Christian and Muslim students, and in
the work of Catholic Relief Services who have been creating opportunities for dialogue between
religious leaders and providing peace education as part of school curricula (Neufldt, McCann and
Cilliers 2000, 8).

Unemployment and underemployment

As has been seen above, the Philippines faces difficulties with poverty, inequality and rapid rural-to-
urban migration. Issues around unemployment and underemployment (i.e. those who are employed,
but well below capacity in terms of ability or working time) must be understood as related to these.
A survey carried out by the Philippine National Statistics office in 2003 reported that unemployment
was around 13 per cent, while underemployment was at 20.8 per cent (Serrano 2004). It also
suggested that these figures were expected to increase due to rising costs in the agriculture sector.
For the most part, thanks to the successes of Philippine education discussed earlier, these
unemployed and underemployed people are educated.

This is not a new problem for the Philippines; in 1975, one in five college graduates was not in
employment (Tan and Leonor 1985, 114). The attempted solution came through educational policy;
an emphasis on vocational training in schools, under the slogan “Work is the core of our curriculum”
(ibid, 121). A similar approach is being used today: “[Department of Education] Secretary Lapus
pointed out the need to provide a solution to the job mismatch in the workforce, where graduates do
not have the skills required by hiring industries. He emphasized the need to improve DepED’s
technical and vocational educational program so that this need can be addressed” (Department of
Education 2006). However, some critics have argued that this may not be the only or most
appropriate solution. Rather than only increasing or improving the vocational education on offer,
Leonor suggested that it is important to develop “the flexibility to adjust to changing labour
markets” (Leonor 1985, 2) through the entire education system, beginning in primary school.
Vocational training can also have a limiting effect, preparing students for short term contract, low
paid factory jobs in trade export zones.
One of the reasons for the survival of the Philippine economy in the face of the problems described above is the high numbers of workers overseas; it “is now the world’s biggest exporter of labour” (New Internationalist 2005, 18). Over eight million Filipinos live and work overseas – around ten per cent of the population. In 2006 they sent back about fifteen billion dollars in remittances (Higham 2007), upon which the country is “highly dependant” (BBC 2007). While this benefits many, it has some negative effects. Those who receive remittances tend not to be from the poor; “most of those who work abroad can be described as middle class: the rich have no incentive to leave, the poor lack the education or the money to buy schooling and air fares” (Higham 2007). It can have a clear negative effect on family life, as families are separated by long distances and expensive transport costs. There is also the issue of ‘brain drain’. For example, the Philippines “sends 14,000 nurses abroad each year – twice as many as it trains…causing a shortfall at home” (New Internationalist 2005, 18).

It should be no surprise that in a country where post-primary education is dominated by the private sector, training for work overseas has become big business. Lewin notes that “these flows of domestic workers, skilled labour and others depend on possession of minimum levels of education, languages and often trade certification” (Lewin 1997, 25). DeptED Secretary Lapus observes that, with improved vocational and technical training, “the jobs are there both here and abroad” (Department of Education 2006).

**Conclusion**

This essay has considered four of the major development problems faced by the Philippines today: Corruption, Inequality, Conflict and Unemployment/Underemployment. It has discussed how these have impacted on, and have been impacted by, educational policy and provision.

It has been seen that the Philippines is a developing country, struggling with a number of challenging issues. Some of these are unavoidable – natural disasters for example. Others have more human causes; they are the legacy of a colonial history, of greed or simply of human error. Many of the problems have been seen to be interrelated, with issues such as debt and international politics ‘lurking’ behind them.
Although education in the Philippines has been shown to have had many significant successes, such as impressively high enrolment and low illiteracy, it has also had a less positive effect at times. There is no doubt that it has played some part in perpetuating and even increasing inequality, particularly due to the huge reliance on private education. It has failed to solve the historical problems of unemployment and underemployment, although the responsibility for this issue must also be shared by other sectors. It has also been shown how some of these problems have negatively impacted the provision of education. Corruption, conflict and inequality have all played a part in limiting the quality of education on offer, particularly to the less wealthy in Philippine society.

For the Philippines to solve the development problems considered in this essay, it has been recognised that education must be a significant part of the solution. Corruption is being challenged by, among other things, the inclusion of ethics and citizenship in schools. Peace-building is being introduced to curricula to challenge negative stereotypes and contribute towards ending conflict. Inequality and employment are, in some senses, larger problems involving many other factors – but it is clear that ensuring that all Filipinos, regardless of geography or wealth, have access to high quality and relevant education is a step in the right direction.

This essay began with a Tagalog proverb extolling the value of education. It seems fitting that it ends the same way.

“Ang sa taong karunungan kayamanan di manakaw”

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Tagalog Proverb, quoted in Cortes 1980, 145

References


