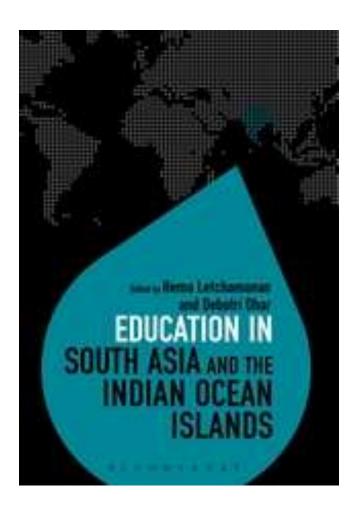**Letchamanan, H., & Dhar, D. (2018).** *Education in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Islands (Education Around the World).* **London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic.**

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Education in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Islands, edited by Hema Letchamanan and Debotri Dhar, is a comprehensive guide to educational development in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Islands. The book is composed of chapters on education and education policy in Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, as well as lesser publicized areas of the world such as the Comoros, Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles and Zanzibar islands. Each chapter provides a detailed analysis of a country in the region by contributors who offer meticulous overviews, analyses and recommendations for the progression of education policy in the region. Some countries such as Bangladesh, India, and Nepal are given more attention due to their population and the complexity of political, cultural, or religious issues that affect education policy.

Nevertheless, the text allows the reader to gain greater understanding of historical contexts, geopolitical concerns, and ongoing

education policy issues in a manner that brings awareness to the reader and provides a platform for further research. Furthermore, each contributor offers the reader unique insight into the development of education policy around the world and gives a glimpse of what the future of the globalization and internationalization of education could be. Several main themes in the book directly affected education progress and were common throughout the South Asia and Indian Ocean Island regions.

Theme 1: Overpopulation and Poverty

In many areas of the world, overpopulation and poverty have significant and long-lasting consequences for nations. This is one of the first issues examined in the introduction by Hema Letchamanan: "Some 1.3 billion people live in this region, making it home to half of the world's poor" (p. 2). It is clear from the collective analysis of each country in the region that overpopulation and poverty have substantial impacts on education progress in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Islands. The alleviation of the primary causes of poverty by means of educating the population is a primary theme throughout the book. The need to hold local governments and state educational authorities accountable for instituting policies that ensure the right to quality education regardless of social status, gender, or geographic location is reiterated in many chapters.

In Chapter 1, author Nassir Uddin wrote, "Education is the [sic] principle means to achieve the goal of poverty alleviation" (p. 12). A similar opinion is expressed in Chapter 13 by author Raja Gunawardhane while addressing Sri Lanka's contemporary issues: "It is apparent therefore that the education system assists in perpetuating poverty and disadvantage in contradistinction to the goals of educational opportunity and mobility from the 'humblest to highest' position as anticipated in the forties. All governments

since independence tried to address this issue, but the situation remains unchanged" (p. 249). Finally, in Chapter 19, author Cathryn MacCallum addressed the link between education and poverty when analyzing the island of Zanzibar,

> Poverty reduction begins with today's children, and by giving more attention to the quality and scope of education to ensure that young people are equipped with the skills in demand in the labor market, the long term impact of this project will be to enable them to secure sustainable livelihoods; this will enable them to break out of the poverty cycle (p. 352).

In the United States, there are somewhat comparable circumstances in which local school districts are not able to provide adequate educational opportunities to their population by their own means. Most of these school districts are in areas with high poverty rates. The US is able to mitigate this by implementing grant programs such as the Rural and Low-Income School Program (RLIS), which supplements these districts and allows for adequate educational opportunities for the population (U. S. Department of Education, 2017). The contributors indicate that while programs like these are certainly the goal, they cannot be attained due to the other unique political, social, or economic barriers existing in each country.

The book points out that one of the greatest barriers that exist in the region is overpopulation. As a result of overpopulation, which is often linked to poverty, specific societal issues arise such as extreme child labor rates, child malnutrition, and a shortage of qualified teachers and funds dedicated to government education programs. This creates a vicious cycle of underperforming education programs that feed societal issues. These issues are the same issues that inhibit education policy initiatives from producing beneficial results. This concern is expressed in

some way in each chapter. However, author Ch. Radha Gayathri gave an enlightening account in Chapter 5 when discussing the future of education in India: "Against a backdrop of growing population, famines and inflation, literacy could hardly make any progress, especially due to underfunding, undue emphasis on teaching in English and closure of many indigenous schools" (p. 96). These conditions are further exacerbated in India, Bangladesh, and Nepal, where 118 million children live in rural areas. Half of those children are not likely to enter school (UNICEF South Asia, 2015; India National Census 2011). This fact, paired with high unemployment and low wages, make educational opportunities scarce in these areas.

Theme 2: Cultural Adversities

When one speaks of the history of the United States, one speaks of centuries. When South Asia and the Islands in the Indian Ocean think about their history, it is thought of in millennia. The desire for governments to hold on to their cultural identity and traditional values makes for a considerable challenge when trying to incorporate new concepts, ideas, and values in education policy. Furthermore, the book makes it clear that past influence from foreign powers has left many countries in the region with mixed feelings about how to approach the future of their education systems. Entire education systems based on different languages, religions, and cultural values have come and gone over the long history of the region. As a result, a complex tapestry of multiple religious and cultural ideas hangs over the region. Author Ch. Radha Gayathri made this clear when referencing India's rich education history:

India has a very long history of education spanning more than 3,000 years. Education in India has a chequered history and the current education system has its moorings in its colonial past. The current

education fabric of India is a result of weaving of different strands of educational traditions and systems which evolved at different phases of its long history (p. 87).

Education policy implementation is further complicated when addressing modern issues and attempting to make progress in culturally sensitive areas. Women and minority groups still suffer low rates of school completion compared to majority groups. "The female literacy rate of India as per the 2011 census is 65.46 per cent compared to male literacy rate of 82.14 per cent" (Pande, p. 103). Author Rekha Pande further addressed this concern in Chapter 6 when focusing on education for Muslim girls,

Education is an important tool for creating a gender-just society and for empowering women. Unfortunately, if we look at the statistics today, there is a significant gap between the education levels of men and women, especially so of Muslim women and women of other religions and marginalized communities. Though primary education is free in India, because of the low value placed on girls' education, very few girls from marginalized groups enroll. (p. 106).

The inability of policy makers to incorporate a realistic and tenable way ahead in the form of education policy that promotes wider incorporation of traditionally oppressed societal groups is a major roadblock to progress in the region.

Theme 3: Lack of Awareness

Of the main themes in the book that challenge education policy implementation in the region, the lack of awareness regarding regional issues has the greatest potential to be mitigated. Globalization and internationalization have been recognized concepts for centuries. However, the potential to implement education change to areas of the

world that have been difficult to reach is now possible due to technological advances. Editor Hema Letchamanan made it clear in the books introduction that awareness is one of the main goals of the book:

> The aims of this book are twofold: (a) first, to highlight issues which are under-discussed in wider academic literature – as can be seen in the chapters on India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, and (b) … to remedy the dearth of literature on education in the smaller countries/ island countries. (p. 2).

Advances in online education provide opportunities that are accessible to the entire populations and can be a primary means of alleviating the lack of opportunities and resources. Author Mahfuz Ashraf identified this in Chapter 3 when making recommendations for how Bangladesh can implement technology: "The present government established 'Vision 2021' with a target to form a modern country or 'Digital Bangladesh' through the effective use of ICT. 'Digital Bangladesh' does not imply the mere use of ICT; rather it implies the proper use of ICT to ensure that quality education and health are provided, and poverty is alleviated" (p. 61).

Another key concept in promoting awareness and progress is the availability of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) that play a crucial role in providing money and resources to areas in need. NGO involvement in the region is recognized frequently in the book. Authors Nafisa Tanjeem and Aditi Sabur recognize the importance of NGO's in Chapter 2 during their analysis of the current state of Bangladesh Women and Gender Studies in Higher Education. The Department of Women's Studies had additional success with graduates becoming employed with NGOs in Bangladesh. This was directly related to the departments' increased awareness and connection to NGO projects as well as adopting new methods first introduced by NGOs (Mahtab as cited by Tanjeem & Sabur, 2018; Chowdhury as cited by Tanjeem & Sabur, 2018).

The only limitation in the book is the unwillingness to address education issues in Pakistan. Certainly, in a historical context, the region has a long and complex history that includes the area Pakistan currently encompasses. Pakistan continues to have social, economic, and political impact on other areas of the South Asia region that have bearing on education policy. However, the book is a well thought out collaborative effort by qualified academics who showed unique and thought provoking insight into their respective subjects. Not only is the book informative, it offers solutions and ways ahead that can be explored further. The geopolitical and social concerns that presently exist in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Islands are similar to many found in other regions of the world. Education policy implementations that have progressive ideas are not easy to implement in many areas of the world due to various regional and global circumstances. However, the book gives the reader an understanding of the issues within the South Asian and Indian Ocean Islands so that solutions may be found. I highly recommend the book to researchers and scholars with an interest in international education policy and agencies of the South Asia and the Indian Ocean Islands.

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