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# Free Basic Education in Nepal: A Myth or Reality

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## Abstract

This paper aims to explore the household cost of basic education. The quantitative approach was used to walk around the household expenditure on basic education. Cluster sampling was used to select the sample units for the study. The 380 households were selected for the survey determined by Yamane's formula of sample selection. The SPSS was used for the data analysis. The study found that households spend Rs. 31435 per year on basic education. Similarly, the per-child cost in public and private schools are Rs. 14285 and Rs. 49703, respectively. Moreover, parents pay Rs. 2090 annually to public schools, which is regarded as the government fully funds. So, it is concluded that free basic education is just a fable, not genuineness, in Nepal.

**Keywords:** Basic education, household, cost, government

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## **1. Introduction**

Investment in education is financing in human development, which imparts the individual's knowledge, skills, and attitude during different stages of life. It is a continuous process throughout an individual's life, right from birth. In the view of Aristotle, education is the formation of a sound mind in a healthy body. It advances the ability of humans, especially their senses, so they might be able to appreciate the observation of ultimate fact, goodness, and prettiness, which complete pleasure fundamentally contains (Sharma & Sharma, 2016). Similarly, education significantly contributes to preserving the sociocultural aspects and hands-on the future generation. Moreover, it aims to mainstream people in social change by strengthening democracy, valuing human rights, and creating a just society. Hence, the state has to make reasonable education provisions for its people.

The government provides different levels of education to the people, such as basic education, secondary education, higher education, technical and vocational education, and non-formal education (Dupriez & Dumay, 2006). Basic education is the first step of education, among other levels of the educational structure in the nation. The various instructive actions in numerous sceneries aim to encounter fundamental wants defined in the world statement on education for all (Dreze & Sen, 2003). Furthermore, it also includes a diversity of the non-formal and informal communities, and individual activities proposed to meet the elementary learning requirements of the public of all ages (Aluede, 2006). It means all the fundamental knowledge-generating activities are included in basic education. So, in a formal education structure, basic education refers to the first step of the education system.

Basic education is not regarded as means only; it is considered to be an end itself. It builds, systematically, different levels and types of education and training. Conceptual questions, such as using terms like elementary education and fundamental education in international normative texts and their contemporary perceptions, fall within basic education (Dreze & Sen, 2003). Basic education is regarded as the level of education considering early childhood care and development. Likewise, the basic education going beyond primary education is junior secondary education. The latest developments in national legislation bear this out. Basic education should be free and compulsory (Jomtien Declaration, 1990, as cited in UNESCO, 2007). However, a policy of free and compulsory elementary education was commenced in 1948 in the human rights declaration of the United Nations (Halvorsen, 1990).

Basic education is one of the fundamental rights of children in the world. Nepal has also approved primary education as a fundamental human right, a principle which has been protected by several global agreements and conferences comprising the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) 1948 (Article 26), the agreement on the rights of the child (1989), the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (1981), the world statement on Education for All (EFA), and the millennium development goals (MDGs). Yet, unfortunately, many children still lack access to quality basic education worldwide (UNESCO, 2010). In this regard, Nepal is no exception. One of the reasons for this is deeply ingrained structural disparities that act as a significant obstacle to universal primary education in most developing countries, which applies to Nepal's context (The World Bank & DFID, 2006).

The Constitution of Nepal (2015) assures the right to education is the fundamental right of all citizens. It comprises the right to access education, compulsory and free basic education, and free education up to the secondary level (Article 31). It shows that the Government of Nepal has prioritized school education as a fundamental right in the Constitution. Furthermore, more emphasis is given to basic education by making it free and compulsory. According to the Education Act-2028 (eighth amendment), basic education refers to elementary education to grade eight in Nepal.

Basic education is the most prioritized in global educational programs, policies, and agendas. In this context, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) set sustainable development goals (SDGs) in 2016 for the overall development of the globe. The SDGs are a global call to eradicate poverty, safeguard the earth, and ensure that all publics enjoy concord and affluence. So, the SDGs also focused on education and set the global goal of "ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all" (UNDP, 2016, p. 7). To ensure inclusive and quality education for all, the Government of Nepal has prioritized basic education to achieve SDG4. Furthermore, it has set the goal to "ensure that all girls and boys complete free equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes" (NPC, 2017, p. 28).

This goal cannot be achieved without the proper provision of basic education in Nepal. Consequently, the Government of Nepal prioritizes access to and equity in basic education. Hence, the Government of Nepal is trying to achieve SDG4 through some educational projects and plans.

The Government of Nepal has implemented different educational projects. It plans to make education accessible, equitable, and qualitative to fulfill the commitment in the international and national education forum and meet the Constitution's envisioned provision. In this context, current educational plans and projects such as School Sector Reform Plan (SSRP) and School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) have given special priority to the basic level of education.

The Ministry of Education (MOE, 2009) has implemented the SSRP (2009-2015) as a significant strategic educational plan. It had given special priority to basic education to make it easily reached, qualitative, and justifiable through right based approach to encounter the objective of confirming equitable entrée to qualitative basic education for all kids of 5-12 years age group. The SSDP has been following the SSRP since 2016, focusing on upgrading the quality of education and enhancing the student's learning achievement. The SSDP also prioritizes basic education to fulfill basic education as a fundamental right by making it compulsory and accessible, as mentioned in the new Constitution of Nepal. In SSDP, basic education goals are to advance the physical, socio-emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and ethical possibilities of all 5-12-year-old kids by ensuring school willingness and universal entrée to quality basic education (MOE, 2011 & MOE, 2016).

Correspondingly, the Government of Nepal (GON) passed The Act Relating to Compulsory and Free Education in 2018. This Act made the state responsible for ensuring that no child is deprived of school education. According to the new Act, the government has to ensure that every child of 5-12 years (basic education age group) is enrolled and receives a free education at public schools. Similarly, The Fifteenth Plan (2019/20-2023/24) has prioritized basic education to make it compulsory and free for all children. This shows that Nepal Government is quite sincere in providing basic education to all children within its policy and program level.

GON has been spending considerable resources from the public treasury to fulfill the above-stated commitment. However, the resources from the private sector, including households, are also significant. In this context, a tremendous amount of money is being spent by students of all levels in our country to achieve an education. The student's families endure the amount required for school uniforms, stationery items, mid-day meals, etc. This expense will vary depending on the economic status of a household family (Kushiyait, 2015). This means that the parents spend their abundant resources on basic education for their kids even though it is free. Similarly, parents contribute 48.8 percent of the total funding of education in Nepal (UNESCO/ IIEP-USI, 2016).

Consequently, the government's funds collected from taxes cannot finance primary learning inputs in several cases. As a result, the cost of household education increases (Penrose, 1998). So, parents should bear a considerable proportion of education expenditure for their children. However, if the public education funds are managed efficiently in the education system, the cost burden to parents may reduce.

In this context, we can see the budget allocation trend of the Nepal Government with the comparison of GDP and total budget. Nepal Government has committed to the various national and international forums allocating at least 15 to 20 percent of the federal budget and 4 to 6 percent of GDP to the education sector (Kushiyait, 2015). According to the Ministry of Finance (2022), 4.3 percent of GDP and 10.64 percent of the Federal Government's total budget have been allocated to education sectors in the FY 2022/23. The budget allocation in terms of GDP is close to the commitment. However, in proportion to the total budget, still education budget is significantly less. This may be a reason for the heavy burden of education expenditure on the household.

Basic education, which enrolls a more significant number of students, receives the largest share of funding, with 49.9 percent of the total public expenditure for education (MOEST, 2022). It indicates that the basic education level receives almost half the education financing. On the other hand, households bear 48.8 percent of the total education expenditure (UNESCO, 2016). It indicates that despite the government's spending enormous resources on education, the household also bears a substantial cost. So, this paper explores the actual household costs of basic education in Nepal.

## **2. Methods and Materials**

The researcher followed the survey method to establish the rationale and give accurate and objective descriptions. One of the rationales for the quantitative approach is that the study entailed collecting data from the research respondents using a structured questionnaire (Ngulube, 2015) to analyze and investigate educational issues (Borg & Gall, 1989). The researcher used Yamane's (1967) formula to determine sample size and used the cluster sampling technique to select representative samples. A set of questionnaires to collect the data from the study area was designed based on the research questions.

Ratuwamai Municipality in Morang district has been selected as the study area for this research. Following the quantitative study, the results were analyzed. A survey method was used for the study, including selecting several representative households,

selecting the questions appropriate for the informants, and linking with the research questions (Baker, 1999). Thus, based on survey research, the nature of the data for this study was quantitative, and the primary source of the data was primarily used to carry out the result of this research. Data were collected using a closed-ended questionnaire in this study.

The total number of households in Ratuwamai Municipality whose children were pursuing basic education was the population of the study. According to the record of the municipality, the total number of households was 12482, out of which 7478 household children were pursuing basic education (Ratuwa Mai Nagarpalika, 2019). Hence, the population of this study is 7478 households in Ratuwa Mai Municipality of Morang district. The total sample size is 380. This sample was determined using Yamane's (1956) formula (Monga, 2013).

Two stages of cluster sampling were used to draw this sample size from the population (LaRoche et al., 2015). In cluster sampling, all the elements in the designated clusters are surveyed (Thompson, 1990). So, the whole population of the study was divided into ten clusters according to the ward numbers of the municipality. There are ten wards, and a simple random sampling selected one ward in the first stage. In the second stage, one cluster was made from public schools and another from private schools. Further, there were five public and four private schools in the sampled ward. The researcher selected the two private schools and two public schools from each cluster by simple random sampling.

After selecting sampled schools, the researcher visited each school to collect information on the households of each student pursuing basic education. There were 403 households with children pursuing basic education in sampled ward schools. The sample size of this study was 380, but all 403 households were surveyed following the assumption of cluster sampling, as suggested by Thompson (1990). However, removing some outlier units from the sample, the researcher analyzed the actual sample of 380 households in the data analyzing process.

To construct the questionnaire, "the measuring household expenditure on education: a guidebook for designing household survey questionnaires" (p. 1), published by UNESCO in 2018, was used. All collected data were entered into the SPSS program to calculate and design numbering data, summarize, compare, and generalize household expenditure on basic education. Data analysis and interpretation is the process of meaning-making of the gathered, analyzed, and presented data (Sapsford & Jupp, 1996).

### 3. Findings and Discussion

The data on the educational expenditure of households on basic education has been collected on three headings such as expenditure related to the payment to school (tuition fee, examination fee, admission fee, annual fee, price of belt, tie and school calendar, library fee, maintenance charge, canteen fee, hostel fee, transportation fee, health service fee, sports fee, price of educational materials provided by school, extra-curricular activities fee, co-curricular activities fee, practical fee, additional cash, and other expenses), the expenditure made out of school (school uniform, other uniform, stationeries, sports materials, material related to art, additional books, computer, internet, additional tuition, transportation cost in public vehicle, and tiffin in school) and other optional expenditure (music and art class, gift and other activities) as suggested by UNESCO (2018). So, it is worth finding the proportion of spending in different headings. Therefore, the pattern of household expenditure on basic education in the separate title has been presented in table 1.

**Table 1: Pattern of household cost in basic education**

Expenditure heads	Average cost (in Rs.)	Percentage
Payment to school	11700	37.22
Expenditure out of school	19521	62.10
Other optional expenditure	214	0.68
Total	31435	100.00

The highest expenditure is on materials and services that should be purchased out of school. Households spend 62.10 percent of the total educational cost on it. Similarly, 37.22 percent was spent on the payment to school, and only 0.68 percent was spent on other optional expenditures. Therefore, it shows that most educational expenses are paid by purchasing different things and services bought out of school.

The expenditure pattern of households on public and private schools may differ. So, in this study, this researcher has presented the different patterns of educational expenditure in public and private schools. It is shown in table 2.

**Table 2: Household cost based on the school types**

Expenditure heads	Public school		Private school	
	Average cost (in Rs.)	Percentage	Average cost (in Rs.)	Percentage
Payment to school	2090	14.63	30378	61.12
Expenditure out of school	12098	84.69	18947	38.12



Expenditure heads	Public school		Private school	
	Average cost (in Rs.)	Percentage	Average cost (in Rs.)	Percentage
Other optional expenditure	97	0.68	377	0.76
Total	14285	100.00	49703	100.00

According to the expenditure head, the expenditure pattern differs in public and private schools. In public schools, household expenditure is highest on out-of-school (84.69%), whereas in private schools, the most increased cost is payment to school (61.12%). It indicates that parents of public schools spend more resources on educational materials and services, which they often buy themselves out of the school zone. On the other hand, parents of public schools pay different types of fees to the school even if it is regarded as a free school. In public schools, households pay Rs.2090 (14.63%) annually for basic education. It is contrary to the commitment of the Nepal Government to free and compulsory education for all.

It shows that Nepalese households often spend substantial amounts, directly and indirectly, to access education, even if it is free. In this regard, about 96 percent of total household expenditure is incurred on purchasing books, stationery, uniforms, private coaching, and fees in India (Shariff et al., 2000). Moreover, Bayar and Yanik-Ilahian (2016) also reveal that the expenditure made by the private schools’ parents mostly goes to the school fees, whereas, in Government schools, heavy expenses fall under the purchase of different stationeries and uniforms. It shows that the parents’ expenditure pattern differs according to school type. The condition of Nepal is also in this line. So, it substantiates that basic education is not free in Nepal.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Household expenditure on basic education is generous in Nepali society. People spend considerable amounts of their scarce resources on basic education, which is expected to be free to all children by the state. However, all the evidence from this study proves that basic education is not free in Nepal. So, the Constitutional commitment to the Nepal Government’s free and compulsory basic education is merely a myth at the implementation level of the Constitutional guarantee.

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