

Chapter **10**

Setting priorities for action

Only ten years are left until 2015, the target date for achieving the Education for All goals. The year 2005 has been one of promising developments, whose potential must now be realized. Some progress towards EFA has become evident, especially in many low-income countries. The international community has focused renewed attention on global poverty, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. The importance of EFA has become even clearer in the context of globalization and the emergence of the knowledge society. The G8 summit in Gleneagles and the annual meeting of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have promised increased international support, including more aid and more debt relief. What must be done now to support EFA is to translate these broad pro-development moves at the international level into specific measures for the education sector within individual countries. This chapter suggests some high-priority areas for national and international action, if EFA, including the literacy goal, is to be achieved. Attaining the goals by 2015 remains feasible, but can only be accomplished by accelerating immediately the current pace.

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The EFA balance sheet

This Report has reviewed changes in EFA since the World Education Forum in 2000 (in Dakar, Senegal) by comparing 2002 data (the most recent available) with those for 1998. Some progress has been made, particularly among girls, resulting in improved gender parity at the primary level. Encouragingly, this progress is most evident for several countries in both sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia. Forty-seven countries have achieved universal primary education (UPE) and another twenty will likely do so by 2015. A further forty-four countries are making solid progress but will not reach UPE until after 2015. Secondary education has expanded very rapidly, in part reflecting past success at the primary level. There is more attention to quality in national planning. Public spending on education has increased as a share of national income in two-thirds of countries for which data exist. Aid to basic education has more than doubled since 1999 and, optimistically, could rise to US\$3.3 billion a year by 2010 following the G8 summit. The Education for All Fast Track Initiative, established only in 2002, has already emerged as a key coordinating mechanism for aid agencies.

Yet, however promising, these positive developments will not be enough to achieve all six EFA goals. It is now urgent to do so, as the emerging global economy and knowledge society make education – and literacy – an even more pressing need. Full participation in the knowledge society and economy – and hence reduced poverty and enhanced citizenship – is predicated on education, with literacy at its core.

The imperative of building literate societies necessitates simultaneous action on three fronts:

- 1) continuing to increase enrolments while reducing gender disparities and improving quality in basic education (at least at the primary and lower secondary levels);
- 2) scaling up programmes for youth and adult literacy; and
- 3) investing in literate environments at home, school, and throughout communities.

This will not be easy. EFA challenges remain enormous. For example:

- Universal primary education by 2015 is not assured. About 100 million children are still not enrolled in primary school, 55% of them girls. In 23 countries, primary net enrolment rates have been declining. Fees are still collected at the primary level in 89 out of the 103 countries

surveyed. High fertility rates, HIV/AIDS and conflict continue to exert pressure on education systems in the regions with the greatest EFA challenges.

- The 2005 gender parity target has been missed. Ninety-four countries have not met the goal, and eighty-six are at risk of not doing so even by 2015. At the primary-school level, where seventy-six countries have not reached gender parity, the issue is principally one of girls' enrolment. At the secondary level, on the other hand, girls predominate in almost half of the countries that have not achieved parity, reflecting high drop-out rates among boys.
- Education quality is too low. In forty-one countries, less than two-thirds of primary-school pupils reach the last grade. There are too few teachers, too few women teachers, and too few trained and qualified teachers; in many countries, primary teacher numbers would have to increase by 20% a year to reduce pupil/teacher ratios to 40:1 and to achieve UPE by 2015. In addition, enrolments have not increased significantly in early childhood care and education programmes, one of the keys to enhanced performance at primary school.
- Literacy has been neglected. Over 770 million youth and adults – about one-fifth of the world's adult population – are without basic literacy skills, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. Moreover, as this Report has shown, this number actually underestimates the size of the global problem, as it is based on conventional, but flawed, methods of assessing literacy. Literacy is not prominent in most education plans and typically accounts for only 1% of public spending on education. Yet the goal is central to the achievement of other EFA goals.
- Aid to basic education is inadequate: despite recent increases, it still represents only about 2.6% of Official Development Assistance (and within this, aid for adult literacy is minuscule). It will fall far short of the US\$7 billion a year estimated to be needed just for achieving UPE and gender parity. Aid is not allocated sufficiently to the countries with the greatest need – in terms of absolute numbers of children and youth facing the EFA challenge, and in terms of ranking according to the Education for All Development Index (EDI). The Fast Track Initiative, launched in 2002, had resulted in only US\$298 million in new pledges by mid-2005, although it may also have leveraged some additional bilateral funding.

Priorities for action

To meet these challenges and to consolidate the progress that has already been made, nine areas must be addressed:

Broad EFA measures

1. *Accelerating efforts towards UPE and quality in primary education.* Particularly important are attention to: (a) reducing and eliminating fees; (b) policies to include rural children, minorities, those affected by HIV/AIDS and those living with disabilities; (c) increasing the teacher supply and improving teacher training; (d) expanding enrolments in early childhood care and education programmes, especially for the disadvantaged; and (e) implementing low-cost school health and nutrition measures that can increase access and learning.
2. *Recommitting to the gender goal.* Although the 2005 goal has been missed, considerable progress has been made, and often in the countries where the challenge is greatest. This progress must be celebrated and reinforced. It is important therefore that the EFA movement renew its commitment to the gender goal and push ahead.
3. *Spending more on education, and spending more efficiently.* Spending is increasing but remains low as a percentage of national income. In some countries, this reflects the low share in national income of public spending in general, and broad revenue measures are needed rather than actions specific to the education sector. In others, allocations to education are too low. In many countries, improving the efficiency of spending also has considerable potential.

Literacy measures

4. *Making youth and adult literacy a higher priority on national and international agendas.* For literacy to be achieved, political commitment from the highest level is essential, as are clear government policies that include literacy in education sector plans and other relevant documents, such as Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers. There are encouraging signs of change in some countries, but these are still too few. At the international level, adult literacy remains largely neglected by aid agencies and the United Nations Literacy Decade has yet to take specific form, though again there are some early signs of possible change.

5. *Focusing on literate societies, not just on literate individuals.* It is very clear that the EFA goals can be met only through the development of literate societies, in which all literate individuals have the means and the opportunity to benefit from rich and dynamic literate environments. Policies to develop rich literate environments – alongside schooling and programmes that ensure that youth and adults become literate – are thus important. Such policies can include support for libraries, local-language newspapers, book publishing, access of adults to school libraries and radio listening groups.
6. *Defining government responsibility for youth and adult literacy.* Governments must clearly define responsibility for adult literacy, which is often diffused across several ministries. It also involves many partnerships at all levels of government and with civil society organizations. Adequate public financing is needed. It is essential to professionalize literacy educators and provide them with adequate pay and training.

International measures

7. *Doubling aid to basic education to reach US\$7 billion.* The increases in aid announced during 2005 have yet to be allocated by sector. It is essential that the share of aid to basic education – including to literacy – increase even faster than aid as a whole. It should at least double, from 2.6% to over 5% of total aid.
8. *Targeting aid to the greatest educational needs.* Aid must be aligned more closely with need, must be more predictable and long-term, and should flow more to those countries furthest from achieving the EFA goals. Efforts to harmonize aid to education should continue, including through the Fast Track Initiative.
9. *Complementing the flow of funds with knowledge and technical support.* For many EFA goals, and especially for literacy, developing countries need access to technical knowledge and expertise. There is significant potential for UNESCO and other agencies to play a greater role in organizing and providing this knowledge and technical support, complementing the financial aid provided by donors.

Achieving EFA – with literacy at its core – is ever more pressing. The needs are clear. It is up to the world community to make it happen. ■

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