

Graca Machel Wants EFA Defaulters Put on Notice

DAKAR, Senegal - Countries which are failing to make progress in achieving the Education for All (EFA) target should be identified publicly, Graca Machel, former education minister of Mozambique, said Wednesday in a plea for greater commitment from governments on education.

"We must stop rubbing shoulders" and shielding those who are trailing behind because of lack of political will, she emphasised, pointing out that this is the only way to deliver on promises made in Jomtien, Thailand, 10 years ago to the world's children and adults.

She urged the representatives of some 180 countries attending the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, to "for one second please put yourself in the place of the rural and urban poor, ... in the place of the disabled ... What would you think of people who repeatedly discuss your condition but don't do anything to change it."

Machel was chairperson of the Opening Plenary, at which the main findings of the regional meetings and from the NGO assessment were presented. There was also a special intervention by Peter Piot, executive director of UNAIDS, who was blunt in his warning on the danger the pandemic poses to education.

"Let me be absolutely clear. AIDS constitutes one of the biggest threats to

the goal of education."

He said that the fatal disease which regularly claims the lives of teachers and other professionals in countries in Africa is undermining decades of investment in countries in Africa and Asia.

He said governments are not powerless against the epidemic and could turn the tide by investing in AIDS education, and integrating it in education programmes to help change attitudes and protect children.

"It is essential (the) education system address the short and long-term effect" of HIV/AIDS, he urged the conference, prompting Machel to say that it is "heartbreaking if you do not act as you should".

She urged "very influential people. I might say powerful people" among the delegates at the Forum to demonstrate "enough political will" to allocate what they pledge at international meetings to advance education and other social development goals.

"Education must remain a priority of national agendas and there must be mechanisms to ensure they remain a priority... There must be quality and equity in education."

Machel specifically urged countries in Africa and South Asia to "clean their house... to make sure we are doing our part." ●

She said the two regions "have to make an effort", adding that it was no longer "enough to blame others" and make that an excuse for doing nothing.

She said the international community has an obligation to transfer know-how and put in money in education. Education has no border, she declared.



Women and Girls

Education, not Discrimination!

Of the 110 million children out of school in developing nations, sixty per cent are girls. According to the United Nations, which is launching a ten-year Girl' Education Initiative at the World Education Forum, girls are systematically more disadvantaged than boys solely on the basis of discrimination by gender

Despite the fact that 44 million more girls attend primary schools in developing countries than in 1990, and despite the fact that the education of girls and women is now on policy-making agendas in most developing nations, the gender gap is still unacceptably wide. "Girls' education makes all the difference, not only in terms of economic development but human development," says Mary Joy Pigozzi of UNICEF. What, then, explains such discrimination, when all indicators show that girls' schooling is a proven effective investment for society. Perhaps the fact that individual families do not always see it as an immediate benefit. "Policy-makers should recognise the costs and benefits from the parents' perspective," suggests a recent World Bank discussion paper. "If parents incur greater costs to educate girls but society reaps greater gains, then governments ought to consider special measures and targeted subsidies to help girls attend school." Many governments now realise this. Southern Egypt's 200 girl-friendly community schools are a shining example. The Egyptian government is now integrating their best practices - active learning and child-centred class management - into the formal education system. Malawi has cut the costs of schooling for parents by eliminating school fees and abolishing compulsory uniforms.

In Mashan County in China, villages and households that take effective measures to send girls to school are awarded priority for loans or development funds. Even a simple measure like building separate toilets for girls is sometimes enough to keep them in school. African and South Asian countries especially have a long way to go to close the gender gap. An average six-year-old girl in South Asia can expect to spend six years in school—three years less than a boy the same age. And when gender disparities meet urban/rural disparities, girls lose out even more.

A girl based in a rural area runs three times the risk of dropping out of school than a city boy. Discrimination is reinforced in the classroom, as research shows that both male and female teachers tend to give more attention to boys, a trend now being tackled by gender-sensitive training programmes. Traditional beliefs and practices are often at the root of the gender gap. Girls may be expected to help look after home and siblings and be forced to marry young, or else their parents lack trust in the education system. One of the reasons parents lack trust is the threat of sexual harassment by male pupils or even teachers. The onset of puberty, which can occur as early as ten, is a crucial time. In many societies, parents who willingly send their daughter to school remove her at puberty, for fear of an unwanted pregnancy, and marry her off early instead.

"Education is the right of every child, even the girl who becomes pregnant," says Eddah Gachukia of the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) who has successfully lobbied against national policies in Africa that deny schooling to pregnant girls.

Greater opportunities and life choices for women (including better chances to protect themselves against HIV/AIDS)

Benin now offers basic education opportunities to girls who drop out from school. Guinea has raised the marriage age and made it an offence for male teachers to harass female pupils. A promising initiative in Tanzania helps girls speak out about their problems and find solutions to overcome obstacles to their own social and academic development. ●

Shifting Focus from Quantity to Quality

Governments from China to Brazil are now flaking about quality, a concept which covers everything from the physical condition of school to better training and from the availability of textbooks to more parental involvement. There is also increased focus on pupil's needs before and after the primary school years.

"In our rush for, quality missed out", says Bangladesh's education minister, Abu Sharaf Hifzul Kader Sadique. His country has made great in literacy, but difficulties in quality remain. Despite its remarkable advances, China admits to the same problem: "The overall quality of school teachers leaves much to be desired," said Lu Fuyuan, deputy education minister, citing the difficulty in reaching remote areas. Bangladesh and China are not alone. Brazil; Malawi and Mexico, along with most countries that have made major strides towards education for all, now wish to match increased access with quality.

Today, however, in South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, less than three out of four

Education for all not same thing as quality education for all. Countries approaching full primary-school coverage increasingly realize that the pursuit of education for all should encompass the pursuit of excellence.

pupils reach grade 5. In terms of measuring efficiency, their school systems are wasting up to a third of their resources on repeaters and drop-outs.

The quest for better quality can be tackled in various ways. One way is by recognizing that learning begins at birth. In the past ten years there has been a steady growth of early childhood education all over the world. "The brain development that occurs during the early years is critical to lifelong learning", says Judith Evans, a specialist in early childhood care and development. Early childhood education, research shows, results in increased mental agility, regular school attendance, less repetition and drop-out and improved academic skills. According to the World Bank, a dollar invested in early childhood education yields a higher rate of return than a dollar invested in secondary or

higher education.

Early childhood education is particularly effective in the poorest communities, where it informs and empowers parents too.

Poorly prepared teachers are one of the main causes of low-quality education. Having achieved 96 per cent primary school enrolment, Brazil now concentrating efforts on improving the quality of instruction, as almost half of the country's pupils are one year behind and repeat one or more classes. A recent nationwide study showed that pupils of teachers with university-level education made much faster progress than those whose teachers lack it. Today only about half of the 1.5 million teachers in the state primary schools in Brazil have a higher-education qualification.

Paradoxically, as some countries are upgrading teacher training, others are watching as qualified, talented teachers desert the profession for better-paid work in computers or tourism; a brain drain provoked by low status and even lower salaries. "Male primary-school teachers who are heads of families are as rare as stars in the daytime," remarks Mongolian teacher Tzerendozhin Urtnasan, who describes his salary as "a pittance".

The school environment also affects the quality of learning: when adequate, it can have a positive impact on attendance and success rates. The opposite is also true. A UNESCO/UNICEF study in fourteen least developed countries in Asia and Africa found that between 35 and 90 per cent of schools needed repairing or rebuilding. Many had no furniture or running water. Most developing countries face serious problems in producing and distributing appropriate textbooks and teaching materials, from mathematical instruments to maps. ●



Senegalese pupils support teachers' demand for jobs

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Going Beyond Slogans

However, the state should ensure that private education applies minimum quality standards, as well as general principles such as non-discrimination.

The "social component" implies taking concrete steps and necessarily involves considerable spending. Indeed, according to Human Rights Conventions, every state should guarantee that primary education is mandatory and free for all children.

In addition, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, makes it incumbent upon the state to actively combat child labour when it poses a threat to their education. It should also fight against dropout and absenteeism.

Furthermore, it is the state's duty, to provide, as far as possible, fundamental education to every person who did not receive complete primary education.

Finally, the international Conventions demand from member states to commit themselves to international assistance and co-operation, especially economic and technical, in order to ensure the full realisation of human rights. The Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates the need to take special account of with a view to contributing to the elimination of ignorance and illiteracy throughout the world and facilitating access to scientific and technical knowledge and modern teaching methods. ●