

The road to Dakar

Ten years of Education for all

The 1990s – the Education for All decade – saw the decline of Communism, a revolution in communications and information technologies, galloping globalisation, the collapse of financial markets, the spread of HIV/AIDS and increased poverty and ethnic conflicts. These developments had profound effects on education.

Ten years ago, representatives from 155 countries and 150 organisations pledged to provide education for all by the year 2000 at the World Conference on Education for All (Jomtien, Thailand). With the statement that "Every person – child, youth and adult – shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs", the World Declaration on Education For All defined a bold new direction in education.

Drafted by education ministers and national and international organisations, the Declaration rang the death-knell for rigid, prescriptive education systems and ushered in an era where flexible systems could thrive. From now on, education would be tailor-made, adapted to the needs, culture and



Ten years after Jomtien : Out-of-school kids in Burkina (Unesco)

circumstances of learners. The decision to review progress a decade later was taken in Jomtien.

Two important milestones intervened in 1996. The mid-decade conference held in Amman, Jordan, noted considerable progress but was hampered by weak reporting from participating countries – underlining the need for an in-depth assessment. The report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century promoted a holistic view of education consisting of four "pillars": learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together. The text

was widely adopted. The World Education Forum (26-28 April 2000, Dakar, Senegal) is unique because it has been preceded by the global EFA 2000 Assessment, two years of "homework" which will provide a critical mass of information to help ensure that educational programmes are rooted in the real world.

This global exercise is the most comprehensive study ever made of basic education. It was carried out by national teams assisted by ten regional advisory groups, comprising UNDP, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNICEF, the World Bank, bilateral donor agencies, development banks and inter-governmental organisations. From the United States to Fiji, from Chile to Mongolia, countries have worked hard to produce and analyse top-quality data covering the six targets.

Agreed on at the 1990 World Conference on Education for All. "It is a qualitative as well as a quantitative assessment," says Svein Ostveit, Executive Secretary of the International Consultative Forum on Education for All, the body set up in Jomtien to monitor and advise on progress and to keep education for all on development agendas.

Denise Lievelesley, Director of the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, sees it as "a vital benchmark to enable us to assess progress in the future and to ensure that any targets we make are realistic and are accompanied by appropriate resources." In the run-up to the World Education Forum, five regional preparatory conferences and a conference of the nine high-population countries (E9) took place between December 1999 and February 2000 (in Johannesburg, South Africa; Bangkok, Thailand; Cairo, Egypt; Recife, Brazil; Warsaw, Poland; and Santo Domingo, the Dominican Republic). Delegates at these regional meetings were able to carry out the fullest possible stocktaking of education in each region by examining national EFA reports and mapping educational policy and reforms in each country. The global synthesis report, which will be presented at Dakar, will give the most accurate picture to date of the state of basic education in the world.

Dakar is rich with experiences for everyone involved in Education. The learning society is within our reach. The world Education Forum will be a milestone on the road to success. ●

Facts and figures

IN AFRICA

- At least 17 million more African primary-school-age children are in school today compared to 1990. However, some 42 million children in sub-Saharan Africa are still out of school.

- Almost 60 per cent of out-of-school children are girls, illustrating that the gender gap is as wide as it was decade ago.

- Up to two thirds of children are not getting an education in countries where there is armed conflict and civil strife.

- The average number of pupils per teacher is 37 in the region ; in central and western African countries, such as Mali or Chad, it can reach up to 70. The pupil/teacher ratio has risen slightly in the past decade.

- Almost 40 per cent of African adults cannot read or write. Women are the most affected. In certain countries in western Africa, female illiteracy can reach 80 per cent.

ARAB STATES

At only 50 per cent, the female literacy rate lags behind other regions.

About 25 per cent of Arab women have jobs, and four per cent are involved in political life. ●

Let us shape the future

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While these improvements are welcome, the gender gap remains as wide as ever. At the 1990 World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand, representatives from 155 countries and 150 organizations committed themselves to achieving education for all by 2000.

On the 10th anniversary of the Jomtien meeting, national leaders -- including the Heads of State of Egypt, Nigeria, Senegal and Uganda -- the Secretary-General of the United Nations, education policy-makers and others from more than 100 countries have gathered here in Dakar to participate in the World Education Forum. Organized by UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA, and the World Bank, the conference aims at mapping out plans to meet people's basic learning needs in the new century.

In response to the urgent need to address the disparities between girls and boys in education, the United Nations will launch a 10-year Girls' Education Initiative at the Forum. The rationale for the new initiative is clear: opening up education to girls provides society at large with a wide array of benefits, ranging from increased family incomes to reduced fertility rates. If we are serious about our commitment to end extreme poverty, education is the place to start. For, it is through education that girls and women are empowered to secure the tools and resources they need to achieve a better life. Let us all – citizens of the global village – use the occasion of the World Education Forum to re-energize the struggle for education for all and demonstrate our solidarity with efforts to provide educational opportunities to girls. We should work with schools, community groups, religious organizations and local governments to achieve this goal. Activities such as organizing a debate, giving a sermon, arranging an exhibit, planning a fundraiser or organizing a cultural or educational event can be used to draw attention to, and drum up support on this issue. Remember we are talking literally about the future of half of humanity. ●

Jomtien, the scenic beach resort in far away Thailand, has become a prominent landmark in any discourse on basic education. It was here that some 155 countries and 150 organizations met in March 1990 for the World Conference on Education that gave birth to the noble ideal called Education for All (EFA).

It was the first time in history that so many countries and organisations sat together to discuss the future of education on a global scale, and underlined the importance the international community attaches to the issue. This importance is also reinforced by the fact that four key United Nations agencies – UNDP, UNESCO, UNFPA, and UNICEF – as well as the World Bank, convened the meeting, which set an agenda for basic education and literacy, under the auspices of the International Consultative Group on EFA.

"Every person – child, youth and adult – shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs", says Article one of the World Declaration on Education for All, which has become the rallying point in the campaign to provide the world population access to education.

The conference defined six major goals summarised as follows:

However, ten years after Jomtien the results have been a mixed bag of measured successes and failed hopes. For sure, Jomtien has given a big push to school-

From Thailand to Senegal The Dilemma of Dakar

ing, literacy and skills acquisition. But the overall goal of providing primary education to every child has failed to materialise. Current estimates are that some 100 million children still do not have access to school while nearly a billion people across the world or one-sixth of humanity, do not have basic literacy skills – the ability to read, write and perform simple calculations. Many more children and adults drop out of the school system and learning structures for a variety of reasons. This has been most pronounced in developing countries largely due to poverty. Worse, the greater majority of the deprived are women who account for more than 50 per cent of the world population.

However, the degree of successes and failures differ from one country to the other and from one region to another. For instance, in the developed world, the key issue has been largely a question of adapting education to new technologies and the problem of the so-called neo-literates

In Asia, the authorities worry about the recent economic crises that rocked the region and its negative impact on education, while Latin American coun-

tries continue to fight to cope with escalating school enrolments at a time when resources are dwindling.

The greater burden seems to be on African countries, where acquisition of education and life skills have once more become a rare commodity that only the rich can easily afford.

"African education has often tended to concentrate on elites rather than to reach the marginalised masses of learners," says Vinayagum Chinapah, a UNESCO educational survey co-ordinator in a recent report. "To aggravate matters, countries have often borrowed 'standard models' of education for all which pay little or no attention to country-specific issues," the official noted.

The EFA2000 assessment conducted in December in Johannesburg went further to underline the enormity of the challenges facing African countries, especially the less endowed located south of the Sahara.

It shows, for instance, that about 40 million primary school-age children are still out of school even though some 20 million more of their colleagues are in school today when compared to 1990.

Thus, for most of these countries, Jomtien is nothing more than a race against time. Officials confirm that EFA today appears more daunting than ever for the poor countries. "New challenges have come to the fore since 1990," says Svein Ostveit, Executive Secretary of EFA Forum. Poverty and exclusion is on the rise in both the northern and southern hemispheres. Globalisation is affecting people in unequal ways, the number of refugees and displaced persons is soaring and AIDS is reaching alarming proportions, especially in Africa, notes Ostveit.

This is the hard nut the 180 countries and nearly 1,000 delegates including political leaders, must crack in Dakar. ●



Learning in the open air : School buildings and materials are lacking in Africa (Unesco)