

Afrique

Debt, AIDS, Civil wars

Challenges for African Renaissance

Wars, foreign debt and the HIV/AIDS pandemic are among the daunting challenges to education systems in Africa. With the world's highest population growth rate (2.6 per cent) and fastest urban growth rate (4.3 per cent), Africa sets a very difficult agenda for education for all.

Only some ten African countries are on track to achieve the education goals they set after the World Conference on Education for All in 1990. The good news is that Africa is energetically pursuing those goals with innovation, optimism and courage. As Kader Asmal, the South African Minister of Education, says, "We must find African solutions to African educational problems."

The continent has made some notable advances. Countries such as Cape Verde, Malawi, Mauritius, South Africa, Zimbabwe have already achieved primary enrolment rates of 90 per cent or more. Uganda more than doubled its enrolment in two years when it introduced a free education scheme. And although some 42 million primary-school-age children are out of school in sub-Saharan Africa, at least 17 million more are in school today compared to 1990.

The gender gap is as wide as ever, despite the fact that many countries have now introduced girl-friendly policies: Benin exempts girls in rural areas from paying school fees and Eritrea has trained 300 female teachers to increase girls' enrolment.

Of the principal reasons education budgets suffer in Africa is a crippling foreign debt burden. No fewer than thirty of the world's forty-two heavily indebted countries are in Africa. The continent is currently serving its debts to the tune of

US\$13 billion annually primary education. Some countries have to struggle to even pay the interest on their loans.

Over 69 per cent of the world's AIDS cases occur in sub-Saharan Africa, according to Peter Piot, Executive Director of UNAIDS. The HIV virus has now infected a total of 23 million Africans. Innovative care and support programmes exist, but with 13 million AIDS orphans predicted by the end of 2000, these efforts, along with traditional community care, are likely to be overwhelmed. Drastic measures are needed.

In Zambia 1,300 teachers died from AIDS in 1998 alone and teacher deaths now outnumber the output from teacher-training colleges. The psychological effect of illness and death among teachers and pupils is far-reaching; its long-term effects on education are ominous.

"The ceiling is full of bullet holes and when it rains I have to stop teaching", complains Thea Uwimpabazi, a Rwanda teacher. The escalation of conflict in the region over the last ten years has had a devastating effect on education. International or civil wars are raging in a third of the forty-five countries in sub-Saharan Africa. The continent is home to nearly a third of the world's refugees.

Countries in the grip of civil strife, such as Somalia, Angola and the Central African Republic, have seen their formal education systems deteriorate. Displaced teachers and pupils, damaged or destroyed school buildings and the looting of educational materials and equipment are just some of the consequences.

But it is not all gloom and doom in Africa. "In the past ten years an unprecedented number of education reforms

have made education an issue discussed in buses and bars", says Gabriel Mharadze, Minister of Education of Zimbabwe. "Now Africa has to show commitment, Africa has to act." Twenty-five recent successful education initiatives, cited by the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA), showed both commitment, innovation and action.

This is surely what people mean when they talk about a new afro-optimism or even an African Renaissance,

recently expressed by South African president Thabo Mbeki: "We are liberating ourselves and now reside in mental universes of our own making, four our own progress and prosperity." ●

Arab States

Great Unity, Great Diversity

The twenty-one Arab States, along with the Palestinian Autonomous Territories, share a common language and culture and a sense of belonging to one nation. When it comes to educational provision, however, the similarity ends.

Education in the region resembles a rich mosaic that is impressive but incomplete because of the great disparity in development levels. The brilliant, shining pieces are countries whose educational development is right on track (such as Kuwait or Lebanon). Other pieces need repair, as in countries where education has suffered from conflicts or economic hardship (such as Iraq, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen). The Arab States have the world's highest percentage of children under 15. One out of four of them are out of school, representing a total of some 10 million children in the region. Educating these children is vitally important if they are to avoid becoming tomorrow's illiterate adults. The overall total of adult illiterates is

currently 67 million, ranging from 5.5 per cent illiteracy in Lebanon to as high as 53 per cent in Mauritania. As for the female literacy rate, it lags behind other regions at only 50 per cent, compared with over 70 per cent for males. Women's involvement in civil society is correspondingly low. About 25 per cent of Arab women have jobs, and four per cent are involved in political life. In other parts of the developing world, these figures are 39 and 10 per cent respectively. Nearly half the countries in the region have not yet ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; this denial of women's rights affects girls' education and women's advancement.

Some countries are overcoming cultural taboos to empower their women. Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic have considerably raised their female literacy rates, thanks to strategies developed in the last decade. "It was no overnight success, though,"

remarks Victor Billeh of UNESCO Beirut. "Improving literacy required a plan of action and regular monitoring. But the results are there." He adds that factors like the democratisation of public life, a free press and a variety of media create the conditions for greater equality. Basic education in the Arab States has come a long way when one considers that, back in 1970, roughly half of the primary age children in the region were enrolled. Today, three out of four children are in school. A handful of countries have almost reached universal primary education.

Oman, which had no education system at all prior to 1970, now has some 85 per cent of primary school-age children in school. The United Arab Emirates, the Palestinian Autonomous Territories, the Libyan Arab Jamahiriyah, Jordan and Iraq have made great progress, while Mauritania's rate of increase is high because, like Oman, it started from a low point. Djibouti, however, occupies the bottom of the list with less than 40 per cent net enrolment. About 70 per cent of primary-school-age girls are enrolled. The gap between girls' and boys' rates is more than nine percentage points. Yemen has the greatest gender gap, with only 33 per cent of girls in school compared with 73 per cent of boys.

Programmes in Egypt, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia and Yemen are now leading the way in bringing education to girls in poor areas through community schools located closer to their homes. Most countries do not consider early childhood education a government responsibility, despite its proven effectiveness. The average figure for the region is below 15 per cent. "Even relatively well-to-do countries do not consider it an issue," explains Billeh. Lebanon again leads the way in this department, along with Kuwait, with 70 per cent of young children in early childhood programmes.

The Palestinian Autonomous Territories and Morocco also have good coverage at 50 per cent. The conflicts in Algeria, Somalia and Sudan have disrupted education, and sanctions against Iraq have led to school closings, loss of teachers and more children dropping out. ●

Europe
North America

Exclusion and Violence Leave Schools at a Loss

The universal availability of primary and secondary schooling in Europe and North America has not solved the problem of unequal access to education. Nor does it guarantee social cohesion.

While western Europe grapples with issues of social exclusion and the relevance of education to the job market, central and eastern Europe struggle to cope with dwindling resources and the decline of a formerly state-supported system of free education. Functional illiteracy, often called 'the invisible problem', is perhaps the most eloquent illustration of the failings of basic education in the region. Sue Torr, a school 'canteen lady' in the United Kingdom, remembers trying to keep her illiteracy a secret: "One night my mother-in-law said, 'Sue, what's on TV tonight?'"

Could you look at the newspaper? I pretended to look. 'There's nothing much on,' I said. 'What's on the second channel?' she persisted. 'Just a load of rubbish,' I said, and ran upstairs.' Sue has now learned to read, but up to a quarter of the adults in twelve of the world's richest countries still cannot make out a cheque or read a prescription – a real indictment of mature education systems. Even in rich societies, education does not guarantee a job.

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