

# Learning through TV and Internet

Inter Press Service MEXICO CITY, 10 March (IPS) - At the World Education Forum to be held in Dakar in April, Mexico will share its 32 years of experience in teaching by television and its more recent advances in the use of satellites and Internet in education. The Telesecundaria project makes secondary-level education available to students at 14,000 rural schools.

For the past five years a government-owned satellite has broadcast educational programming throughout the country, and to other Latin American nations as well; and some 3,300 schools are linked to a new network over the Internet.

Mexico is at the vanguard of several data transmission and broadcasting technologies for educational use, Sofialecta Morales, director of international relations at the Secretariat of Education, told IPS. Morales will be one of Mexico's representatives at the Apr. 26-28 Dakar meeting.

Sponsored by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the World Education Forum will draw delegates from all five continents to assess the advances made in education since 1990. The Forum follows a two year exercise by governments to critically assess their progress and identify more effective and appropriate strategies.

Preparatory meetings for the region included the Recife, Brazil, meeting of the nine most populous developing countries - Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria and Pakistan -- and in the Dominican Republic. "The progress made by each

country in education will be presented," said Morales. "Although special papers have not been called for, Mexico plans to share the work it has been doing with the new technologies." Telesecundaria, the oldest project of its kind in Latin America, reaches one-third of Mexico's five million secondary school students. It is especially important in rural areas, where the number of students finishing primary school makes it unfeasible to build separate high school facilities. With a television set, a VCR and audiovisual material, high school students, in groups of less than 25, follow the courses with the guidance of a teacher. In 1995, Telesecundaria was renovated and extended to primary school and technical teaching as well, through the System of Educational Television Via Satellite (EDUSAT). Some 33,500 reception centres, with decoders and television sets, were set up throughout Mexico.

They receive nine channels of educational programming, four of which are run by the government and five by the Latin American Institute of Educational Communication. The programmes, which are broadcast to some 30,000 schools throughout Mexico, contribute to teacher training, adult education and the development of educational curricula. "For a large country like ours (100 million, with a 10 percent illiteracy rate), what we have is still not enough, but we are making great progress through the use of the satellite," Satmex 5, which belongs to the Mexican state, said Morales. Through various agreements, Mexico also broadcasts educational programming to several countries in Central

America, as well as to the Hispanic community in the southern United States. It also has the as-yet untapped capacity to broadcast to the entire American continent. Satmex 5 broadcast 25,000 hours of educational programming in 1999. As part of the EDUSAT project, this year Mexico will set up Latin America's first library of educational videos, with some 100,000 videos, to which teachers and students will have access. In the future, it will be made available over a computer network. In the past two years, the Mexican government created the Scholastic Network of Educational Informatics, in an attempt to take advantage of the Internet to link schools nationwide and enable that technology, currently used by less than one percent of students, to be extended throughout the country.

Some 3,300 schools are already linked to the network, said Morales, who added that the programme was being developed with support from the government, parents groups and private institutions. "In the past few years, Mexico has made important strides in taking advantage of the new technologies and devoting them to the service of education, which means that in Dakar we can help other countries join in the effort," she said.



## Yesterday's 'Dustbins' Aspire to Excellence

Dakar, Senegal - The African continent only has 8 to 10 countries with a functional educational system, said Mr. Adrian Verspoor, an educational specialist at World Bank headquarters, during the sub-Saharan African Conference on Education for All, held in Johannesburg last December.

And yet, African countries devote 20 billion dollars a year to education, 600 to 700 million dollars of which come from foreign aid.

Africa has made huge investments in education since independence in hopes that the school would help the continent find a way out of poverty and the marginalisation of its people in the global economy.

School enrolment and public spending on education also rose dramatically in the decade that followed independence.

In primary education, the number of pupils rose from 21.2 million to 54.7 million between 1970 and 1988 and in secondary education, from 2.2 million to 11.7 million over the same period.

The repercussions of the economic crisis on the African education system have been devastating. The average growth rate of per capita income in sub-Saharan Africa was negative between 1976 and 1990.

Yesterday's "dustbins" are aspiring to excellence today. It used to be a disgrace to go to private schools, which used to take in the outcasts of the system, remarked the governor of the Central Bank of the West African States (BCEAO) on a television programme. Today, the opposite trend seems to prevail: every parent's ambition is to send his or her offspring to private school, considered more effective.

There is an endless debate on the issue of whether private schools are more efficient and more profitable than public schools.

The very definition of the term "private" is debated

by specialists, some of which consider that a large number of so-called private schools are to a great extent funded and regulated by the state.

Regarding performance, when private schools make better results than public schools, some attributed this to discriminatory treatment and insufficient state funding.

However, when private schools do better than public schools, people are quick to say that it is due to their less bureaucratic decision-making process.

The fact that one type of school has a better output than the other can be explained by reasons unrelated to their public or private nature, such as the qualifications of the teachers and the social background of the parents, as pointed out in a study by the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), based in Paris.

According to the report of the International Commission on Education for the 21st Century, presided over by a Frenchman, Mr. Jacques Delors, the formal institutions at the heart of the educational system, be they public or private, must manifestly act in a concerted manner based on a long-term vision.

In the process of consolidating their national identity, African countries had an obligation to meet the political objective of free and universal education through public education.

As it made its place in that environment, private education benefited from the status quo that has applied to it since the 1960s, when the leaders of independent African nations viewed it as a temporary phenomenon. But it soon became apparent that the existing and projected supply of public education would not be sufficient to meet the ever-increasing demand.

In most African countries faced with serious economic or population growth problems, private education is a natural response to the need to provide school-aged pupils with access to basic education.

Relations between the two types of school may range from competition to complementarity. The dynamics of the evolution and development of private education may even provide some very useful information to help decision-makers detect the weaknesses of public education, it was noted.

### Philippines

## Scrounging Funds to Finance Public Schools

MANILA - Classes conducted under the shade of fruit trees or in dilapidated school buildings are not uncommon in rural areas in the Philippines.

And with the meagre share of funds for education in the government's annual budget, it will take some time before the shortage of classrooms, books, desks, chairs, and even teachers can be adequately addressed.

The education department admits it needs to build 21,000 classrooms and hire 10,000 teachers for public schools across the country to fill the current shortfall, but the problem is finding the money to fund this.

No wonder that the quality of education has deteriorated fast in a country that once boasted one of the highest literacy rates in Asia.

While there are 16 million enrolled in public elementary and high schools, the Philippines "spends only one-eighth of what Thailand sets aside for basic education", says a journalist who has written extensively on the education sector.

There has been a minimal increase in public spending for social services -- basic education, preventive health care, water and sanitation -- in proportion to total public spending, according to Philip Tuaoq, of the Ateneo de Manila University's Center for Policy Studies.

"Human proportion (share of spending on basic social services to total budget) barely increased from its 11 to 12 percent levels in 10 years or from 1987 to 1997," he said.

A UNESCO study in 1999 said as many as 1.7 million Filipino children in the 7-12 age bracket are out of school. Most are from the country's poorest provinces.

"Although public elementary education is free, school-related expenses like transportation fare, snacks, lunch, school supplies and other learning

materials are beyond the financial capabilities of poor parents," UNESCO said.

Teachers themselves have also long been identified as part of the problem and the survey results bear this out.

"The very small proportion of teachers who majored in math or science indicates that a significant proportion of teachers are teaching the two subjects but are not actually trained to handle them," the study said. This lack of teaching competence, according to journalist Yvonne Chua, "explains why the public school system churns out graduates who are totally unprepared for a complex world".

In 1995, the Philippines ranked third to the last in elementary math and second to the last in elementary science in an international test taken by half a million elementary and high school students in 45 countries.

To meet the growing demand for education, the education department has resorted to three-class shifts in urban areas and the multi-grade system (where pupils from different grades are combined) in sparsely-populated areas.

This has resulted in shorter learning hours, according to Chua, who estimates that one school whose students had to give up two hours of learning every school day for four years lost 1,600 valuable hours of learning.

The Project TAO survey said most multi-grade teachers are coping out of this system not only because it is more difficult than mono-grade teaching but for lack of additional support and compensation. From the survey emerged another alarming devel-

opment: the current teaching force is ageing. About one-third will retire within the next 10 years. "If the plan to lower the retirement age to 55 pushes through, then the (government) budget will have to factor in the financial requirements for the retirement benefits of 126,900 teachers," Project TAO said. The more difficult question is, will there be enough personnel to replace them.



The poverty of parents is so terrible that the only issue is the free teaching.