

# Smart moves

## Towards achieving multiple priorities in education

Cream Wright, PhD

### Introduction

The Commonwealth is a useful microcosm for reviewing the Education for All (EFA) movement, since its membership is made up of established and emerging donors as well as regular developing countries, emergency countries and post-crisis transition countries. A major challenge for all these categories of countries is how best to address 'multiple priorities in education' to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as well as all of the six EFA Dakar goals. In the face of limited financial resources, can developing countries invest in secondary and higher education or in adult basic literacy, as EFA priorities, while also investing in universal primary completion and gender parity as the main MDG priorities? What is the best way for donor partners to support these multiple priority goals with external funding and technical assistance? How far should countries give priority to the millions of children who do not yet have access to primary education? Can they afford to do so at the expense of the compelling need to expand secondary or higher education in support of economic growth? What priority should countries give to their deprived youth and adult population as part of the almost 800 million illiterates in the world? If available

domestic and external resources are spread too thinly to address these multiple priority goals, would countries in effect be sacrificing the quality of education provided to their populations?

These types of questions reveal the complex options that developing countries and donor partner countries face in assigning priority to different sets of education goals. This goes beyond advocacy for increased domestic and external funding or strong political will in support of education. Achieving multiple goals in education requires more than rhetoric and well-meaning slogans. It requires sound macro-economic analysis, as well as strategic education systems planning. More importantly, these questions make it imperative for developing countries and donor partners alike to re-examine the underlying premises and basic assumptions guiding their commitment to different sets of priority education goals. This brief article explores avenues through which Commonwealth countries and others in the EFA movement can re-examine their underlying assumptions about education goals, in order to review priorities and set a feasible framework for policy-making and financing in education. Once this process of re-examination begins to bear fruit, countries will be in a position to make *smart moves* towards achieving multiple priority goals in education.

Commonwealth Photographic Awards



Schoolchildren in the UK



## Developing a new perception

The first avenue to explore is one that suggests that countries need to change the way they perceive and analyse education systems, to better reflect the fundamental purpose of education. Education is about people not about systems. Despite much rhetoric within the EFA movement on education as a human right, analysis is largely based on models of education as a social service sector, with systems and sub-systems linking to other sectors and the wider economy. This reflects both the predominance of sector/systems analytical tools, as well as the paucity of credible analytical tools that are based on education as a human right.<sup>1</sup> Injecting a human rights perspective into the analytical process can yield radically different planning and financing frameworks compared with an approach based purely on sector/systems analysis.

When education systems are planned to address human resource needs, for instance, it makes sense to tailor investments to employment opportunities in order to avoid wastage or graduate unemployment. In contrast, a human rights rationale for education dictates that investments must cater for all, regardless of employment prospects. Similarly, the sector approach to planning implies that available resources can be rationed in the most efficient manner to achieve set goals. So, for instance, secondary school places can be rationed if resources are not enough to provide places for all primary school leavers. So, most countries use a national end-of-primary examination to ration access to available secondary places. It then becomes obvious that those who fail to secure a secondary school place are left with second-rate options in terms of other provisions of post-primary education opportunities. On the other hand, using a rights-based approach means that investments are made equitably across a range of post-primary options, depending on preferences and requirements of learners completing primary education. This does not guarantee that all primary school leavers will have access to post-primary education, but it does imply that they will have access to other quality options besides the secondary school.

A rights-based approach to planning education keeps us focused on the principle that education is about individuals and the right to fulfil their potential as human beings in order to play various roles in society and pursue their aspirations. It is about enabling all learners to acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes that would make them into functioning members of society, and help them to develop their unique talents and potential. Provision of education is not simply a service that countries invest in to meet human resource requirements or to promote economic growth, or to address the demands of an electorate. It is fundamentally an obligation and a duty that governments, communities and parents have, to facilitate the right that children and young people have to a basic education.

Schools and education systems happen to be the most efficient means societies have devised to fulfil this obligation to successive generations of learners. The key priority for countries, therefore, should be how to facilitate education as a right for all citizens. This raises challenging policy and financing issues of access to education as a right, such as: who has access to what type of education and on what basis? For how long (years of schooling) and by what means (who pays) should such provision be guaranteed? These are critical questions to be addressed when planning for education as a

human right. Resource constraints imply that countries would have to limit how many years they could afford to guarantee provision of education for all (i.e., free and compulsory). One of the main responses to this issue is reflected in the *universal primary completion* goal of MDG 2, to which most countries are committed. This implies ensuring that all children access and complete the primary cycle of education as defined by each country. Some countries have sought to go beyond this by designating the primary and junior secondary levels as the target for universal access and completion.

Latest education statistics<sup>2</sup> indicate that, on average, 80.7% of the primary-school-aged children in the Commonwealth are enrolled (Net Enrolment Ratio – NER) or attend (Net Attendance Ratio – NAR) primary school. Boys have a slight advantage at 81.6%, compared to girls at 79.7%. There are 18 Commonwealth countries in which the primary NER/NAR has crossed the desirable threshold of 95%, indicating a strong likelihood that they will achieve universal primary enrolment/attendance by 2015. However, there are ten countries with NER/NAR below 75%, and they are highly unlikely to achieve universal primary enrolment by 2015. For an organisation that prides itself on its human rights principles, the Commonwealth ought to give the highest priority to this issue of millions of its citizens who do not have access to education as is their right. Does this imply suspending investments in other sub-sectors of education until this issue of universal primary enrolment is addressed? Not really. What it does suggest is a review of current investment levels and patterns, to promote a more balanced approach that would put all countries on track to achieve universal primary enrolment and completion. This is partly a matter of additional resources, but also an issue of better use of existing resources.

## Tackling inefficiencies

This brings us to the second avenue that needs to be explored. It is one that suggests countries should review and reverse persistent inefficiencies in their education systems, in order to secure savings that can then be ploughed back into other priority areas of the education system. Inefficiencies within education systems are due to repetition and drop-out, among other factors. In the Commonwealth as a whole, only 69.6% of children enrolled in primary school survive to the last grade of the cycle.<sup>3</sup> This is considerable wastage, with more than 30% of those enrolled failing to complete primary education. Such wastage is due to children starting school later than the prescribed age, and to those who are poorly prepared to learn because they have had little or no early childhood development and education (ECDE) preparation. These children are prone to dropping out before the last grade of the cycle. Also, many children repeat grades in the primary school, and repetition is often a strong predictor of drop-out. This needs to be addressed if countries are not to continue wasting resources and failing to facilitate the rights of all children in the process, through non-completion of the primary school cycle by so many children.

For those concerned with a rights-based approach to education, one solution is to provide a 'right start' for school (and for life) to all children, especially those from disadvantaged communities. This is about investing in early childhood development (ECD) in a manner that ensures children will start school at the right age and with the right preparation for learning. The evidence is



overwhelming that good-quality ECD programmes promote school readiness, reduce repetition and failure rates and improve school performance. Yet only 10% of children world-wide have access to any form of ECD, such as community-based childcare centres, formal daycare centres, nurseries or preschools. Investing in the right start through ECD can yield gains and save resources from the primary cycle that can be invested in secondary or other forms of post-primary education. This gives countries a more efficient primary sub-sector that also becomes a strong platform for effective utilisation of external financing. It also addresses another inefficiency problem in education systems. Many older children of secondary school age are still enrolled in primary school in some countries. These older children take up places that fairly belong to the primary-school-aged children who are out of school. In the face of this type of evidence, how much longer can Commonwealth countries continue to ignore the imperative of giving every child a right start for learning?

### Taking a realistic stance

The third avenue for countries to explore is the type of heuristic education planning that reflects the reality of their national capacity and their ability to cope with key aspects of the education sector. Countries are currently being urged to prepare comprehensive sector plans that will form the basis of their own investments, as well as for external support for education. The 'one country one plan' mantra resonates particularly with donor partners. While this is quite sensible and useful for improved aid efficiency, it can also be counter-productive if it results in sector plans that are divorced from the reality of the national situation. The result is that countries with weak capacity and turbulent operating environments can (and do) end up producing ambitious sector plans by simply engaging technical experts (consultants) to do the job. Such plans are typically not well grounded in a consultative and participatory process to ensure they reflect the aspirations of various beneficiaries, rather than just the views of political leaders and/or technical consultants. Emergency and post-crisis countries are particularly prone to this weakness of dislocated sector planning that is out of sync with their reality.

It is against this background that this paper argues for exploring more heuristic education planning that takes account of national realities. Consider a country in which the government does not control all the national territory, has issues with allegiance from large sections of its own population, has serious problems with a shattered economy, is constantly dealing with the spectre of civil conflict erupting in various provinces, and is trying to cope with high levels of unemployment. What does it mean to ask such a country to prepare the type of comprehensive education sector plan that donors can rally round? It seems best to help such a country develop a partial plan that reflects its ability to cope with rebuilding an education system one part at a time.

This might be a 'primary education recovery plan' that reflects popular demand for expanding primary education while providing alternative learning opportunities for those over-aged learners who have missed out on primary school. This is enough for a weak government to deal with, and donors should respect and invest in such a plan as a smart move by a realistic government. It does not mean there are no other important priorities in education. The country might have a serious problem with restless unemployed

youth, indicating a priority for innovative vocational education. Such cohabiting priorities can sensibly be parcelled out as projects supported by donors outside of the main sector plan in the short term. Further down the line, this priority can realistically be incorporated into a revised and more comprehensive sector plan, as the government increases its capacity to deal with a wider swathe of the education sector. This is what government ownership and leadership means in practice; being in control of what it can control and signalling areas in which it needs to entrust solutions to its supporting partners for a while.

In the long term, the purpose of such heuristic planning should be to promote self-reliant mechanisms for supporting 'non-negotiable areas' of the education system in which the government can take full control. For instance, progress with a good sector plan should result in self-sufficiency in, say, the primary education sub-sector. There is something counter-productive in legislating for compulsory primary education and then having to rely perpetually on external financing to provide the same education! Success means that countries can put primary education on a self-propulsion track with the right policies, right strategies and adequate domestic financing to achieve universal primary completion. The focus of external financing can then shift to secondary and other post-primary provisions.

### Conclusion

In summary then, developing countries and their donor partners need to make smart moves towards achieving multiple priority goals in education. They need to inject some degree of the rights-based approach into their planning process and financing choices. They need to revamp inefficient aspects of their education system in order to reduce wastage, make savings and re-invest in other areas of need. They also need to develop education sector plans that are in sync with their social and economic realities. Through these and other avenues, Commonwealth countries and others can make smart moves as they pursue different and competing priorities in education.

### Endnotes

- 1 This state of affairs is due to the fact that the human rights approach to education has been concerned with legislation and advocacy rather than with technical analysis to support programming and sector planning. A recent joint publication by UNICEF and UNESCO on 'Human Rights Based Approaches to Programming in Education' reflects current efforts to address this problem.
- 2 UNICEF (2007) – The State of the World's Children 2008: Child Survival – New York.
- 3 UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS) Data Centre: <http://stats.uis.unesco.org/reportfolders>.

**DR CREAM WRIGHT** is Associate Director of Programmes and Global Chief of Education at UNICEF, New York. Before this, he was a Deputy Director and later Special Adviser and Head of Education at the Commonwealth Secretariat (London) from 1997 to 2002. He also acted as Director for the then Division of Human Resources at the Secretariat, which comprised the Education and Health Departments.