

# Renewing interest in the quality of education

Have we lost sight of what education is all about?

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Whether education is seen to be part of the solution to the current financial crisis remains to be seen. When the G20 met in London in March 2009 they emphasised the importance of education and training as a catalyst to stimulating their national economies and softening the blow of the global recession.<sup>1</sup> But what about the low-income countries (LICs) where the majority of the world's 75 million out-of-school children reside? Will the rich countries keep their promises to increase aid for education? Will the recipient governments match this funding and wisely apply the resources to improve the quality of education? Will civil society be able to influence their governments to invest in teachers and improve their training so children learn the right skills to access good and steady employment, thereby contributing to strengthening the economy (and averting future crises)?

These questions are not new, but they do take on a new dimension in a time of recession. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that the LICs will be hit hard – 30-50 million more workers are expected to be unemployed, pushing over 200 million people to the brink of starvation and poverty (ILO 2009).<sup>2</sup> For women, who tend to have lower educational attainment levels, the impact is expected to be worse as they tend to be the first to lose their employment (ILO, 2009a).<sup>3</sup>

If we want people, especially the poor, marginalised and women, to not only *survive* but *thrive* through the crisis we must bolster investment in areas that will support them, such as education and healthcare. But perhaps we must also seek a paradigm shift in the way these 'essential services' or rights are fulfilled. If schools offered better quality learning, would people be better equipped to deal with periods of uncertainty?

The crisis not only challenges donors and governments to uphold their commitments to education but also offers an opportunity to build an even stronger, more egalitarian system that is accessible to all children. If we want children to learn more and have 'real competencies and holistic capacities',<sup>4</sup> then we must:

- (a) invest in teachers;
- (b) support greater involvement of parents and communities in ensuring schools provide good quality education;
- (c) widen policy and decision-making platforms so open debates on the key elements required to make schools more effective can take place.

## Investing in teachers

The situation of teachers is a crucial indicator for achieving the gender parity and universal primary education (UPE) goals by 2015. Addressing the 18 million shortage in teachers worldwide is imperative. Sub-Saharan Africa alone requires 3.8 million more teachers – a 68 per cent increase between 2004 and 2015 – if countries are to reach the goal of UPE with a pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) that offers reasonable opportunity to learn of 40:1 (Global Monitoring Report 2009).<sup>5</sup> However, the PTRs continue to rise, often reaching over 100:1 in rural areas, and trained pupil-teacher ratios (TPTR) continue to dwindle. Recent research shows that 12 per cent of teachers in Uganda and Malawi are untrained or under-qualified (ActionAid Malawi, 2009; ActionAid Uganda, 2009).<sup>6</sup>

However, simply increasing the number of teachers in a classroom will not automatically lead to better learning. Improving children's learning outcomes depends in large part on the quality of teaching that takes place in the classroom. Research shows that improving learning largely depends on teacher development and meaningful, context-specific teacher-centred approaches (Chapman, 2000; Kent, 2005).<sup>7</sup> The trend in teacher training however is to truncate the years of training. In Senegal, teacher training programmes were reduced from 4 years to 6 months (this policy is now being reviewed) and varies from 2 years in Uganda and Malawi to 1-4 years in Burundi (ActionAid Burundi, 2008; ActionAid Senegal, 2009).<sup>8</sup>

Hiring more trained teachers and ensuring those in service benefit from continued professional development requires resources. However, in times of financial crisis, governments are likely to clamp down on spending. The likely target for cuts tends to be teachers, who occupy the largest budget line for education, often

amounting to 90 per cent of available resources. Faced with limited resources, governments have turned to hiring untrained and under-qualified teachers to fill the gap. This compromises the quality of teaching and can impact children's learning outcomes.

Another reason for limiting the number of teachers that can be hired comes from an unlikely, but important source: the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Recent reports by civil society organisations (CSOs) working on health and education show that the widely imposed 'wage bill ceiling' in IMF macro-economic conditionalities have negatively impacted the ability of countries to hire teachers and health workers.<sup>9</sup> Though the IMF has recently ceased imposing these ceilings in its loan agreements with LICs, the overly restrictive monetary (low, single-digit inflation rates) and fiscal (low to zero deficits) policies continue to appear as strict conditionalities and continue to limit spending (Global Campaign for Education, 2009).<sup>10</sup> Placing limits on wage spending is smart budgeting but the question is who sets these ceilings and based on what considerations? Research shows that the ceilings have mostly been based on the need to contain spending in order to meet the macro-economic targets of the IMF rather than on national education goals. Unless these policies are challenged and changed to support economic stability and increased investment in social sectors, the likelihood of increasing investment in teachers remains slim. And all this at a time when investment in key sectors of health and education is precisely what countries require to shield themselves from recession. The G20 countries are practising this policy with the UK and USA running historical fiscal deficits and increasing spending on education and health. President Obama has said that '[the] last thing a government should do in the middle of a recession is to cut back on spending' (*Financial Times*, 2009).<sup>11</sup> So why can't LICs, which need to protect their social sectors more than ever to shoulder the impact of the financial crisis, be able to do the same?

## Promoting parental involvement in learning

Investing in teachers is one part of the equation for improving learning. Parental involvement in education is equally important. However the participation of parents must move beyond functional uses (e.g., school construction, fees, books, etc.) to involvement in governance, supporting teachers and taking part in their children's learning. This can happen if parents believe education is a worthwhile investment and if they have a good understanding of what constitutes 'good quality' learning. This requires a better understanding of the role of parents and teachers in improving children's learning outcomes. Exactly how this information is derived has been shown to be as important as the results. When a wide range of actors – parents, pupils, teachers, adult learning groups, education coalitions, teachers' unions, national research institutions and Ministries of Education – are directly involved in diagnosing the current state of education, learning achievements and the quality of teaching, then the solutions are likely to be more realistic (ActionAid, 2009).<sup>12</sup>

These broad partnerships have the potential of widening the space for debate and discussion around expectations of schooling, responsibilities of different stakeholders and greater accountability vis-à-vis policy-makers for delivering a high quality of education. Involving stakeholders in bottom-up processes that are participatory and inclusive in nature pave the way to successful reforms

(Dembélé and Schwille, 2003; Heneveld, 2007). Challenging the notion of whose voice and experience counts by involving parents – especially those that are illiterate – and pupils can be empowering. It results in greater awareness of what effective schools and quality learning should be like, offering opportunities for advocating specific changes to fulfil this 'vision'. By partnering those who have first-hand experience of learning (communities and teachers) with groups who already have an advocacy platform (education coalitions and teacher unions), and by involving research institutes who have the evidence to make a stronger case, you may well have the ingredients for change.

## Renewing commitment to learning

Renewing commitment to learning therefore requires not only widening current platforms but creating new spaces for engagement with decision-makers. If education is to become a national prerogative (in other words, concern to all citizens) and an essential tool that people can use to better shoulder the financial crisis, then decisions about funding and policies must be made in consultation with civil society. These discussions are already starting to take place in many countries through the efforts of the Global Campaign for Education and regional and national education coalitions. The 'paradigm shift' involves widening this circle to include pupils and parents, teachers, unions, researchers and economists. It also requires moving beyond the education sector to include the externally imposed macro-economic policies by the IMF that continue to set the parameters around national spending. Macro-economic policies must be set through a process of debate and discussion with wider civil society. The discussion around 'trade-offs' between restrictive policies and increasing investment in education and health must be exhausted. The solution – which balances investment in education and health, protects and promotes women's access and fulfilment of these rights and promotes economic stability – must be derived by national policy-makers and civil society and not external actors, be they donor agencies or international financial institutions. Only then can the 'quality of education equation' – investing in teachers, promoting parental involvement in learning and civil society engagement in policy discussions – be fulfilled.

## What can the Commonwealth Ministers of Education do?

The Commonwealth Ministers of Education must first ask where and how they can continue to add value. Is it through a broader education/development agenda or on particular issues? Below are some of the future issues Commonwealth Ministers of Education need to consider.

- Revisiting the role of the IMF.
- Building the capacity of Ministries of Education and Finance staff to work out alternative macro-economic scenarios that enable a balance between macro policies and social spending.
- Ensuring civil society, including teachers' unions and parents, are at the table when discussions take place so that the power circles shift.
- Broadening partnerships between education coalitions, teachers' unions, economists and research institutes.

## Endnotes

- 1 G20 Communiqué. Available at: <http://www.londonsummit.gov.uk/resources/en/news/15766232/communique-020409>.
- 2 LO (28 January 2009), Unemployment, working poor and vulnerable employment to increase dramatically due to global crisis. Press release ILO/09/2. Available at: [http://www.ilo.org/global/About\\_the\\_ILO/Media\\_and\\_public\\_information/Press\\_releases/lang--en/WCMS\\_101462/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/About_the_ILO/Media_and_public_information/Press_releases/lang--en/WCMS_101462/index.htm)
- 3 ILO (2009a), *Global Employment Trends for Women*. Available at: [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms\\_103456.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_103456.pdf)
- 4 Quoted from Didicus Jules in his presentation at the conference *Commonwealth Educational Co-operation: Looking Ahead at 50*. Oxford, March 2009.
- 5 UNESCO (2009), *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2009: Overcoming Inequality: Why Governance Matters*. Paris: UNESCO.
- 6 ActionAid Malawi (2009), *Improving Learning Outcomes in Primary School in Malawi*. Lilongwe: Malawi (forthcoming). ActionAid Uganda (2009), *Improving Learning Outcomes in Primary School in Uganda: Walking the Talk*. Kampala, Uganda (forthcoming).
- 7 As referenced in K. Edge et al. (forthcoming in 2009), *Teacher Quality and Parental Participation: An Exploratory Review of Research and Resources Related to Influencing Student Outcomes*. London: Institute of Education and ActionAid.
- 8 ActionAid Burundi (2008), *Améliorer les résultats d'apprentissage dans les écoles primaires au Burundi*. Bujumbura, Burundi (forthcoming). ActionAid Senegal (2009), *Améliorer la qualité des résultats d'apprentissage dans les écoles primaires au Sénégal*. Dakar, Senegal (forthcoming).
- 9 ActionAid (2007), *Confronting the Contradictions: The IMF, Wage Bill Ceilings and the Case for Teachers*. London; D. Goldsbrough (2007), *Does the IMF Constrain Health Spending in Poor Countries? Evidence and an Agenda for Action*. Report of the working group on IMF Programs and Health Spending. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development. See <http://www.cgdev.org/content/publications/detail/14103>; Wemos (2006), *IMF Macroeconomic Policies and Health Sector Budgets*. Amsterdam; Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) (2007), *Help Wanted: Confronting the Health Care Worker Crisis to Expand Access to HIV Treatment*, Johannesburg; Action for Global Health (AfGH) (2008), *AIDS 2008: AfGH contributes to debate on IMF conditionalities at the 18th International AIDS Conference*.
- 10 Global Campaign for Education (GCE) (2009), *Education on the Brink: Will the IMF's New Lease on Life Ease or Block Progress towards Education Goals?*, Johannesburg.
- 11 Obama hints at hopes for recovery, *Financial Times*, 15 April 2009.
- 12 ActionAid (2009), *Improving Learning Outcomes Project in Primary School in Burundi, Malawi, Senegal and Uganda: Summary of Project Methodology* and other forthcoming publications related to this project on [www.actionaid.org](http://www.actionaid.org).

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