

Keeping education on track in times of crisis



In a microcosm, the 53 states of the Commonwealth capture all the challenges faced across the world in making Education for All (EFA) a reality. They are characterised by a wide array of countries in terms of territory, wealth and population. They include 16 Sub-Saharan African countries, four high-population countries (Bangladesh, India, Nigeria and Pakistan), small island states, countries in post-conflict situations and several industrialised donors.

Because of this mosaic, the Commonwealth countries also harbour the potential to share knowledge, exchange best practices and promote south-south and north-south co-operation. More than ever, today is a time for reinforcing international co-operation. We are six years away from the 2015 target date for achieving the EFA and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted in 2000 by a majority of the world's countries. There has been tremendous progress since 2000, especially towards universal primary education, but the current global economic downturn threatens this by reducing the ability of both households and governments to invest in education. If we allow the crisis to follow its course, it will lead to increased poverty and malnutrition, to higher infant mortality rates, to parents pulling their children out of school or delaying their entry into school. Policies exist that can counteract these trends. They are grounded in a concern for equity and the conviction that education is part of the response to the crisis.

It would be misleading to say that the world was on track before the crisis. In a nutshell, the education balance sheet shows impressive progress on the one hand and the persistence of large disparities on the other, in terms of access, the quality of education provided and learning outcomes. A child born in Zambia has less of a chance of getting through primary school than a child in the UK has of reaching university. It could be argued that enrolments at the tertiary level in Africa are increasing very rapidly, but participation rates in this region remain the lowest in the world, at an average 5 per cent. But let us look more closely at the basic level, recalling that education is a fundamental human right and that a majority of countries have constitutional provisions mandating free and compulsory education at the primary and lower secondary levels.

Impressive progress

More children are in school than ever before through a combination of political will and well-designed policies backed by financial resources and international aid. This is a historic turning

point. The United Republic of Tanzania, for example, moved from a net enrolment ratio at the primary level of 50 per cent in 1999 to 98 per cent in 2007; Kenya from 63 per cent to 75 per cent; Lesotho from 57 per cent to 72 per cent. Bangladesh and India are on track to get almost all their children in school by 2015. In South and West Asia, disparities between boys and girls have declined significantly at the primary level, with Bangladesh achieving gender parity and India sharply reducing disparities within a short space of time.

Still, seven Commonwealth countries remain on the low end of the EFA Development Index (EDI), which captures a country's mean distance from the four most easily quantifiable EFA goals. Three Commonwealth countries – India, Nigeria and Pakistan – account for nearly 30 per cent of the world's out-of-school children. India has achieved a rapid decrease in its number of out-of-school children. The same cannot be said for Nigeria with more children out of school than any other country in the world. On current trends it will continue to have the largest out-of-school population in 2015 (7.6 million children), while Pakistan will have the largest in South and West Asia (3.7 million children).

The stakes in reaching EFA converge around three main challenges:

- 1 addressing inequalities;
- 2 improving the quality of education;
- 3 increasing both national spending and international aid to basic education.

As the 2009 EFA Global Monitoring Report finds, inequalities based on wealth, location, gender, minority status or disability are preventing millions of children from receiving a good quality education.¹

Early interventions and incentives

Inequality begins at birth with high infant mortality rates and the prevalence of malnutrition in many countries of South and West Asia and Africa. Malnutrition, such as iodine or iron deficiency, affects a child's physical and mental capacity and is one of the main reasons that children perform poorly in school. This is why education and care programmes for young children are instrumental for addressing health, nutrition and learning needs. Furthermore, they have a positive impact on improving attendance and learning outcomes in primary education.



An adult literacy class

Although these programmes have the greatest impact on children from the poorest households, they are those least likely to have access to them. Attendance rates for children from poor households fall far below those from wealthy households. Rural-urban gaps and other geographic disparities are also marked in many countries. Scaling up investment in early childhood programmes calls for closer co-ordination between health, education and nutrition initiatives. Some countries have made early childhood care and education a policy priority: Ghana has made two years of kindergarten compulsory, while Jamaica is known for setting up highly regarded programmes that work with young children from poor backgrounds.

Other factors come into play. Having a mother with no education doubles the probability of a child being out of school – highlighting the importance of adult literacy programmes. These not only empower individuals with skills and knowledge to improve their livelihoods but carry benefits across generations, especially when women are the beneficiaries.

Mapping factors of exclusion from primary school is a first step towards acting on the causes of inequality. Universal primary education is close to being achieved for children from the wealthiest 20 per cent of households, even in the world's poorest countries. Household wealth has a marked bearing on school attendance and how far children progress in school. Clear targets for reducing disparities need to be set, backed by practical strategies. Incentives such as school meals, financial incentives to disadvantaged groups, social protection measures and conditional cash transfer programmes all play an important role in increasing

attendance and reducing the incidence of child labour. In short, abolishing primary school fees is not enough to universalise primary school attendance. For the poorest families, more needs to be done.

The quality deficit

The quality of education is the second area that requires top policy attention. How do countries ensure that children acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills? Evidence from several sources suggests that up to 40 per cent of students who finish primary school do not reach minimum achievement standards in language and mathematics. Results from SACMEQ II (South and Eastern Africa Consortium on Monitoring Educational Quality) regional assessment indicate that less than 25 per cent of Grade 6 children reached the 'desirable' level of reading literacy in Botswana, Kenya, South Africa and Swaziland, and fewer than 10 per cent in Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Uganda and Zambia.

There is no magic bullet for improving education quality. It is a package of measures encompassing school safety, sanitation, health and building schools in remote areas. But teachers are the most important investment of all. In many countries, the supply of teachers has not kept pace with the increase in enrolment rates. Sub-Saharan Africa alone requires an inflow of four million teachers to achieve universal primary education by 2015. Training and professional development are key, along with incentives to work in remote areas, decent working conditions and pay. Building up the teaching force calls for innovative models, from shorter training periods and more on-the-job learning to the use of

Taraba State University

JALINGO, NIGERIA

Background



Taraba State University, located in Jalingo, is the leading higher educational institution in Taraba State. It was established in 2008 by the Taraba State University Law No. 4; and approved by the National Universities

Commission to enhance the opportunity for access to quality university education and to produce skilled and competent graduates in a wide range of disciplines that will contribute to national development. It is owned and mainly funded by the Taraba State Government. Some of the reasons necessitating the establishment of Taraba State University are founded on the need:

- To build a reservoir of skilled manpower in various fields to cope with the ever-rising social and economic expectations and the challenges of a globalised world.
- To serve as a catalyst for the development of the huge natural resources with which the State is endowed.
- To fast track the process of industrialisation in the State by providing opportunities for advanced research.
- To stimulate and promote the process of integration and mutual respect among various peoples of the State.
- To prepare the citizens of the State for fare competition nationally.

Vision

It is the aspiration of Taraba State University to be one of the best universities in Nigeria with a reputation for high quality teaching, learning and innovative research as a catalyst for state and national development, while at the same time preserving its core academic, cultural and spiritual values.

Mission

The mission of Taraba State University is to serve as an institution for intellectual development whose ideal is the training of men and women to acquire appropriate skills, abilities and competences, both mental and physical, as well as inculcating the right type of values and attitudes for the well being of the society in general.

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Faculties & programmes

Currently the university offers a wide range of courses in the faculties of Agriculture, Science, Arts and Social Science, Management, Education, and Information and Communication Technology.

Faculty of Agriculture

Agronomy, Animal Science, Agricultural Economics and Extension.

Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences

History and Archaeology, Economics, Geography, Political Science and International Relations, Mass Communication and Sociology.

Faculty of Science

Biological Sciences, Chemistry, Mathematics and Computer Studies, Physics and Geological Science.

Faculty of Management & Information Technology

Business and Financial Management Studies, Accounting, Public Administration, Information and Communication Science.

Faculty of Education

Professional Studies, Science, Arts and Social Sciences, and Religious Studies.

Specialised research centres

Institute for Solid Minerals Research; Institute for Fresh Water Biology and Fisheries Research; Institute for Animal Breeding and Dairy Research; and Centre for Peace Studies.



information and communication technologies. Through its Teacher Training Initiative for Sub-Saharan Africa and a recently created task force, UNESCO is working to assist governments in designing and implementing sustainable teacher policies. Improving the educational prospects of millions of children and teenagers in the coming years will depend to a large extent on the capacity of governments to hire and train large numbers of teachers.

There does not have to be a trade-off between increasing access, reducing inequalities and building high quality education systems. International learning assessments show that the best performing countries are indeed those with the most equitable education systems.

Financing education for all

Financing growing education systems is the third challenge. Governments are under pressure to increase the number of places in secondary schools, to expand technical and vocational education and to meet demand at the tertiary level. The dominant focus on primary education in many policy circles is a strategic error. The more opportunities an education has to offer at all levels, the more incentive there is for parents to keep their children in school.

In a number of countries, increased spending has been associated with substantial progress on the EFA goals. However, the share of national income devoted to education decreased in 40 of the 105 countries with data between 1999 and 2006. Low-income countries are still spending significantly less on education than are other countries. In South Asia, several high-population countries continue to spend under or only just over 3 per cent of their GNP on education. Additional funding is needed along with formulas that aim to redress inequalities, such as school grants and the redistribution of financial resources from richer to poorer areas. South Africa's formula for financial decentralisation aims at overcoming inequalities. Without an in-built commitment to equity, there is a risk of accentuating disparities. The EFA Global Monitoring Report finds that in Nigeria, the wealthiest states and regions with the highest education participation received the lion's share of the country's federal resources, in some cases up to five times more than poorer areas.

The impact of the crisis

Today's financial and economic crisis calls for even more vigilance to all these challenges. What we face in the World Bank's words is no less than a 'development emergency'.² It is important to note that sustained economic growth since 2000 is partly responsible for Sub-Saharan Africa's rapid progress towards primary education, while the rise of a middle class in several of the world's largest emerging economies has had a positive impact on school participation.

The impact of past financial crises has been documented. East Asia's crisis in the early 1990s led to reductions in health and education spending in several countries, to more poverty, higher child mortality rates, more malnutrition and an increase in child labour. Paradoxically demand for public provision of education rose as parents pulled children out of private schools.

The task is to convince governments to continue investing in education because it is one of the keys to economic recovery. Cuts

in education spending, however minor, put a whole generation at risk. They could lead to higher dropout from school, lower student enrolment, higher absenteeism, school closures and delays in teacher pay. Instead of a short-term reaction, we need to promote short-term synergies grounded in a long-term vision of education's importance: public employment schemes for teachers, scaled-up technical and vocational education adapted to national development needs, and policies that promote inclusion, not exclusion. Social safety net schemes, including block transfers to keep children in school and scholarship programmes, can tip the scales and make a difference for the most marginalised students. Furthermore, it will be crucial for governments and international organisations to closely monitor the impact of the crisis on education and react quickly to alarm signals.

It is noteworthy that the Obama administration's stimulus package earmarks US\$150 billion for education. Singapore has also increased education spending in its stimulus package. Such packages are urgently required for the world's poorest countries and need to be externally financed. Research by the EFA Global Monitoring Report finds that 43 out of 48 of the low-income countries lack the capacity to provide a pro-poor fiscal stimulus. Are donors ready to step in? Evidence suggests that a 1 per cent drop in donor country GDP is associated with a 1 per cent drop in aid flows.

Making the case for education will be particularly crucial at the next G8 meeting because donors are not keeping the commitments they made at Gleneagles in 2005. This year's G20 summit delivered a US\$1.1 trillion stimulus package to boost the world economy and promised to channel US\$50 billion to support social protection, trade and development in low-income countries. But it is still unclear how easily and quickly funds will be disbursed for human development, including education.

Already, the 22 per cent drop to US\$4.3 billion in aid to basic education in 2007 – and this was before the crisis – seriously jeopardises future progress towards EFA and more broadly towards all human development goals. After increasing between 2000 and 2004, aid to basic education stagnated before dropping in 2007. In 2008, total net aid increased by more than 10 per cent but there are question marks over how much of this was allocated to education. Despite a drop in 2007, the UK remains one of the most important donors to basic education while Canada and Australia both allocate a fairly high share of their education aid to the basic level. Increasing aid, targeting it to countries most in need and seeking better harmonisation among donors are keys for protecting gains and advancing educational development.

Acting together

As the lead co-ordinating agency for EFA, UNESCO has a responsibility to keep education at the top of political agendas and to bring together partners from different constituencies – the UN, bilateral agencies, governments and civil society – to keep up the momentum. Last December, at the annual High-Level Group meeting held in Oslo, Norway, partners rallied around a common set of priorities, namely reaffirming the centrality of education for development, making equity a priority in all education policies, addressing the teacher shortage and scaling up financing.

As lead co-ordinator, UNESCO also seeks to promote knowledge sharing, dissemination of best practices and south-south co-operation. We do this, for example, through the E9 initiative, which includes Bangladesh, India, Nigeria and Pakistan, and which has been engaged in policy discussions on teacher policies. UNESCO also pilots the UNAIDS Global Initiative on Education and HIV and AIDS, which assists countries in implementing comprehensive responses to the pandemic through education systems.

Furthermore as lead UN agency for the UN Literacy Decade, we are engaged in generating strong political commitment for literacy, a foundation for all learning. In a global society where basic literacy skills count more than ever, 776 million adults lack the elementary knowledge for improving their health, helping their children with school and making more informed choices. Through our Literacy Initiative for Empowerment, we are assisting governments in some 30 countries with the lowest literacy rates to develop appropriate learning policies for youth and adults. We would also like to work more closely with the Commonwealth, through its Secretariat, to provide south-south co-operation.

We need innovative thinking and more flexible and inclusive education systems because today's knowledge-driven societies call for increasingly skilled workers. Partnerships between learning and the world of work, second-chance equivalency programmes, income-generation and life skills programmes, and the creative use of technology to impart skills are all part of rich and multifaceted educational landscapes. Through several global conferences since 2008, we have stressed the importance of developing more inclusive learning systems, of education's role in promoting sustainable development and of the pivotal importance of adult education in our societies. In July 2009, the aim of the World Conference on Higher Education is to emphasise the role of tertiary education for development and the social responsibility of these institutions.

We must never lose sight that education changes lives. At the High-Level Group in Oslo last December, two teenagers from India and Ghana moved the audience of officials by recounting their struggle to follow an education. Daniel, from Ghana, had been sold into slavery at the age of 8; Himleta had been married at the age of 10 but had refused to leave home until finishing primary school. She became head of her village children's council, managed to delay the marriage of several of her young classmates and convinced over 50 families in her village to send their girls to school. Daniel was freed after several years, returned to school and has become an advocate in his country for the right to education. These are two voices – two among millions of others across the world – that governments cannot afford to fail.

Endnotes

- 1 EFA Global Monitoring Report 2009. *Overcoming Inequality: Why Governance Matters*. UNESCO/Oxford University Press, 2008. Data and analysis in this article draw largely on this report.
- 2 Global Monitoring Report 2009. *A Development Emergency*. Washington: World Bank, 2009.

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