

Reaching nomadic communities

Providing inclusive quality education



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Providing education to nomadic communities is one of the most challenging and urgent issues currently facing Commonwealth education policy-makers, practitioners and other actors within the field. On the one hand, evidence shows that nomadic children are among those groups that are consistently not enrolled in formal schools. On the other, the very nature of the nomadic lifestyle is often perceived as conflicting with the aims and aspirations of formal education structures aimed at perpetuating and developing sedentary societies. The result is an emotive and often politically sensitive debate. The importance of education provision to nomadic communities however, forms an integral part of the overall pursuance of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and Education for All (EFA). Attaining the two education MDGs – Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Eliminating Gender Inequalities in Education at all levels by 2015 – is dependent not just on mass enrolment drives but also on targeting and reaching those smaller percentages of marginalised groups that are currently unable to fully access the system.

Generally, nomads are categorised according to three broad groups based on their mobile lifestyle – pastoralist, migrant fisher folk, and hunter food gatherersⁱ. These are further subdivided according to their varying degrees of mobility: with some groups within each category also having developed semi-agricultural livelihoods. The Commonwealth is home to substantial numbers of nomadic and semi-nomadic communities. Some of the most heavily populated Commonwealth countries – India, Pakistan and Nigeria – have sizeable numbers: 9.3 million of Nigeria's population alone are believed to be nomadicⁱⁱ. Other Commonwealth countries with nomadic populations include Kenya, Ghana, the United Republic of Tanzania, Botswana, Namibia, Uganda, Cameroon, and South Africa.

The paradox of seeking to provide education to nomads is that these communities already have their own indigenous traditional education system. Nomads devote time for social life and the telling of stories which children share. Older children take care of younger ones; they look after their herds; and perform domestic chores. Amongst hunting and pastoral groups – such as the Fulani, Maasai, Tauregs, Turkana, Hadzaabe – children are taught hunting and herding skills very early in life. Skills necessary for survival in a hostile environment have to be learnt very earlyⁱⁱⁱ. Nomadic communities are highly structured and organised, with strong traditions of self-government; sophisticated institutional

arrangements; and high levels of individual and social specialisation and organisation^{iv}.

Challenges

Despite significant numbers of nomads in some Commonwealth countries, these communities largely remain minorities (even if sizeable ones) within the borders of the nations through which they travel. In accessing education therefore, nomadic communities in the Commonwealth are faced with some of the fundamental issues affecting marginalised groups globally: disenfranchisement, lack of inclusion and, in many cases, stigmatisation.

By contrast, the relative success of Mongolia for example – with a majority nomadic population – provides a very different scenario. The successful outcomes of Mongolia's education drive are partly attributed to this national homogeneity – an advantage many other countries lack. Overall, barriers to accessing formal education among nomads in Commonwealth countries are multiple and can vary across regions and communities. A common denominator is that a traditionally migratory nomadic community is often located in extremely remote locations. So the first problem to be surmounted is the physical impracticality that a formal school represents to a mobile nomadic family. Forced settlements of nomads have led to tension and conflict; while the routes taken by some nomadic communities mean that they cross national boundaries, so several countries find themselves responsible at different times for the same populations. This has also been used as an excuse to ignore the needs of these communities, and to effectively shirk any governmental obligation to them.

Generally, education systems are simply not equipped at present to cater for these communities. The lack of teachers willing to work in remote locations is a key problem. There is still a significant shortage of teachers who are drawn from within the nomadic communities themselves and who can instruct primary school children in their mother tongue. Prejudices towards nomadic groups, inherent among the wider society and even among educators, must be tackled so that those nomadic children who do attend formal schools are not ostracised. Despite some of the sedentary populations in Africa and Asia having quite recent nomadic roots, there is an increasing conceptualisation of the nomad as the 'other' by rapidly modernising societies^v. This is



coupled with a rising threat to nomadic existence as a viable and sustainable modern livelihood. In Kenya, for example, settlement was seen as a way for the government to bring education and a better living standard to nomads; in Nigeria, laws were passed reducing grazing rights; and in the United Republic of Tanzania, the Ministry of Education and Culture tried to transform nomads into agro-pastoralists^{vi}. However, even eventual settlement within a well-developed country brings its own issues, as in the case of the indigenous Pitjantjatjara people in South Australia^{vii}.

The alienation from nomadic life and culture that may result among nomadic children sent to formal schools is also a major deterrent for parents. And just as wider society is sometimes derogatory about nomadic communities; educated nomadic children can be influenced by these attitudes and adopt these prejudices. Research found that nomadic children among the Bakkarwal of Jammu and Kashmir who had spent prolonged periods of time in formal education spoke with contempt of their community^{viii}. Many pastoralist communities in both Africa and Asia have expressed distrust of schools and the influences they could have on their children, especially girls. More than twice the number of nomadic girls are out of school than nomadic boys. Formal schools can be seen to represent a challenge to the norms and values of nomadic culture and, in the long-term, to be one that could lead to the eventual disappearance of nomad life. With poverty also playing a factor among some nomadic communities, the prevention of girls attending school in favour of boys is also an issue; as are the roles and responsibilities of girls within the community, as they often leave them less time for studies^{ix}. Tension between the school system and more contentious cultural practices, like female genital mutilation and early marriage, are also at the heart of these debates.

Ultimately, many communities quote the lack of relevance the schooling has for their way of life. Traditional teaching methods within the communities – whether it be through family oral lore or Islamic *madrassas* in parts of Muslim Africa and South Asia – are viewed as being more sufficient and relevant. But the absence of officially recognised schooling means that the communities continue to remain marginalised; disenfranchised; and outside the decision-making processes which inevitably impact upon their livelihoods, such as land disputes, water and sanitation.

Approaches

If formal education is to reach nomadic communities without policies that insist on forced settlements, radical changes in the delivery of education provision are urgently needed. Educationalists, policy-makers and practitioners have used many approaches over the years, with varying degrees of success. Increasingly, some governments are moving away (publicly at least) from sedentisation policies and are making a more concerted effort towards incorporating nomadic needs within broader national policy frameworks. Arguably, the existence of Nigeria's National Commission for Nomadic Education is one example of this; while Kenya's recent inclusion of policies pertaining to their Arid and Semi-Arid Lands is another.

To meet the initial challenge of nomadic mobility, several countries in the Commonwealth have experimented with mobile and collapsible schools. These allow nomadic communities to remain

intact, avoiding the inevitable separation that comes from sending children to regular formal schools. While innovative, the continuing challenge of this approach is in providing adequate numbers of qualified teachers willing to move with the schools. Another approach has been to create nomadic boarding schools. This approach has met serious challenges due to the reluctance of families to be separated from their children. Lack of understanding on the part of educators in terms of dietary and other cultural needs has also led to children absconding from the schools to return to their communities. A more promising approach has been the creation of boarding schools deep within nomadic regions – such as the SAKA boarding school in Kenya's North Eastern Province – which are run primarily by the communities themselves.

As noted, providing adequate numbers of qualified teachers willing to work within nomadic areas is perhaps the single most important and urgent challenge to be addressed. This barrier to nomadic education is intrinsically tied with the wider under-provision of teachers to rural and other remote areas. Targeted training and recruitment of teachers from within indigenous communities is a key approach to addressing the problem; and has been put into effect in Nigeria among pastoralist nomads. The initiative has been successful in training up significant numbers of students from the communities towards standardised teacher accreditation, although ensuring balanced numbers of female teachers is a continuing challenge. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has been a key facilitator in teacher training among nomadic communities. However, it is sometimes necessary to implement additional measures in order to retain teachers within their nomadic communities: as they can be drawn elsewhere by financial incentives (especially when working in or close to urban centres); or move away as a result of the alienating process that can sometimes occur as a result of access to formal education.

Inclusiveness within the education process itself also requires further attention. Relevant curriculum content is believed to be one aspect of this. It can lead to both an increased confidence in the formal education system on the part of parents, and the preservation of the cultural heritage of nomadic communities. Use of the indigenous language and cultural norms as a medium of instruction are also important outcomes, as is the opportunity to provide nomads with relevant livelihood and advocacy skills. Important to the success of this is the inclusion of nomads in the planning and design of the curriculum^x. This inclusive approach is increasingly being used in all aspects of nomadic education, with more consultation at the community level by policy-makers; and is proving crucial to addressing, at the core, inequalities in the power structure between marginalised nomads and the central system.

Providing education for more female students in nomadic communities is, ultimately, integral to raising overall enrolment and retention among the populations, so mainstreaming this gender imperative throughout policies and practices is key. Part of the challenge is to alter (increase) the physical infrastructure so that it will not require girls to be absent from their communities for prolonged periods of time; another is to address some of the cultural barriers that prevent girls from attending school. These are by nature a lot more difficult to resolve and, to a large degree, cyclical (for example, recruiting local female teachers is dependent

on increased female access, and so on). In many case studies, successful initiatives have involved informal education programmes; some of which come in the form of 'rescue centres', such as the AIC girls' school in Kojiado, Kenya, for young Maasai girls who do not wish to be circumcised or married at a young age^{xi}. But these cannot be viewed as permanent solutions to the issue, nor as an alternative to basic education. However, the current 'stand-off' between formal and non-formal education is central to the debate. It is necessary to recognise the role of non-formal education in nomadic areas, both traditionally; and in newer initiatives, such as literacy programmes, livelihood and skills training, and facilitator training. Providing increased access to traditional forms, such as Islamic *madrassas* and *dugsi* schools among Muslim nomadic communities, is one method of addressing many of the barriers discussed as contextual to nomadic lifestyles. However, for the tenets of quality EFA to be achieved, these schools need to be accredited with entry and exit points for nomadic children within the formal education system; so as to encourage the fundamental right of these nomadic children to aspire to rise high within the system should they wish. Approaches would need to adopt innovative methods of partnerships between the two, and to address the power issue behind the formal/non-formal divide^{xii}.

Despite several decades of debate, the issue of providing formal education to nomadic populations remains a challenge; like the communities themselves, the field – academically, politically and practically – remains on the margins of wider education debates surrounding EFA. In many Commonwealth developing countries, nomadic populations are at the limits of struggling education systems that are unable to meet even the needs of the sedentary rural poor. There is also the argument that eventual settlement is a long-term inevitability, leading to – at most – only the retention of semi-nomadic lifestyles; such as that experienced by the Sami of Finland and other minority groups, which have managed to salvage some residual aspects of their nomadic past through successful land negotiations. Ominous predictions perhaps, but ones that have a strong precedent in the fate of other nomadic groups globally.

However, at present, the need for inclusive approaches to meet the current challenges has never been greater. Arguably, some governments are making efforts to integrate nomadic education into broader national approaches, and a few of these are taking consultative steps to ascertain the needs of the communities. Many of the challenges still remain and have not moved on substantially over the last decade or even longer. While finding sustained examples of successful approaches can be difficult, the dialogue is improving as the case for inclusive education that addresses the needs of nomadic populations gains increased recognition at both national and international levels.

Endnotes

- i The term 'nomadic' however, is a contentious one and is not always accepted by those it is used to describe, who sometimes prefer reference to a more specific description of their socio-economic lifestyle, such as pastoralist. These groups [pastoralists, migrant fisher folk, and hunter food gatherers] are also recognised within the term 'nomadic' as it denotes a traditional lifestyle that pre-dates modernisation; the term distinguishes them from the newer migratory groups found in parts of the Commonwealth – particularly India – which have movements that appear to mimic nomadic patterns, but that are in fact following the ebb and flow of a modern, seasonal labour market.
- ii Muhammad, ND and Junaid, MI *From Kaduna to Garissa: A decade of experimentation with innovative interventions in the implementation of nomadic education in Nigeria*, Paper presented at the Forum on Flexible Education: Reaching nomadic populations in Africa, Garissa, Kenya, June 21–23, 2006.
- iii Ezeomah, C (ed) (1997) *The Education of Nomadic Populations in Africa*. Papers presented at the UNESCO (Breda) regional seminar on the education of nomadic populations in Africa, 11–15 December 1995, Kaduna, Nigeria. Breda: UNESCO.
- iv De Souza, A, Background paper, Forum on Flexible Education: Reaching nomadic populations in Africa, Garissa, Kenya, 2006.
- v Gidado Tahir's paper (delivered at the 'Forum on Flexible Education: Reaching nomadic populations in Africa' at Garissa, Kenya 2006) entitled *Nomadic Life and the Implications for Education Provision*, posits the issue of nomadism and 'otherness' within the classic de Beauvoir/Said framework, rendering even the necessity and focus of this paper part of the problem itself.
- vi De Souza, A, Background paper, Forum on Flexible Education: Reaching nomadic populations in Africa, Garissa, Kenya, 2006.
- vii Edwards, B and Underwood, B 'Changes in Education as Hunters and Gatherers Settle: Pitjantjatara education in South Australia', in Dyer, C (2006) *The Education of Nomadic Peoples: Current issues, future prospects*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- viii Rao, A 'The Acquisition of Manners, Morals and Knowledge: Growing into and out of Bakkarwal society', in Dyer, C (2006) *The Education of Nomadic Peoples: Current issues, future prospects*, New York: Berghahn Books.
- ix IIEP Synthesis Report (2002) *The Education of Nomadic Peoples in East Africa: Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda*. An IIEP study commissioned by the African Development Bank (ADB). UNESCO.
- x De Souza, A, Background paper, Forum on Flexible Education: Reaching nomadic populations in Africa, Garissa, Kenya, 2006.
- xi *Education for Girls and Women in Nomadic Regions: A case study*, Paper presented at Forum on Flexible Education: Reaching nomadic populations in Africa, Garissa, Kenya, 2006.
- xii Kratli, S, (2001) 'The Bias behind Nomadic Education', article available at www.unesco.org/courier

Biographical notes

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