

# Flexible education

## Reaching nomadic children in Africa



Nomads in Africa roughly constitute about 6 per cent of the population and are found in 21 African countries: Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, Niger, Mali, Senegal, Chad, Mauritania, Algeria, Egypt, Eritrea, Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Uganda, Djibouti, Kenya, Tanzania, Botswana, South Africa and Namibia. They are categorised into three major groups based on their mobile lifestyle: pastoralists, migrant fishermen and hunter-food gatherers. Of these the pastoralists are most predominant in Africa and are classified under the following categories:

- Nomadic pastoralists who live and derive most of their food and income from domestic livestock. They do not have a place of residence and are constantly on the move in search of pasture for their animals.
- Agro-pastoralists who integrate crop farming with livestock. They live in semi-permanent settlements and only the male members move in search of pasture and water: the women and children remain in the homestead, tending goats and sheep and tilling the land.
- Transhumant pastoralists have a permanent home area and move more or less on regular routes.

Nomads' existence is becoming increasingly threatened by pressures from population explosions and increased competition over scarce natural resources. These culminate in a number of problems, such as farmer-pastoralist conflicts, the loss of both human and livestock and the constant displacements of pastoralists. There are three main points that tend to exacerbate the precarious existence of the nomads. These are:

- 1 The neglect of nomads by governments;
- 2 The negative perception of pastoralists;
- 3 The increased levels of illiteracy.

These negative factors facilitate the nomads' vulnerability to exclusion from most services, notably, health and education, and greatly affect their well-being and development.

### Provision of education services for nomadic peoples

Education systems also appear to have failed nomadic communities. All the education indicators reveal that they are at the bottom in terms of national statistics; for example, enrolment, participation, classroom performance, gender balance, achievement

and progression to the next level of education and training. There thus is a growing awareness that significant progress needs to be made in the provision of education services to nomadic people if national targets of the Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are to be met.

Low education levels have contributed to denying nomadic communities the ability to participate in determining their own educational, social and developmental policies and activities, resulting in lack of sufficient control over their livelihood. This situation is further compounded by their mobile lifestyle. For most nomadic communities, their migration routes cut across borders and, for some, their citizenship remains undefined. Consequently, governments are reluctant to make available scarce resources because these communities are not only difficult to reach and govern but also difficult to identify as citizens.

Providing education to nomadic communities is one of the most challenging and urgent issues currently facing education policy-makers, practitioners and other actors within the field. Evidence shows that among those groups not enrolled in schools are the school-age children of nomads, and of these, very few girls are participating in education.

The importance of education provision to nomadic communities is integral to the overall pursuance of the MDGs and EFA. Attaining the two education MDGs – Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Eliminating Gender Disparities in Primary and Secondary, by 2015 – are dependant not just on overall increases in enrolment rates, retention and transition to secondary education, but also on reaching those smaller percentages of marginalised groups who are currently unable to access the system. The response of the international community to the failure in meeting the 2005 gender parity MDG has arguably been unsatisfactory, and with indicators now suggesting that the 2015 goals will not be met by many countries, an increase in exploring flexible and innovative approaches in education provision is needed.

The EFA Global Monitoring Report of 2009 indicates that there has been remarkable progress towards some of the EFA goals since the international community made its commitments in Dakar in 2000. Some of the world's poorest countries have demonstrated that political leadership and practical policies make a difference. The report, however, cautions that progress towards EFA is being undermined by failure of governments to tackle persistent inequalities based on income, gender, location, ethnicity, language, disability and other markers for disadvantage. Governments are urged to reduce inequalities by enacting effective policy reforms if

the EFA targets are to be met. In 2006, some 75 million children, 55 per cent girls, were still out of school, almost half in Sub-Saharan Africa, and it is obvious that the majority of those are the disadvantaged groups/communities in Africa to whom the nomads belong.

If all governments tried to address these exclusion factors, some of the reasons for migration would be removed, more opportunities for the pastoralists would be available; their educational and other life chances would improve; their children would be given the opportunity to get involved in their productive systems; the unsuitable nature of the formal school curriculum would be dealt with; there would be no physical isolation and restricted social interaction with the larger society; and the unfavourable land tenure system in some cases would be reviewed.

## How different countries are tackling the problem

Given the low population density of nomadic groups, their mobile lifestyle, the harsh environment in which they live, the distances from towns and villages (often exacerbated by a lack of roads), the traditional day school has not been a viable option. The options that allow formal or partial formal, non-formal, and informal education and training to take place fall into two categories: (a) bringing the children to the school by providing incentives to encourage nomads while they are mobile, or (b) bringing the school to the children.

Different countries have tried various strategies to ensure the nomadic populations access quality education. Some of these include:

- establishment of mobile schools
- self-sufficient schools in remote pastoral areas
- school feeding programmes
- mobilisation of community participation in schools
- use of non-conventional approaches like Open and Distance Learning (ODL)

In Nigeria, for example, through their National Council for Nomadic Education, unfettered access to relevant, qualitative and functional education has been provided. The council also supports literacy programmes and equips the nomads with skills and competences to enhance their wellbeing and participation in nation building. The council is responsible for formulating policies and issuing guidelines for a National Education Plan (NEP); supporting research and personnel development; funding the development of NEP; funding the provision of equipment and other instructional materials; establishing, managing and maintaining schools; assuring quality; and maintaining standards.

In Uganda, the non-formal Alternative Basic Education for Karamoja (ABEK) is used in the northeast of the country, and was set up in response to non-attendance in the formal school system of the nomadic Karamojong community. The Karamojong considered education (the 'pen') to be a curse and actually buried a pen in a ceremony that marked the end of that curse. This is because in colonial times officials enlisted the men as soldiers,

using a pen to take down their details, and the men never returned. It was against this background, already hostile to education, that the programme was formulated. In designing the programme, household priorities were taken into consideration, as Karamojong children contribute to household chores from the age of 5. For example, the programme was adapted to take into account the time constraints that children faced in balancing school attendance and attending to families' economic needs.

The project had two objectives:

- (a) To develop relevant teaching for Karamojong children by enhancing skills relevant to the Karamoja lifestyle for those who wish to continue as nomads.
- (b) To create a path to formal education for those who want to enrol in formal schooling.

The programme appears to have been a success, although there has been criticism that it is geared too much towards leading children into formal education. Over 80 per cent of the children attend the programme and of these about 10 per cent go on to formal education. The success of the programme can be attributed to the following measures:

- Involving community elders in the initial consultation on the curriculum.
- Relevancy of the curriculum.
- A flexible timetable that adjusts itself to seasons and to children's needs.
- Communities allowed to choose their own facilitators/teachers.
- Using Nakaramojong as the language of instruction.

Other Commonwealth African countries like Kenya, Botswana, Namibia and Tanzania, which have significant populations of nomadic populations, have also designed special programmes to ensure that the children in these communities access and complete quality basic education.

## Commonwealth intervention

The Commonwealth Secretariat has intervened in this area by bringing together researchers, education practitioners working with nomadic groups, and the nomadic people themselves to participate in workshops that focus on synthesising the research, determining successful practices and sharing lessons learned, all of which will be useful to those working in this area. Government departments, international development agencies, NGOs, UN agencies and community-based organisations (CBOs) that have a special interest or mandate in increasing and improving access to education within nomadic populations have also participated in these workshops.

The potential for and use of innovative ways of using ODL and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to further education and training opportunities have been discussed, with best practices shared. It is hoped that the collective knowledge and experience amassed during these workshops should assist towards the realisation of the EFA and the MDG goals in Commonwealth African countries.

The workshops have also provided opportunity for countries with special intervention programmes for nomadic populations to evaluate their approaches to providing education to the nomads. The participants have been able to network and collaborate in finding solutions that will tackle the major problems and challenges confronting the education of nomadic populations.

#### Recommendations agreed at Garissa, Kenya, June 2006<sup>1</sup>

- 1 The establishment of working groups/commissions or other organisational structures that have a legal status that is relevant to the national context, which will comprehensively address issues and implement activities that are pertinent to marginalised groups including nomadic communities.
- 2 Expansion of networking among countries to examine possibilities of working together through the establishment of:
  - a) a regional association of educators working with nomadic groups;
  - b) an electronic network;
  - c) a website that disseminates information on behalf of such a network.
- 3 Advocating for nomadic education in terms of increased recognition, funding and political will.
- 4 Lobbying UNESCO for the inclusion of nomadic education within their analysis of marginalised groups, particularly within the EFA Global Monitoring Report.
- 5 Producing an annual publication that documents for dissemination:
  - a) case studies of innovative initiatives and lessons learned;
  - b) best practices in nomadic education provision.
- 6 The exploration of strategies to tackle the challenges of current and emerging health issues, such as HIV/AIDS, malaria, TB, polio, and maternal and infant mortality.
- 7 The exploration of new information technologies (mobile phones, wind-up radios, solar-powered computer kiosks) to provide timely information on current issues.
- 8 The development of an integrated approach on current issues such as health, nutrition, water and sanitation, livestock, agriculture and other immediate concerns.
- 9 The formulation of holistic policies and strategies, such as affirmative action and quota systems, which specifically target increased access to education for nomadic groups in countries that do not yet have them.

#### Recommendations agreed at Ghanzi, Botswana, 2009

- 1 Countries should develop a more research-oriented focus on issues pertaining to the education of nomadic populations.
- 2 Individual countries should actively consider the issue of language as a barrier to communication, and find contextually appropriate language policies.

- 3 Countries should implement more systematic interventions in teacher education.
- 4 The concept of nomadism should be redefined as an inclusive term that covers a range of disadvantaged learners.
- 5 Online interaction among delegates in the time between one conference and the next.
- 6 A quality assurance instrument applicable to countries should be developed.
- 7 A generic policy on gender sensitivity should be developed for countries to adapt.
- 8 Countries should actively involve NGOs in the education of nomadic learners.
- 9 Countries should establish structures relevant to the national context aimed at dealing with issues pertinent to marginalised groups.
- 10 An annual publication on best practices in the education of nomadic populations should be produced.
- 11 Commonwealth countries should network with francophone countries in order to open new fronts.
- 12 A case book to be prepared on the basis of country reports.
- 13 The Southern African Development Community (SADC) Centre for Distance Education to co-ordinate activities relating to education for nomadic populations.
- 14 A follow-up workshop to take place in Nigeria in 2012.

The Commonwealth Secretariat is optimistic that if countries commit themselves to implementing the above recommendations, most of the nomadic children currently not accessing education will be able to, and, in the process, significant progress will be made towards achieving the MDG and EFA goals.

#### Endnote

- 1 The Forum on Flexible Education: Reaching Nomadic Populations in Africa was held in Garissa, Kenya, from 20–23 June 2006. It was hosted by the Kenyan Ministry of Education and UNICEF, and funded by the Commonwealth of Learning and the Commonwealth Secretariat. The objectives of the Forum were to share experiences and best practices, create linkages and encourage collaboration in order to make education more accessible to nomadic communities.

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