

Nomadic education in the Commonwealth

A review of obligations

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Introduction

Most nomadic communities living in Commonwealth countries do not have access to quality education. Research shows that education provision does not adequately reach these nomadic populations and marginalised indigenous communities, nor does it adequately address their needs and aspirations (Bourne, 2003; Commonwealth Secretariat, 2009; Gatsha, 2010).

In India, the national enrolment rate for Scheduled Tribal children in 1997/98 was only 66 per cent ('Scheduled Tribes' being those recognised in the Indian Constitution). In Namibia in the 1990s, the scholastic enrolment of the Basarwa (also known as the San) was only 21 per cent, compared to a national average of 83 per cent; while in Australia in 1999, nearly half of all indigenous people aged 15 or over had had no formal education, and only 5.5 per cent were participating in years 11 and 12 at secondary level (Bourne, 2003).

This raises the question: To what extent are Commonwealth countries able to achieve the Education For All (EFA) targets and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in ways that uphold economic, social and cultural rights? In order to address the challenge, some Commonwealth countries have adopted and implemented policies that promote education for nomads. Nigeria now has a dedicated National Commission for Nomadic Education (NCNE); Kenya has concrete plans to establish a similar commission to tackle nomadic education; and Botswana has sought to address the issue through its Remote Area Development Programme (RADP). Policy reforms in such countries have deployed open and distance learning (ODL) methodologies in order to reach the nomadic peoples who have been failed by the conventional classroom system.

The indigenous populations in African Commonwealth countries are nomadic due to their long-established forms of livelihood. There are primarily three types of nomadic occupations – hunter-

gathering, fishing and pastoral farming – and the nature of these traditional lifestyles requires that nomads move from place to place. It is estimated that about 6 per cent of the population of Africa are nomads, and these are found in at least 20 African countries (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2009). In all these Commonwealth countries, the complexity posed by the very nature of nomadic living has been a huge challenge as far as providing equitable education to all citizens is concerned. Education indicators show that these communities are at the bottom when it comes to national enrolment, participation, classroom performance, gender balance, academic achievement and progression to the next level of education or training (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2009). These low education levels deny nomadic peoples the opportunity to determine their educational, socio-economic and political progression, not just within their respective countries but globally.

International obligations in terms of nomadic education

The United Nations Economic and Social Council (1999) and the United Nations Human Rights Council (2009) make it clear that education is an inalienable human right and is more than a commodity or a service. It is regarded as crucial for the realisation of other rights, and an indispensable agency for the expansion of human capabilities and the enhancement of human dignity. Education represents an essential support for community identity. It is also viewed as a means by which individuals and communities can lift themselves out of poverty. Furthermore, education can help minorities overcome the legacies of historical injustice or discrimination committed against them (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2009). It is therefore critically important that people from marginalised communities should have the right to a fully fledged education, given that lack of access impinges on their civil and political rights, as well as on their rights to freedom of movement and expression.

Lack of education also limits participation in public affairs, such as voting rights, and limits the access and enjoyment of rights to employment, health, housing and an adequate standard of living. Lack of education can also result in reticence to engage with law enforcement authorities, inhibiting access to remedies when human rights are violated.

The United Nations Human Rights Council further advocates for education to serve the dual function of supporting the efforts of communities to self-development in economic, social and cultural terms while opening up pathways along which they can function in the wider society and promote social harmony. This therefore calls for education strategies that enhance rights and freedoms. Human rights are violated when, for instance, unwanted assimilation is imposed through the medium of education or enforced social



Distance learners from the San community during a weekend face-to-face tutorial at D'Kar, Botswana with their facilitators



Photographs of the indigenous San young and old during the Kuru Dance Festival at D'Kar, Botswana in 2006

segregation is generated through educational processes (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2009). In the light of the rights and obligations recognised at the level of the United Nations, the right to secondary education of people from marginalised communities satisfies Article 13 (2) (b) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Article 13 recognises that secondary education demands flexible curricula and varied delivery systems to respond to the needs of learners in different social and cultural settings. The United Nations Economic and Social Council encourages alternative educational programmes that parallel regular secondary school systems. This is echoed by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and the Commonwealth Secretariat report, delivered at the 2006 Forum on Flexible Education, in Garissa, Kenya, which called for inclusive education and appealed to educators to explore flexible and innovative approaches.

Conclusion: Open and distance learning (ODL)

ODL has gained prominence in the past 20 years (COL, 2000) and has proved to be capable of reaching and addressing the needs and aspirations of large numbers of marginalised peoples in developing countries (Siaciwena and Lubinda, 2008; Gatsha, 2010).

Open and distance learning is a blanket term used for learning systems that offer varying mixes of openness and distance (DFID, 2008). The 'open' aspect in ODL refers to a learning system in which the restrictions placed on learners are under constant review and removed wherever possible. Open learning as a system entails policies that permit entry to learning with no, or only minimum, barriers in respect to age, gender or time constraints, and that takes into consideration students' prior learning (COL, 2000).

ODL enables students to learn at the time, place and pace that satisfies their circumstances and requirements, and allows them to choose when to start and exit a course. It opens up opportunities to learners by overcoming the obstacles that result from geographical isolation, personal circumstances, work commitments or conventional course structures that so often prevent people from gaining access to training or schooling (Rowntree, 1992).

It is critical that all governments adhere to the educational obligations enshrined in the UN instruments, since the achievement

of the EFA and MDG goals will continue to remain elusive to many Commonwealth countries if they are unable to provide their nomadic communities with quality education. This can be made possible if national education policy frameworks that promote the utilisation of ODL methodologies are adopted and implemented to reach the unreached.

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