

Editorial

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This issue of *Prospects*, which tackles the theme of the “Poverty alleviation and inclusive education: transforming the school in sub-Saharan Africa”, presents the main results of four years of continuous work and effort on the part of nine African countries (Angola, Burkina Faso, Burundi, the Republic of the Congo, Mali, Mauritius, Mozambique, Niger and Rwanda) involved in an IBE-UNESCO project entitled “Curriculum innovation and poverty alleviation in sub-Saharan Africa”.

Poverty in general, and extreme poverty in particular, continue to constitute one of the great scandals of our time and is a major challenge to the global community.

Indeed, as the Director-General of UNESCO pointed out:

Worldwide poverty was responsible for the death of an estimated 270 million people between 1990 and 2004, which is more than four times the number of deaths during the two World Wars. Even though some progress has been made in recent years, the figures remain daunting and present us with an urgent ethical challenge. [...] In sub-Saharan Africa, which had the highest poverty rates in the world, the rate of extreme poverty increased from 44.6% in 1990 to 46.4% in 2001. [...] For UNESCO, the eradication of poverty is both an ethical imperative and a development imperative. Poverty is a denial of human development and, as such, it is contrary to the fundamental values and principles on which UNESCO is based.¹

Although campaigns to combat poverty have been waged for decades at the national, regional and international levels, it was not until 2000 that the problem really came to the forefront on the international scene. The Dakar World Forum on Quality Education for All (EFA), ten years after the Jomtien Conference, and the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDG) reaffirmed and broadened the commitment of the international community in

¹ Message from Mr. Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO, on the occasion of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, 17 October 2005.

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favour of education, in particular—and this is a relatively new development—by emphasizing the importance of education in poverty alleviation:

Indeed, without massive strides towards reducing illiteracy, expanding educational opportunities and improving the quality of education, it is difficult to see how poverty can be eradicated or how the development potential of all countries can be realized.²

Since 2000, a great many of the world's countries, with the support of multilateral development agencies, have undertaken sweeping, oftentimes bold and ambitious reforms. Significant initiatives have been launched, such as “the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers” (PRSP), which clearly demonstrate that education must be considered one of the priority sectors in sub-Saharan African countries. However, few of the extant papers define exactly how the measures envisaged will target poor people, and none of them mentions the necessary changes in teaching and learning strategies, not only to school the poorest children, but, more specifically, to keep them in school and improve their educational outcomes. It was this realization that moved the UNESCO IBE, beginning in 2003, to elaborate and implement the project, the results of which are presented here.

In Africa, as in some countries on other continents, the poverty crisis is synonymous with illiteracy, lack of access to education, chronic illness, mortality, starvation and malnutrition, unemployment and underemployment, inadequate housing and the absence or inadequacy of other services, social services in particular. Another of its characteristics is the incapacity of civil society to fight effectively for the improvement of the quality of life.

What must and what can education do? Despite the remarkable effort made by several sub-Saharan African countries to provide every child with access to basic education and the qualitative results achieved, the overall situation remains disconcerting. It is not enough to school a large number of children; they must also be offered quality education that enables them to be competitive, to enjoy learning, to advance and to stay in school. Teacher and learner motivation and the relevance of the contents of education are in this regard key factors influencing the quality of education. No one will dispute the fact that access and quality are inextricably linked, and it is apparent that the desire to send more children to school must be accompanied by efforts to improve the quality of education if these children are to achieve significant, long-lasting educational results.

Progress towards quality implies that several factors must be improved, such as: contents; learning conditions; the skills enabling an individual to adapt to the socio-economic and cultural environment of which the child is a part; essential skills for confronting contemporary problems such as HIV and AIDS or other pandemics; appropriate educational methods and means; conditions of access that are equitable for all; the quality of teachers; school life and the ability to live together in diversity and with respect for each other's differences. Quality education of this sort should enable children and adolescents to become integrated and to participate fully in the lives of their communities, to contribute to their countries' development in the context of the global economy and to adapt to modern information and communication technologies.

Improving these factors in order to achieve the objectives of quality education for all and poverty reduction calls first and foremost for the development and implementation of global educational policies, with broad support on the part of government as a whole and civil society. It also calls—though more modestly but extremely effectively in real terms—for innovations, good practices and minor changes in everyday life within and outside the

² Ibid.

schools. It means, for example, involving the community in school life (Mozambique), providing instruction in local languages (Burkina Faso), creating schools capable of meeting the needs of disadvantaged children (Mauritius), introducing accelerated curricula adapted to children who have passed compulsory school age (Rwanda) or training teachers to work in rural areas, where few teachers trained in traditional institutions are prepared to go (Angola).

The articles in this issue of *Prospects* illustrate successful and promising experiences, the outcomes of which are presented in terms of innovations, changes and good practices observed and studied in the field. Each of them contributes in its own way to improving the quality of education by means of basic education curricula, within the framework of the fight against poverty and educating for peace, both at the design level and the level of implementation in the classroom. They all converge in some way or other towards a more inclusive form of education.

It is beyond doubt that poverty remains throughout the world one of the greatest, most visible sources of exclusion. The publication of this issue of *Prospects* on the eve of the 48th session of the International Conference on Education (ICE) to be held in Geneva on 25–28 November 2008 under the theme “Inclusive education: the way of the future” is therefore an excellent opportunity. Indeed, inclusive education at present continues to pose a major challenge to all countries, including African ones, which can take advantage of the educational reforms under way by incorporating into them the principles and good practices of inclusive education, and thereby capitalize on and strengthen the results already achieved. In this way they can design and implement more just, more effective policies, based on access to education, equity and successful learning, while taking account of learners’ diversity.

We are confident that sharing the results of the project presented in this issue of *Prospects* can benefit the educational community. For, if improving the relevance of the curriculum, contents, methods and community involvement brings more children into the classroom and keeps them there, if it prepares them better to face the challenges of everyday life and teaches them as citizens better to direct their individual destinies and that of their communities, the results and the impact of this project will be of great significance not only at the level of the individual country, but also regionally and even globally.

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