

Responding to diversity: the challenge of expanding basic education for young people in the south

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Abstract This article explores the extent to which and how non-formal education (NFE) contributes to the development of a more diversified basic education system and thus to the achievement of EFA. It outlines the current nature of NFE, the frameworks provided by the EFA movement, and the evolution of reflection, policies and practices in NFE in relation to basic education as a whole. Based on significant developments in various countries across the South, the article also discusses some key challenges that ministries of education and their partners need to face in moving towards relevant and equitable diversity in education. The article posits that, despite the many problems faced by NFE, there is justification for building on its experiences and integrating these within a larger policy and systems framework that responds more effectively to needs and circumstances of children and young people.

Keywords Education for All · Diversity · Non-formal education

Introduction

In the years since the Dakar conference on Education for All, international policy debates on basic education have come to recognize the need for a degree of diversification as regards basic education delivery in order to achieve EFA. In this context, non-formal education (NFE) is receiving fresh attention for its potential value as an alternative pathway to learning. With respect to the learning needs of children and young people, NFE is already making a small but often significant contribution to the improvement of access, quality and relevance of basic education provision, thus enhancing equity of access and of outcomes.

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At the same time it is recognized that this contribution is often problematic due to NFE's poor status, its uneven track record and the problems of taking initiatives to scale (Hoppers 2006). The lack of adequate data does not help either. Yet, in many countries in the South this complementary input has been necessary, given socio-economic constraints that limit the reach of formal education systems and the presence of large numbers of children who, for socio-economic or cultural reasons, cannot attend full-time, conventional schooling.

A further examination of current developments, debates and prospects of NFE is thus called for. This paper briefly examines the extent to which and how NFE contributes to the development of a more diversified basic education system and thus to the achievement of EFA. It reviews the current variations of NFE at the level of children and young people, the international framework under which it has been operating, and the current trends in NFE development. A summary review of developments in some countries is used as a basis to outline issues and challenges for the future.

Non-formal education for children and young people

Although NFE generally covers a wide variety of learning opportunities outside the formal education system, there are specific forms that over the years have come play a significant role in providing alternative options for accessing basic education, both as primary or post-primary education and as skills development provisions.

Particular attention is being given to the forms of NFE that provide a flexible and relevant equivalent of formal education to young people who either cannot access formal schools or who have prematurely left school for reasons associated with poverty, home conditions, cultural practices, geographical distance, the impact of HIV and AIDS and/or situations of conflict. This group of un-reached people includes children beyond the "regular" school age who are forced to look for alternative ways of getting a basic education. Above all, this group includes girls who for a host of reasons go to school less and for shorter periods overall than boys.

Many non-formal education programmes have sought to redress disadvantages by tailoring programmes to the needs and circumstances of the communities. It is also becoming apparent that different kinds of disadvantage have different implications for the design of NFE education and training programmes (Rogers 2004; WGNFE/Working Group on Non-formal Education 2005; Hoppers 2005; United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization 2005; Hoppers 2008). NFE, with its ability to adapt to client demand, is thus particularly important from an equity perspective, as unschooled and undereducated children are overwhelmingly poor, young, rural and female (UIS with UNICEF 2005).

A distinction can be made between two types of "NFE-as-alternative" provisions that play a role in EFA. The first concerns NFE as a flexible provision of primary education that offers *complementary and equivalent pathways* in basic education, leading to the same essential learning outcomes and opportunities but by different modalities. The second one focuses on NFE as *parallel programmes* that are not directly related to the formal system and offer different approaches to learning, with goals and opportunities that are more directly related to the local socio-economic environment.

Complementary programmes include those targeting unreached children as well as well as "remedial programs" for dropouts and/or over-age youngsters who can then complete their primary education either by resuming regular schooling or by taking the official

primary leaving examination.¹ It is current good practice in both types of “NFE as alternative” that the curriculum and pedagogy are adapted to the needs of the learners, for example by adding a significant component of life or livelihood/vocational skills. Both NFE options can and in some countries do play a significant role when circumstances and the poor quality produce a situation in which only a small percentage of children complete primary education successfully (Klees et al. 2002; Hoppers 2008).

Combinations of the two options are increasingly found in vocational skills development programmes for young people. The growing concern with finding ways to link basic education with the labour market has led to many initiatives across the South to link vocational skills training components of cognitive and life skills development in NFE, either through curriculum integration within the same programme or through co-operative arrangements between NFE and local enterprises. Other initiatives focus largely on vocational skills development by establishing polytechnic-type training centres or by enhancing the quality and effectiveness of informal sector apprenticeships and their link with enterprise development (Walther 2007).

The emphasis is clearly on integrating various strands of learning across formal and non-formal provisions, leading to the acquisition of a range of basic competences in different learning areas and often to recognition through transferable credits. In this process the boundaries between formal and non-formal seem to blur, as various equivalent learning pathways are seen to exist side-by-side, some of which prepare for the same formal qualifications but through “non-formal” means.

The Dakar conceptual framework

In the context of EFA the non-formal education options are increasingly being challenged to define their place and role in basic education provision and their relations with the wider totality of learning opportunities. It appears that, at least for the more structured and larger NFE programmes aiming to meet the learning needs of children and young people, it is no longer an option to exist in the margins or even outside the education and training system. In a context in which the state is compelled to adopt a much broader perspective in terms of its policy responsibility for all education, these forms of NFE are coming under public scrutiny.

EFA documents are, however, limited in their guidance on making good-quality, basic education achievable for all children and young people in an equitable manner. In terms of EFA the totality of learning opportunities for children and young people of school-going age (approx. 6–18) have been catered for by three EFA Goals. Of these, two goals relate to participation in primary education: Goal 2 on universal access and Goal 5 on gender equality. Goal 3 relates to the meeting of “learning needs by youth as well as adults”.

Generally, ministries of education and international agencies—probably together with most parents and learners—have interpreted Goals 2 and 5 as dealing exclusively with formal primary education. Very little official attention appears to have been given to the possibility of delivering such primary education by other means, such as NFE options,

¹ Terminology tends to be a problem in NFE. Agencies and governments often use “complementary” when the provision is seen as an addition to what the mainstream provides. Complementary programmes also include what are often in English referred to as “supplementary” activities (i.e. as enrichment, such as remedial programs to enable dropouts to re-enter formal schools). In French “complémentaire” refers mainly to the latter option.

forms of open learning or enhanced programmes of faith-based education, such as “madrassas”.

EFA Goal 3 is more problematic as it is articulated only in general terms of learning needs, without being directly related to any education (supply) programme, except skills-related NFE programmes. The Goal reads: “*Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes*”.

The Dakar goal appears somewhat nebulous: it does not clarify the “*learning needs*”, nor does it address the notion of “*equitable*” or what is considered “*appropriate*” or who is the arbiter of this. The closest is probably the following elaboration, related to young people: On Goal 3 (Dakar Framework for Action, par 36):

All young people should be given the opportunity for completing an extended basic education. For those who drop out of school or complete school without acquiring the literacy, numeracy and life skills they need, there must be a range of options for continuing their learning. This will have to include appropriate vocational skills. Such opportunities should be both meaningful and relevant to their environment and needs, and help them to become active agents in shaping the future of themselves and their communities (UNESCO 2000).

The significance of this Dakar statement is that it reflects a wide perspective on learning needs and on how these should be addressed within an extended context of education opportunities, which moreover should be equitable and ongoing. It exhorts countries to pay more attention to educational provisions that meet people’s needs and circumstances. It gives greater recognition to the many diverse forms of non-formal education and skills development programmes, public and private ones, that already exist in countries providing essential learning opportunities for large numbers of young people and adults. Thus it encourages the creation of a better enabling environment, responding to actual learning *demand* expressed by young people—as different from learning *needs* often attributed to them by governments and agencies.

At the same time, however, the Dakar Framework suggests that Goal 3 is essentially about expanding alternative NFE options for *out-of-school youth only*. Thus, it missed an opportunity to define a range of learning needs that would be applicable to *all youth*, whether in formal secondary education or in NFE alternatives, or in full-time employment. These could have been defined in terms of a broad set of *transversal competences* of different types—such those related to communication, cognitive skills, life skills, work-related skills, etc.—that would be essential for young people’s preparation for life, work and further learning.

As a result, overall the Dakar Framework has maintained the image of a fragmented education system, separating formal from non-formal programmes, whereby the latter largely supplement the former, without considering the essential integration of learning pathways and the nature of their articulation based on the principle of equity.

Moreover, the EFA goals seem to be formulated more from a perspective of “*programme supply*” rather than “*beneficiary demand*”. They deal with major provisions already in place for specific age categories (mostly general education rather than vocational skills development programmes) which are thus easy to monitor. EFA Goal 3 seems not to match either perspective. The Dakar Framework did not manage to offer guidance on how to respond to learning interests from different population groups across the system. As a result, assumptions regarding externally attributed learning needs, to be met by standard education provisions, continued to prevail. Thus, the diverse learning needs of many categories of young people who are of school-going age but out of synch with what is

provided—especially those in the age group 10–18—may not find an appropriate response within this framework.

Evolution of thinking about visions, policies and strategies in NFE

Fortunately, post-Dakar debates on basic education have begun to address these issues. Looking now at international policy debates on NFE in relation to developing countries there have been significant developments that facilitated a more integrative and diversified approach to basic education development. Together these have produced a more articulated body of knowledge around NFE, enabling countries in principle to develop their own visions and approaches while drawing on international experience.

As significant developments the following can be presented:

- (a) A *more explicit interest* in NFE as complementary forms of education, including vocational skills acquisition, emphasising relevance and child-friendly pedagogies.
- (b) A *greater recognition of the diversity* of NFE in terms of types of programmes, purposes and beneficiary groups.
- (c) *Increase in information* available about programmes, their nature and outcomes.
- (d) More attention to NFE's *socio-economic and cultural context*, its principles and its purposes.
- (e) More attention to the *systemic issues* related to the place and roles of NFE within the context of education systems as a whole.
- (f) Greater recognition of the value and relevance of a *lifelong learning framework*.

Increased interest in NFE

There is a general recognition among governments and international technical and funding agencies that EFA via conventional formal primary schooling can only be realised in many countries unless extraordinary efforts are made to combine educational reform with the mobilization of large, additional resources (Bruns et al. 2003). There is also a strong recognition that national development will be severely impeded without bringing out-of-school youth and adults into the process by way of meaningful non-formal programmes that either build on previous years of schooling or provide basic learning as a substitute.

Both together appear to have heightened the awareness that a more visible, robust complementarity between types of formal and non-formal education needs to be pursued as a major additional strategy to reach all young people. The case for NFE as part of a broader national human resources strategy has been made very forcefully (Manzoor 1989; Oxenham et al. 2002; Easton et al. 2003).

Greater recognition of diversity in NFE forms

Renewed interest in NFE has also led to fresh attempts to investigate the myriad appearances of NFE. Hence, a major gain is a greater awareness among stakeholders of distinct types and forms of NFE and their different potential in relation to the needs and circumstances of identifiable beneficiary groups.

A major effort has been made to examine different perspectives and expectations among adolescents and youths with various degrees of schooling behind them. Increased interest has also prompted closer examination of different conditions of disadvantage—such as

broken families, the impact of HIV and AIDS, household income poverty, gender discrimination, rural marginalization, unemployment, displacement resulting from conflict, etc.. Equally there is increased attention to what these conditions mean for the design of NFE initiatives in both education and training domains (Pironrue and Keoyote 2001; Klees et al. 2002; Rogers 2004; WGNFE/Working Group on Non-formal Education 2005; Hoppers 2005; United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization 2005).

New NFE programmes are often now tailor-made for specific groups among young people or adults, even if core competencies remain the same; “hybrid” programmes, combining school-based learning with community support, are constructed to cater for supplementary needs for care; and small-scale, innovative programmes are being piloted to respond to new emergencies, such as displacement (MiET 2007; Hoppers 2006). Amidst these flexibilities, new questions are being asked about what outcomes can be expected and how can they be measured and monitored (Pieck 2006).

To a varying extent this work enters policy formulation by way of public recognition and support for selected programmes, such as public support for community schools, mobile schools, and skills training programmes for out-of-school youth (Hoppers 2006). It is also apparent, however, that the motivation for such support is more frequently associated with an expected impact on economic productivity and a minimal degree of social inclusion than on equity and social emancipation (Jones 1997; Morales-Gómez 1999; Abadzi 2004). As result, in the public mind they do not necessarily acquire the same value.

Donor preferences also play a major role in the types of NFE that receive funding. It is very helpful that a greater orientation towards social demand also leads to judicious combinations of different learning programmes—combining literacy with livelihood training, for example, or vocational training with life skills development (Oxenham et al. 2002 and 2004; Duke and Hinzen 2006).

Increase of information about programmes

The quality and effectiveness of NFE described above is increasingly related to the information that can be made available concerning processes and outcomes of individual programmes. Progress has been made in capturing learning outcomes of major NFE programmes. However, this has focused mostly on literacy programmes in which young people of school-going age only participate as an opportunity of last resort. Much of this work was carried out in the late 1990 s by World Bank staff, in a bid to provide the ground for the Bank’s entry into adult and literacy education (Carr-Hill 2001; Oxenham et al. 2002; Lauglo 2002; Lind 2002; Easton et al. 2003).

There is still little insight regarding the actual benefits of acquiring basic skills and competencies through literacy education (Lauglo 2002: 38; Abadzi 2004). It is often assumed that basic learning has an automatic impact on poverty and the prospects of people’s lives, including the reduction of inequality and marginality (Torres 2001). But there is much doubt about whether this is the case in the absence of other enabling factors (NORRAG NEWS 2006).

Little systematic assessment has been carried out of NFE alternatives for out-of-school children and young people, as regards outcomes and impact as well as in terms of the relative value of tailor-made pedagogical processes. The fact that much monitoring and evaluative work is controlled by the sponsoring agencies is not always helpful in securing feedback that is relevant enough for policy and planning (Hoppers 2005; Pieck 2006). Often there is little regard for unintended but valuable outcomes.

In this context, renewed collective efforts of countries and agencies in the area of research, dialogue and development are significant—such as those by UNESCO/APPEAL in South-East Asia, ADEA/WGNFE in Africa, and ILO/Cinterfor in Latin America. In this way major contributions have been made to the knowledge base of many small-scale NFE initiatives by non-governmental or community organizations, which in turn has helped to improve awareness among national governments and often ensure some degree of public recognition and support.

Unfortunately, the tendency of agencies and governments to treat NFE programmes as a generic category, without differentiating between those for younger people and adults, means that findings regarding perceptions, participation, outcomes and impact in relation to school-age children are generally unavailable. This gap undermines effective policy making (Hoppers 2006).

More attention to socio-economic and cultural context

Though it does appear that international sensitivity to the needs, circumstances, and the life world of beneficiary groups in NFE has increased greatly, this has also come with problems. The nature of such sensitivity and the responses to which it leads seem closely associated with the background and ideological orientation of authors and organizations, and the interests to which the results are meant to speak. Here one can see the pragmatist setting down points to write about “Adult Basic Education” (ABE) by persons associated with the World Bank, as against the more transformative expectations of writers associated with progressive civil society groups (Lauglo 2002; Chelimo 2006; Abadzi 2004; Easton et al. 2003; Graciani 1992; Puntasen 1992; UNESCO/APPEAL 2000; Lind 2002; Torres 2003).

Bank-related authors have taken a more minimalist, re-active approach to the nature and purpose of ABE—focusing on practical skills, relevant for coping with changing environments, emphasizing livelihood, health, nutrition, civic education and the like. By contrast, those associated with a more progressive agenda prefer to take a maximalist, pro-active stand, focusing on learning to criticize society and being ready for collective action aimed at changing their life situation and moving their communities out of poverty. Both parties talk about “empowerment”, but with different connotations. Whereas one side acknowledges that basic learning is essentially about improving the lives that people are already living, the other aims directly at social and economic transformation (Lauglo 2002; Torres 2003).

Such contrasting views of NFE raise questions about the ultimate purposes of non-formal (and other forms of) education, what conception of human development they represent, what values they promote, and whose interests they reflect. The nature and extent of “functionality” of NFE cannot be taken for granted, but needs to be defined within the context of a national vision regarding education and development. Clearly, the relevance and legitimacy of NFE as an alternative pathway in basic education, and thus its purpose and design, require careful argumentation.

More attention to systemic issues

Greater awareness has emerged regarding the systemic dimensions of NFE, i.e. how its many forms relate to formal provisions, what roles it plays within the wider totality of education and training opportunities, what forms of public and/or private governance are desirable, and what types of support it can or should expect from the state and other stakeholders. Thus far much attention has particularly been paid to issues regarding equivalency, the idea of public-private partnerships, the mobilization of supplementary

financial resources, and the development of approaches to validate NFE learning as a basis for transferable credits in areas of general education and vocational skills development. Such national qualifications frameworks, in turn, have stimulated new learning opportunities provided by civil society and private sector operators, with or without public support.

Equivalence of learning outcomes is regarded as important for younger learners who have missed out on formal education opportunities. These may still wish to utilize NFE (and forms of open and distance learning) as alternative pathways to continued formal education and training, either in- or out-of-school. It has found strong support on grounds of ethics (right to education for *all* children and adolescents) and equity (Tomasevski 2003; Rogers 2004; Hoppers 2006).

The implications of equivalency are far-reaching. They may include requirements for inserting appropriate mixes of core knowledge, skills and competencies for young people in learning programmes across formal, non-formal and even informal learning, as a basis for enhancing relevance and for facilitation of vertical and horizontal articulation (Duke and Hinzen 2006; Hoppers 2006). However, there is still a tendency to regard such programmes as non-equivalent “remedial work” only, helping to maximize what people have already learned at school (Jones 1997; Carr-Hill 2001; Abadzi 2004).

Greater recognition of lifelong learning framework

In many ways the awareness of the systemic dimensions has reached further when seen within a wider context of “lifelong (and life-wide) learning”. This has particular relevance in the South where in quite a few countries the concept has come to cover all types and forms of education, including non-formal basic education and training (Aitchison 2003; WGNFE/Working Group on Non-formal Education 2005; Thailand-ONFEC 2006). The coherence and integration provided by such a framework is now seen as vital for the achievement of Goals 3 and 4 of EFA.

Equity in access to and the outcomes of basic education can only be extended if there is a system of lifelong learning [...] integrating general education and vocational training and re-training, social and cultural learning needs. It calls for more, and more systematic, ways to continue after literacy classes for youth and adults, for entry points from out of school classes into the formal set-up, and thus a systematic approach to value and credit learning outcomes from the diversity of non-formal education and skills training (Duke and Hinzen 2006:138).

The flexibility of non-formal learning, together with an overarching frame for crediting learning outcomes would enable learning to move gradually away from a rigid traditional “schooling model” to a more modern and open approach which helps “[*free*] the participants to learn what they want, when they want, where they want and for as long as they want” (Rogers 2004:11). In actual fact, the lifelong learning frame provides the *formal* context within which both formal and non-formal education can address their particular clientèles with content and pedagogical styles that are appropriate to those learners (Duke and Hinzen 2006; Hoppers 2006).

Emerging good practices in diversifying basic education

This section offers some findings and conclusions from a comparative review of selected countries where explicit efforts have been made to integrate selected forms of NFE within

a wider basic education policy framework aimed at universal basic education for children and young people. References are made to the extent that policy developments appear to reflect international trends as discussed above. Country experiences that have informed this review include Brazil, Namibia, Burkina Faso, Uganda and Thailand² (Hoppers 2008).

There is evidence of growing interest in these countries to pursue a more holistic, integrated perspective on basic education addressing the needs of the entire population. In concrete terms policy actions related to the incorporation of forms of NFE (or other alternative pathways such as open learning) into the larger basic education system seem to focus on embedding NFE as a parallel “subsystem” representing other pathways intended for those who are not in school.

An exception concerns an ongoing policy development process in Uganda, the aim of which has been to incorporate one particular set of NFE programmes directed at categories of unreached children within the existing framework for achieving universal primary education. This has been termed a “one-system” integration as separate legal, administrative or financial arrangements for this set of NFE is considered inappropriate (Hoppers 2008).

Where countries have adopted a “lifelong learning” approach (Brazil, Namibia, Thailand), this appears to assist greatly in constructing equivalencies and bridges across the two “subsystems” as part of the general effort to improve *life-wide access* to learning opportunities and *life-long continuation* of learning (i.e. enhance both *horizontal* and *vertical* articulation). This tendency appears to be stronger in more developed countries of the South (Namibia) than in less developed countries (Burkina), possibly because of resource constraints in building up such a parallel system.

The recognition, systemic embedding and support for forms of NFE also appear to benefit greatly from broad political acceptance of diversity in education as part of a national policy of social inclusion based on equity. In addition, such developments seem to connect closely with the degree of public endorsement of long-standing cultural traditions in popular education and their legitimate place in the modern world (e.g. Brazil, Thailand). The difficulties in overcoming the stigmatization of NFE and systemic fragmentation seem less related to traditions than to socio-political histories, in which colonial models have continued to play a dominant role.

In terms of significant innovations in policies and strategies associated with NFE development post-Dakar, it is evident that these tend not to lie in the nature of the policies themselves (most countries proclaimed integrated basic education policies after Jomtien), but rather in their further elaboration (in terms of more specific frameworks for action) and in the strategies developed to direct policy implementation.

Valuable innovations in NFE are particularly found with regard to:

- (1) Policy coordination, in particular the establishment of multi-stakeholder councils or platforms for consultation (Brazil, Namibia, Burkina).
- (2) Inter-sectoral coordination, in terms of direct linkages between education initiatives and those in other sectors (like health and social development) or macro-economic policies in general (Brazil, Namibia, Uganda, Thailand). Such development may become more marked as a result of coordination with ministry of labour, youth, and economic development.

² Specific details about relevant policies and practices in these countries can be found in the background paper for the Global Monitoring Report 2008 (Hoppers 2007).

- (3) New governance arrangements, such as collaborative governance with decentralized authorities and/or other partners, like civil society and private sector providers. The latter has resulted in new forms of public-private partnerships (Brazil, Namibia, Burkina, Uganda, Thailand).
- (4) Instructor development and professional support services (Brazil, Uganda, Thailand).
- (5) Mobilization of supplementary resources and programme sustainability, including criteria for funding norms for different types of education, and roles of communities in taking co-ownership of programmes (Brazil, Namibia, Burkina, Thailand).

At the same time it is also clear that major challenges remain in these very same aspects of NFE development: such as:

- How to get national platforms established and functioning in an effective, democratic manner?
- How to promote public-private partnerships in ways that combine efficiency and responsiveness with quality and equity?
- How to supervise and strengthen local government structures, and ensure compliance with national policy goals and priorities?
- How to ensure appropriate staff recruitment, training and development while acknowledging the need for an integrated teaching service?
- How to increase public and private funding for NFE in an equitable yet sustainable manner?
- How to achieve a mind shift among both policy-makers, professionals and communities to revalue the merits of all forms of basic education and re-model these to suit national development goals?

Statements on policies and strategies regarding NFE generally focus on its contribution to basic *education*, as different from contributions to basic (*skills*) *training*. To the extent that technical or vocational skills play a part they are considered “livelihood” skills, enabling learners to develop elementary competencies, helpful in their own sustenance and not so much a basis for further specialized training (Namibia, Burkina, Uganda - though not so in Thailand). There is little *praxis* in NFE relating to the merger of different types of skills as a basis for a variety of future learning paths, even when there are extensive apprenticeship systems as preparation for micro-enterprise development (as in Burkina and Uganda). This bias may come from the general inexperience of education ministries in dealing with vocational training, but also from the tendency to regard NFE as secondary tracks towards “improved” subsistence rather than as alternative avenues to the “real world of work”.

There is an increased tendency for the state to play a major role in NFE development, in terms of policy making, coordination and monitoring; programme implementation, promoting partnerships, and in catalyzing experiment and innovation. It appears that where this role has been more pronounced and recognized as a central component of national policy, the education ministry is more successful in moving towards an integrated yet more diversified system serving all population groups. Of crucial importance appears to be its role in setting and promoting principles, norms and standards across the system (Brazil, Namibia, Thailand).

However, the possible role of the education ministry in coordinating NFE development, regarding both education and skills training, across a variety of other ministries under a common national policy and strategic framework, still appears to be highly contentious (Namibia, Burkina, Uganda).

While there is evidence that the need for life skills development as a core set of competencies for all is becoming more accepted, little appears to have been done to develop national frameworks to guide their inclusion in all forms of learning for children, youth and adults. In practice it seems more common for separate programmes to exist, run by different government ministries and civil society organizations for different population groups.

The absence of common frameworks for the development, implementation and monitoring of life skills and other essential social and economic skills required by young people across the age-group at country level makes it difficult to monitor progress in relation to EFA Goal 3 (i.e. in its more restricted interpretation), other than considering indicators of programmes in place, and types of population groups targeted.

There is evidence, however, that many countries seem more interested in considering life and other essential skills as part of a general basic education equivalent that is promoted for all population groups. It would appear that a common strategy is to improve appropriateness of curricula within this frame, and use these as reference points for NFE equivalents—to the extent these are recognized.

Within the context of NFE development countries are still struggling with the issue of how best to accommodate the needs and interests of young people with those of adults. Out-of-school youth tend to make ample use of any education option that keeps them learning, even those that have not been designed for them, such as adult literacy programmes. Yet governments are keen to “streamline” education participation in those NFE programmes they control. As a result there are often problems with “throughput” as ladders and bridges in practice do not function and vertical articulation is highly problematic (Namibia, Burkina, Uganda).

A major problem, exacerbating the above, is the very small volume of NFE opportunities in relation to demand, designed to cater for the needs of young people. Especially in the 10–15 age-group complementary forms of basic education tend to be very limited, often covering only a fraction of the population out of school. Thus opportunities for remedial or continuing education, serving as pathways from basic education to further specialized forms of education or training, are not available to significant numbers of this age-group—though both Brazil and Thailand show how rapid progress can be made if policies and resources are in place.

Currently, in countries where EFA has largely focused on primary education, there is also an increased interest in expanding the length of basic education and including lower secondary education within a 9-year enhanced basic education cycle. In view of major problems with repeating and dropouts, affecting especially children of disadvantaged background and girls, such expansion would constitute a major challenge to NFE as a source for innovative approaches, partly to improve pedagogy and relevance in the “upper part” of basic education, partly to create alternative learning pathways that take young people through the primary leaning bottleneck into post-primary programmes combining general education with relevant skills development. The pressures to widen access and secure quality pathways to the world of work will be so much greater.

Monitoring and assessment of NFE processes and outcomes is still highly problematic. Even where systems are in place, scarcity of resources and institutional capacity, both in government and civil society, often hinder its effective usage as a basis for policy and planning. The absence of national strategic frameworks for addressing policy issues in NFE and basic education also pre-empts meaningful evaluation of policy implementation as criteria and indicators have not been sufficiently developed.

A conclusion as regards country policy practices in relation to international reflections on NFE is that there are still major gaps between what countries aim or profess to be doing

on the one hand, and the actual realities on the ground on the other hand. It appears rather difficult for countries to apply principles of diversity and equity in actual policy processes. Perhaps greater recognition of NFE and more information about its operations and outcomes are necessary but not yet sufficient conditions to ensure their effective contribution to EFA. There is also a great need for enabling socio-political and cultural environments to make this happen.

Lessons for policies and strategies, and ways forward

From the discussion in this paper and the nature of its findings from selected countries, several key issues regarding policies and strategies for NFE can be identified. They are subdivided into those relating to policies themselves, those relating to strategies for implementation, and some relating to enabling factors that allow countries to make more rapid progress in moving towards a more diversified basic education system.

Issues of policies

A major issue is the extent to which policies articulate the diversity of learning and of valid forms of education and training. Policy implementation would be greatly assisted by clearer articulation of relevant and recognized alternative pathways. The range of organized learning outside the “formal” school system is too wide to be identified by a single term. There is a need to move beyond the formal–non-formal divide to recognize a plurality of education forms serving different clientèles in different ways (formal or less formal). All would serve under a common, integrated education framework, which caters for diversity in pedagogy and purpose, and in degree of “formality” (WGNFE/Working Group on Non-formal Education 2005).

Issues of strategies

Recognition and support, coupled with effective quality control and monitoring, allow selected forms of education to be extended and upgraded in accordance with demands, within the bounds of affordability and sustainability. Common frameworks for basic and continuing education also allow guidelines to be agreed regarding desirable core competencies for children and young people, which can inform curriculum development at local level serving specific clientèles. This would have to include a policy regarding languages and exposure to the nation’s cultures (WGNFE/Working Group on Non-formal Education 2005).

Further strategic frames can be articulated to assist progress in implementation, for example, in regard to the expected synergies and interactions between formal and non-formal education and training; in regard to shared governance, i.e. a division of roles and responsibilities among stakeholders, and the extent of decentralization; in regard to a differentiated, but unified teaching service and strategies for educator development and support; and in regard to outsourcing educational services and conditions under which supplementary funds are obtained, managed and accounted for (Diagne and Sall 2006). A major challenge is to define the nature and extent of the state’s involvement in different forms of education, what criteria are applicable to coordination of non-state providers, and how available resources can be shared equitably across the system.

It would seem that forging effective partnerships among immediate stakeholders is essential for the achievement of a system that recognizes diversity but also adheres to

norms of equity and quality. This constitutes a major challenge for governments, in allowing national responsibilities for policy, resourcing, implementation and monitoring to be shared with other national partners, notably NGOs, local authorities and centres of expertise. Policy making is not only about the elaboration of technical and administrative requirements, but also about developing public-private partnerships, negotiating supportive legal frameworks, establishing adequate institutional support structures, and not least about satisfying the public that alternative pathways do not have to be dead-end streets but can constitute equivalent routes leading to equity of outcomes and benefits. Alliances across national stakeholders are key to achieving this (cf. Hoppers 2008).

Issues regarding enabling factors

Moving towards greater diversity of non-conventional forms of learning in relation to diverging needs, demands substantive intellectual and strategic reflection within countries. It also demands space, cognitive and organizational, for national stakeholders to explore and (re-) value both the national wealth in learning traditions and modern international practices, and agree what is appropriate in accordance with people's demands and national goals.

International partners can inform and guide, and stimulate national debate rather than pre-empt this with global blueprints and prescriptions. In this regard much can still be done to facilitate translating overall policy perspectives into strategies that are in line with countries' interests, traditions and resources. A very delicate consideration concerns the trade-offs between expanding the system horizontally (through NFE and other parallel forms of education and training) and expanding it vertically (the expansion of formal secondary education and TVET).

A key enabling factor here is greater visibility, i.e. the improvement of quality and relevance of data and formative research on existing pathways, whether under the flags of NFE, community schools, work-based learning, forms of part-time education and training, open and distance learning, or faith-based education. Too often policy work in these areas is shunned with the argument that no data are available to help understand realities and potentialities.

Data collection on the nature, quality, and effectiveness of such pathways is urgently required. In particular there is need for greater understanding of the added value of alternative pedagogies, organizational modalities and governance structures. Their cost-structures need to be examined in order to justify on what grounds unit-costs of selected provisions for specific beneficiary groups of children can be allowed to exceed those of conventional schools. Finally, conditions for up-scaling and integration into national systems can be investigated so as to inform policy strategies for the expansion of promising, non-conventional but relevant pathways.

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