



MDG INSIGHTS

Issue 02
February 2009

Accelerating MDG progress through Education for All

Education is explicit in two of the Millennium Development Goals and implicit in all the others. This is because education is central to giving children, youth and adults the knowledge and skills they need to make choices, improve their livelihoods and actively participate in shaping their societies.

The case for education, however, still needs to be consistently defended. Despite the proven benefits of education on social and economic development, it does not follow that governments will allocate a higher share of their budgets to it, nor that donors will increase their aid to education. The latter is in fact rising at a slower pace than three years ago despite the momentous challenges before countries: 75 million out-of-primary school children¹; gender parity in primary education only achieved in 63 per cent of countries (37 per cent at secondary level); and severe shortage of trained teachers and poor learning conditions to name but a few. Large inequalities in learning opportunities prevail within and across countries and regions. And yet it took intensive lobbying for education to find a mention on the G8 agenda. Equally pressing global concerns, from climate change and public health to surging food prices, are quicker to generate commitment. But the education of some 1.2 billion children and teenagers – the approximate number of primary and secondary school students in the world today (not to mention those not enrolled) – is rarely evoked with the same urgency.

A human right, a development imperative

The case for education is grounded in rights and in development. The 1948 Declaration of Human Rights, whose 60th anniversary we celebrated in 2008, establishes the right to compulsory elementary education. Ever since that date the international community has sought to anchor this aspiration within a solid legal and political

framework. The most widely ratified treaty in the world – the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child – contains important provisions on education, both with regards to universal access and to the aims of education.

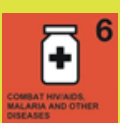
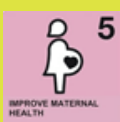
But education also unlocks and protects other human rights. Girls' education translates into lower fertility, later marriage and better health. An educated woman is more likely to send both her sons and daughters to school. Prevention programmes are the most effective vaccine against HIV/AIDS. Participation in literacy programmes leads to greater civic engagement. No one questions the right to education and its importance for development. The real issue is how to universalize the right, reach the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, and develop learning programmes that are relevant to personal and social needs.

From a strictly economic viewpoint, education is a major determinant of individual income, with each extra year of schooling resulting in a 10 per cent increase in earnings. The OECD estimates that adding one extra year of schooling increases GDP per capita by 4 to 6 per cent. As the knowledge-intensive economy spreads and calls for a more skilled labour force, a higher premium than ever is placed on education. More than ever, lack of education is synonymous with exclusion.

The MDGs are an interlinked package aimed at improving the lives of the poorest children, youth and adults. They represent an aspiration for social justice and acknowledge that development cannot be achieved without education. They emphasize the fundamental importance of girls' and women's education. Policies to reduce child mortality, improve maternal health, combat HIV/AIDS and ensure environmental sustainability will fall short of their desired impact if they fail to include an educational component – and one that is gender-

MDG INSIGHTS is a joint publication of the MDG Network and the UNDG MDG Policy Network. The findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not reflect official policies of the UN agencies or governments they represent.

The text and data in this publication may be quoted or reproduced as long as the source is cited. Reproductions for commercial purposes are forbidden.



sensitive.

Acting on poverty

Achieving the education MDGs calls first for measures that act on poverty and inequality; second for policies that improve the quality of education; and third for a comprehensive vision of learning that spans the life cycle.

First, acting on poverty. In a world where close to one billion people live on less than a dollar a day, going to school is simply not affordable for many – in terms of direct costs and of time required for other chores. Households in rural or remote communities have less access to primary education. Disabled children continue to suffer from blatant educational exclusion. Indigenous children and those from linguistic minorities have a higher chance of not attending school. According to the International Labour Organization, some 165 million children between the age of 5 and 14 are missing out on school in order to work often long hours in dangerous conditions. Many families depend on modest contributions from a working child. Beyond social norms and discrimination, girls miss out on school because they often spend hours each day fetching water, caring for their younger siblings or, in the context of HIV/AIDS, for an ailing family member. This is why the reality of socio-economic disadvantage must be built into education policies from the outset if all children are to benefit from schooling.

To a certain extent this is happening. Since 1999 the number of out-of- primary school-age children has dropped by 25 per cent. Overall participation in primary schooling worldwide grew by 6.4 per cent. Net enrolment ratios rose fastest in the two regions farthest from achieving universal primary education (MDG 2), sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia. In the former, participation in primary school leapt by 36 per cent. The trend has benefited girls: in South and West Asia, 93 girls for every 100 boys were in school in 2005, up from 82 in 1999.²

This expansion has happened through universal and targeted strategies. Countries where enrolments rose sharply generally increased their education spending as a share of gross national product. Fourteen countries abolished primary school tuition fees between 2000 and 2004, leading to enrolment increases that have benefited the most disadvantaged children. Some governments have

adopted a phased-in approach to eliminating fees (not all grades at once); others have targeted specific schools, regions or groups (Colombia, South Africa). Several middle-income Latin American countries run programmes that provide cash transfers to families conditional on their children attending school.

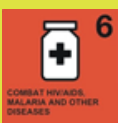
Countries have acted on obstacles to girls' education through community sensitization campaigns, installing separate toilets and running water in schools, increasing the number of female teachers and accompanying girls to school. Bangladesh and Cambodia run scholarship programmes for girls in secondary education that have encouraged access. Still, there is much more to be done, particularly in rural areas and urban slums. Only about one-third of countries with data available had achieved gender parity for both primary and secondary education in 2005. At the primary level, gender disparities stem first and foremost from disparities in enrolment in the first grade. In several countries, including Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, Chad, Niger, Pakistan and Yemen, the intake rate for girls is less than 80 per cent of that for boys.

Progress does not happen across the board in countries, requiring policies to reduce geographical disparities in education. Several governments have redistributed funds toward poorer regions or targeted areas that are lagging. Burkina Faso allocates additional resources to 20 selected provinces, Brazil redistributes resources from richer to poorer regions and has introduced monetary and other incentives to improve teachers' working conditions.

There is now sufficient evidence to illustrate that a range of targeted financial interventions, school-feeding programmes and more flexible learning models are associated with broader access and higher achievement. For such initiatives to be a real safety net, they must be based on partnerships – with parents, non-governmental organizations and other grassroots stakeholders.

Attention to learning conditions

Access is only part of the education equation. Eliminating school fees is crucial for enabling access to the poorest groups. But the policy has to be carefully planned to be sustainable in terms of enough teachers, classrooms and other resources to ensure that learning conditions are viable. Ethiopia,



for example, increased the number of primary schools by 55 per cent over nine years, with small multigrade classes established in rural areas and among pastoralist and semi-agriculturist societies.

What happens in the classroom – the whole process of learning – is just as vital as ensuring that children have access to school. Are teachers properly trained, paid, deployed in the right places and adequately supported? Do children have desks, chairs, notebooks and textbooks? The median primary school completion rate is 78 per cent in South and West Asia and 63 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa. Assessments indicate that poor learning outcomes remain an overriding challenge. In developing countries up to 40 per cent of children fail to reach minimum achievement standards. At the secondary level, boys' underachievement in terms of participation and performance is a growing problem. Students from more privileged socio-economic backgrounds and with access to books consistently perform better than those from poorer backgrounds with limited exposure to reading materials.

A trade-off between access and quality undermines the value of education. Poor quality schooling even reduces the demand for education on the part of parents and runs the risk of creating a generation of marginalized, under-skilled youth and adults.

The more vulnerable children are, the more support they need from schools. Yet the opposite appears to be the norm. A recent survey that polled individuals from more than 7,600 schools in eleven countries³ highlights the strong effect of social inequality on primary education systems, with major gaps in resources between rural and urban schools. The former tend to need major repairs, and are less likely to have electricity and toilets. In Peru and the Philippines, for example, principals in rural areas report that about 70 per cent of their pupils are in schools that needed major repairs or complete rebuilding. The data indicated that working conditions were perceived by principals and teachers to be more difficult in schools serving a majority of disadvantaged students.

Quality learning depends first and foremost on enough properly trained teachers. They are the backbone of high-achieving systems. But pupil/teacher ratios have increased in sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia since 1999. To cope with rapid enrolment increases, countries in both

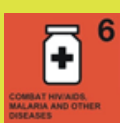
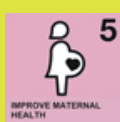
regions have employed large numbers of contract teachers who are not as well remunerated as regular teachers and are likely to have little training. In sub-Saharan Africa, 60 per cent of teachers have no formal training.

Other dimensions of quality are influential: school safety and sanitation, sufficient hours of instruction (at least 800 hours a year), learning materials and a gender-sensitive curriculum with carefully defined aims. School feeding and health programmes encourage parents to enrol their children in primary school. This is especially important given surging food prices. Ample evidence points to their positive impact on attendance and learning. Mother tongue instruction in the first years of school has a proven impact on literacy acquisition. In Mexico and Guatemala, for example, bilingual education in indigenous communities has improved children's learning outcomes.

As countries strive to reach the 'last 20 per cent' they face more complex and more specific challenges that call for innovation, more careful targeting and adapting education to specific needs. Alternative learning models – bridging and catch-up courses, and equivalency programmes – might be the only way to reach some of the most excluded and marginalized groups. Teacher training also beckons new approaches: some 18 million new teachers are needed worldwide to achieve universal primary education by 2015. Shorter and more flexible models, greater use of open and distance learning, and more on-the-job training are some options being explored in a number of developing countries.

Strong foundations in early childhood

Children do not start primary schooling on an equal footing. A child in the developing world has a four-in-ten chance of living in extreme poverty, and nearly 10 million children die each year from preventable diseases before age five. The effects of malnutrition and poor health set in at an early age, affecting social, emotional and cognitive development. Universal primary education has a much higher chance of being achieved if countries invest in programmes for children under age six. When programmes combine nutrition, care, health and education, they not only improve children's well-being. They also prepare them for primary school and improve their results in school. Nobel laureate James Heckman has repeatedly



demonstrated that investing in disadvantaged young children promotes fairness, social justice and productivity. Such programmes level the playing field and break the cycle of disadvantage.

But opportunities are few and far between and tend to benefit the most affluent children. Among developing regions, Latin America and the Caribbean are the most advanced in terms of early childhood care and education provision. Although participation is extremely low in sub-Saharan Africa, several governments have demonstrated commitment to young children: Senegal has made early childhood a priority since the 1980s, two years of kindergarten are now compulsory in Ghana. Cambodia, Guatemala, India and Nicaragua have developed pre-school community centres in rural and marginalized areas.

Such programmes establish strong foundations and need to be vastly scaled up. Comprehensive policies imply an integrated, multi-sectoral approach with particular attention to ensuring smooth transitions between different levels of education and between formal and non-formal paths. Mexico, for example, targets the most disadvantaged and lowest-performing schools at all levels of the system, including all primary schools in indigenous communities. The country's compensatory programmes include provision of early childhood care and education, childcare support for parents, improvement of primary school infrastructure, provision of learning materials, professional development and training for education staff, and monetary incentives for teachers to reduce turnover and absenteeism. Cambodia's Priority Action Programme involves a package that includes reducing costs of schooling to poor families, provision of school meals and healthcare, measures to improve teacher training, and allowances to encourage teachers to take up posts in hardship areas. These interventions have had some success in lowering dropout, improving learning outcomes and reducing children's participation in economic activities.

Early childhood care and education programmes ease the transition to primary school. But robust secondary systems motivate students – and parents – to view and value education along a longer continuum. Most countries now consider nine years of education as compulsory. As countries progress towards universal primary education, demand

for secondary schooling is increasing. Failure to respond to this demand risks encouraging dropout from primary. Focusing solely on primary education is to take a narrow perspective that does not recognize the basic demands of knowledge-based societies.

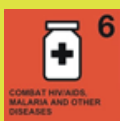
Literacy and lifelong learning – the danger of neglect

If governments are under pressure to increase the number of secondary school places, most are less responsive to literacy gaps among the adult population. Initiatives to reduce poverty are hampered when 774 million adults lack minimal literacy skills. In some of the poorest countries of sub-Saharan Africa, the female literacy rate is under 20 per cent. Literacy not only empowers individuals, it gives adults, especially women, the basic knowledge to improve family health care and start up income-generating initiatives.

Youth and adult education programmes remain marginalized, particularly in terms of public funding. Nevertheless, some governments have begun to strengthen programmes through legislation and designing bridges between non-formal and formal education. China targets the least literate areas and integrates learning to read with training in agricultural and entrepreneurial skills. Brazil has made adult literacy a high political priority involving partnerships with state and municipal bodies, NGOs and other public and private organizations. India, Bangladesh and Senegal have developed closer partnerships with civil society to expand youth and adult learning. It is a matter of political will and commitment towards the most disadvantaged groups, and a belief that education is an instrument for achieving social justice.

The six Education for All goals adopted in Dakar, Senegal in the year 2000 aim to achieve quality basic education for children, youth and adults. They explicitly refer to early childhood, life skills, literacy and education quality, in addition to universal primary education and gender parity and equality. As such these goals represent a strategy for advancing the overall MDG agenda, in particular with regard to reducing poverty, improving child and maternal health and empowering women.

Addressing inequality in education requires



stable levels of public spending – 15 to 20 per cent of government budgets. But development is a compact. Where progress is observed, it is generally associated with political commitment to public education, sound planning and adequate external support. Official development assistance remains well below the \$9 billion required just to reach universal primary education, nor is it targeted to the neediest countries. Effective mechanisms are lacking to address the huge educational gaps in countries facing conflict and post-conflict/natural disaster situations.

The challenges may appear daunting but they have the merit of being clear cut. As the coordinating UN agency for Education for All, UNESCO will unrelentingly press for education to be a top priority on political agendas – at national and international level. The priority is to focus policies, funds and expertise on reaching the most disadvantaged,

marginalized and vulnerable – whether individuals, regions or countries –and improving the quality of education that is being offered. Increasing access for these groups, starting early, being innovative and raising learning standards are yardsticks for measuring success. Good quality must be synonymous with inclusion. When the poorest benefit, all society does. This belief must guide all our policies and actions in the years to come, and will significantly influence progress towards the MDGs.

This issue was contributed by Nicholas Burnett, Assistant Director-General for Education, UNESCO

¹ 2006 figure released by UNESCO's Institute for Statistics in May 2008.

² For extensive monitoring and analysis of basic education trends, see *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2008, "Education for All by 2015: will we make it?"*, UNESCO/Oxford University Press, 2007. www.efareport.unesco.org

³ *A View Inside Primary Schools. A World Education Indicators cross-national study.* UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2007.

To contribute an article to the MDG INSIGHTS or your opinions/reactions to this piece, please contact the MDG Network and the UNDG MDG Policy Network Facilitation Team at the United Nations Development Programme, Bureau for Development and Policy, Poverty Group, 304 East 45th Street, 10th floor. This publication will become available at: www.mdg-gateway.org

To receive this publication and participate on e-discussions on MDGs, register to the MDG Network at: mdg-net@groups.undp.org