

THE STATE OF THE MATTER

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E DUCATION HAS AN UNDENIABLE IMPORTANCE FOR ANY NATION. It is not only a basic human right (included in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and subsequent treaties, enshrined in legislation by governments that ratify them) but also a fundamental issue in the struggle for human dignity and freedom. Education for children is a way out of poverty and helps develop their potential. Achieving universal primary education by 2015 is one of the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) and fighting illiteracy is the objective of UNESCO's Education For All (EFA)¹. Of the 77 million children who do not attend school, 38 million are in Sub-Saharan Africa (2008 figures). One out of five adults worldwide has no basic literacy skill. Special measures are needed to reach the poorest, the most vulnerable and the most disadvantaged social groups.

During the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, held in April 2000, 164 governments affirmed the importance of learning at all ages. Every year the EFA Global Monitoring Report Team issues a report with an analysis of the progress made and recommendations for improvements². The 2008 report highlights the global trends concerning education. One of them is the rise of the so-called knowledge economy, because a more knowledge-intensive world economy inevitably requires more skilled labour. Quality primary education and high-level secondary education, both promoting problem-solving and critical-thinking skills, are thus essential for development.

Due to the abolition of school tuition fees in several countries, the number of children entering primary school has fortunately grown. Access to primary education is increasing but is still far from being universally spread. In 2005, 688 million children worldwide were enrolled in primary school, which is 6.4% more than in 1999. After the World Education Forum in Dakar enrolment improved significantly in sub-Saharan Africa (increasing by 29 million or 36%) and South and West Asia (35 million, 22%),

while in the Arab States it continued at almost the same pace prior to Dakar. India, Nigeria and Pakistan together account for 27% of the children worldwide who do not go to school.

Overall, children are more likely to be left out of school if they come from poor households, live in rural areas and/or have a mother without schooling. For girls the probability of not being in school is even higher.

Also the quality of the education will need to be assessed, and all countries face the challenge of improving it. When children lack trained teachers, proper learning materials, instructional time and adequate schooling facilities, then they are unlikely to master the basics. Several governments are carrying out national education assessments, which often highlight the inequalities in learning outcomes within countries. Moreover, they generally show a relationship between a higher socio-economical status (parents' education, job, household wealth) and better student's achievements. In countries where data is available, we can see that rural children score lower than urban ones in language and mathematics.

In order to address the lack of teachers, alternatives are being sought, such as the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) as an emerging tool for learning. For instance, India has launched EDUSAT, the world's first satellite dedicated to education, adapted for rolling out long distance learning programmes to schools, colleges, teacher-training institutions and non-formal education centres. Older technologies continue to play an important role: radio and television have helped expand access to secondary schooling in Brazil, India and Mexico.

According to the 2008 report some real progress has been observed especially in the number of children entering primary school. Many governments have taken measures to reduce the cost of schooling and tackle obstacles to education for girls. Nevertheless great challenges still remain. Firstly, there is a dramatic lack of schools, teachers and learning materials (across the world more than 18

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“ The most certain way to hide from others the limits of our knowledge is not to go beyond them. ”

GIACOMO LEOPARDI

million new teachers will need to be employed by 2015). Furthermore, poverty and social disadvantage remain major barriers for millions of children and young students. The existing policies aimed to improve both access to and quality of education are often not effective, since they would require much bolder actions, from an early age, to reach the most vulnerable groups and to dramatically expand literacy programmes among youth and adults. Aid for education must also be stepped up in line with promises donors made in 2000.

On 25 January 2008 during the World Economic Forum³ held in Davos, Switzerland, the Global Education Alliance (GEA)⁴ announced the start of a pilot project in the Republic

growing network of private schools for themselves. And contrary to common belief, the quality of these private schools is not worse than that of public schools. Although private schools employ untrained teachers who are paid much less than their government counterparts, and their facilities are grossly inadequate, the education is of good quality. Tooley's research concludes that private schools serving low-income families are not inferior to those provided by the state. Children from private schools outperform similar students from government schools in several key subjects. And this is true even for the unrecognized schools, which are normally dismissed by experts as being of poor quality. Consequently a genuine improvement in



of Rwanda and initiated a collaboration between corporations, the national government and foundations to achieve «education for all» in Rwanda. It will benefit from the successful experience of the Global Education Initiative⁵ in Jordan (2003), in the Indian state of Rajasthan (2004) and in Egypt (2006). Rwanda has been chosen as a pilot country because of its track record of effective public-private partnerships and for the emphasis given by the government on the development of human capital, science and technology. AMD, Cisco, Edelman, Intel and Microsoft, among other partners, have expressed their wish to explore effective ways to help the government of Rwanda to achieve priorities in education. The companies involved will bring knowledge, skills and resources necessary to put children into school and will do so in the form of a partnership, with the national government and local donors.

However, not all schooling is initiated by the governments. In a study by James Tooley⁶ it is shown that private schools exist in slums in India. Despite the official denial of private education for the poor, Tooley found large numbers of informal self-organised schools. He has supervised research on private schools in India, China and sub-Saharan Africa, finding that «the poor have remarkably innovative ways of helping each other» educationally, and even in the most destitute places on Earth they have nurtured a large and

education could result from investments in private schools, such as offering loans for improving the school infrastructure or providing a worthwhile teacher training system. This appears as a very good alternative to public school, which may finally help even more poor children to gain access to education.

¹ Education for All.

² EFA Global Monitoring Report 2008, www.efareport.unesco.org

³ The World Economic Forum is an independent international organization committed to improving the state of the world by engaging leaders in partnerships to shape global, regional and industry agendas. Incorporated as a foundation in 1971, and based in Geneva, Switzerland, the World Economic Forum is impartial and not-for-profit. It is tied to no political, partisan or national interests. www.weforum.org/annual_meeting

⁴ Global Education Alliance.

⁵ Global Education Initiative.

⁶ James Tooley, professor of education policy, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, England, in «Private Schools for the Poor – Education where no one expects it», in *Education Next*, fall 2005, vol. 5, no. 4. ■