

• INGRID VAN TIENHOVEN

It is among the greatest scourges afflicting humanity at the beginning of the 21st century. It has left hundreds of millions of adults disadvantaged and impoverished. Each year, it claims millions of new victims among children. It is destroying human potential on a vast scale. Most of the victims are poor. The vast majority are young girls and women. The scourge in question is not a disease. It is mass illiteracy, caused by exclusion from opportunities for education.

These penetrating lines are from Kevin Watkins, author of the book *Break the cycle of poverty* published by Oxfam International in 1999 to mobilise political will to achieve the internationally agreed development targets of good-quality basic education for all. The Global Campaign for Education was launched in Brussels in October 1999 to achieve this same goal. This campaign brings together teacher unions, development agencies and community organisations working in over 180 countries.

Ten years ago, at the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien (Thailand), governments from 155 countries pledged to provide all of the world's children with access to good quality basic education. The end of the decade was established as a target date. The world's governments have fallen shamefully short of this goal.

At the start of the new millennium:

- 125 million primary-school-age children are not in school: most of them are girls.
- Another 150 million children start primary school but drop out within four years: the vast majority without acquiring basic literacy skills.
- One in four adults in the developing world—872 million people—are unable to read or write, and their numbers are growing.

This is not only a violation of the universal right to education, it also presents a massive waste of human resources and an obstacle to economic development. In an increasingly knowledge-based world economy, exclusion from education translates into growing poverty and inequality between people and nations.

The costs of educational deprivation are incalculable. Lack of basic education undermines efforts to reduce child and maternal mortality, to improve public health and nutrition, and to strengthen

A GLOBAL ACTION PLAN FOR EDUCATION

opportunities for more secure and productive livelihoods. Democracy and good governance cannot flourish in a situation where large sections of the population are excluded from participation as a result of illiteracy.

Looking to the future, the costs of the crisis in world education are rising. Educational inequalities today will translate into the income inequalities of tomorrow. That is why improved access to good quality education holds the key to the development of more equitable patterns of globalisation. At a national level, too, education will play an increasingly important role in shaping life chances.

At the 1995 Social Summit in Copenhagen, governments shifted the finishing line for achieving universal primary education to 2015. Closing the gender gap in primary and secondary education was postponed until 2005. The international community also embraced a new set of international development targets for 2015. These include halving the proportion of the world's population living in poverty and associated targets for child and maternal mortality. In the absence of accelerated progress towards universal education, all of these targets will be missed.

The World Education Forum in Dakar (Senegal), scheduled for April 2000, and the reviews of the World Summit for Social Development and the Fourth World Conference on Women in June, provide an opportunity to deliver on the 2015 commitment to universal education. That opportunity will be lost unless governments make a concerted effort to mobilise political and financial resources.

That is why a large coalition of campaigners is calling for a Global Action Plan (GAP) on education to bring within reach the financing requirements for universal primary education, currently estimated at about USD 8 billion *per annum* for ten years.

Under the GAP, developing countries have to mobilise half of this amount through increased resources and redistribution of wasteful public spending, such as military purchases. The other half of the amount has to be mobilised by the international community through:

- **Increased aid.** Raising aid budgets by around 8% would mobilise USD 3 billion. The share of the aid budgets directed to basic education (today a meagre 2%) should grow through

redistribution from higher levels of education spending. Less emphasis should be placed on technical assistance, and more on capacity building.

- **Debt relief.** The Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative has the potential to generate significant resource flows to over 30 countries. Under the reformed HIPC Initiative, eligibility for debt relief will be contingent on countries demonstrating a commitment to poverty reduction. It is important that a significant proportion of debt relief flows are directed to basic education. In middle-income countries, debt swap arrangements could be developed to finance education initiatives.
- **Private capital.** Although contributions from this source will remain modest in relation to overall financing needs, the GAP could be used to increase funding from non-governmental organisations, foundations and other private sources.

Mechanisms for implementation of the GAP could be agreed at Dakar. It is important to start from two central principles. First, the GAP should be used to support and reinforce existing national strategies. Assistance under the GAP should not be used to create another layer of conditionality.

Second, national ownership and public participation will be the key to successful implementation. Governments should seek to establish through active engagement with civil society the financing requirements for getting 'on track' for 2015. These can be set out in a National Education Action Plan (NEAP) covering the major barriers to more equitable access and improved education quality. The NEAP can both review and evaluate national progress towards basic education for all, and create a political framework capable of supporting accelerated progress.

Sub-Saharan Africa faces particularly severe challenges in education. It is the only part of the world in which the number of children out of school is increasing. Over 40 million children—almost half of the primary school age group—do not see the inside of a classroom. Millions more start school, only to drop out before gaining basic literacy skills. They will join the ranks of the 360 million adults in the region that entered the new millennium in a state of illiteracy. If current trends continue, there will be 57 million primary school age children out of school in 2015.

There are no simple solutions to the education crisis in Africa. The lethal interaction of slow economic growth with rapid population growth, conflict, corruption, AIDS and gender-discrimination are all contributing to the fact that public spending per child has been reduced by a third since the 1970s. Governments also fail to develop appropriate curricula and teaching methods capable of delivering good quality education.

Africa's creditors have been siphoning USD 12 billion a year out of the region in the form of debt repayments—more than double the government spending on primary education. The International Monetary Fund's adjustment programmes have imposed deep cuts in education budgets across Africa. In Zambia, for instance, the primary education budget has fallen by over 20%.

In Zambia, children have less chance of completing primary school than their parents.

On a more positive note, several countries have introduced far-reaching education reforms that hold out the hope of progress. Among them is Uganda, one of the poorest countries in Africa, where enrolment has increased by two million since the government withdrew fees and increased spending on primary education. Countries such as Malawi, Burkina Faso and Mozambique are also implementing far-reaching reforms.

Ultimately, the financial constraints on African governments mean that the 2015 goals cannot be met through domestic efforts alone. That is why Oxfam International is proposing, as part of the GAP, a Compact for Africa. Under the Compact national governments will have to mobilise an additional USD 1.6 billion *per annum* by reducing military expenditure and increasing resources. At the same time the international community has to mobilise USD 2 billion through increased aid and debt relief.

Africa's children do not need more broken promises or vacuous UN targets. What they need is concrete action to show that the treasurer of social justice and international cooperation is not bankrupt.

THE GLOBAL CAMPAIGN FOR EDUCATION CALLS FOR:

- Free and compulsory, quality education for all children, for at least eight years, and a second chance for adults who missed out.
- Increased provision of quality early childhood education and care.
- Increased public expenditure on education to at least 6% of GNP, and new resources through aid and debt relief for the poorest countries.
- An end to child labour.
- Democratic participation of, and accountability to civil society, including teachers and their unions, in education decision-making at all levels.
- Reform of International Monetary Fund and World Bank structural adjustment policies to ensure they support, rather than undermine, free quality education.
- Fair and regular salaries for teachers, properly equipped classrooms and a supply of quality textbooks.
- Inclusive and non-discriminatory provision of services for all.
- A Global Action Plan for basic education to mobilise political will and new resources in support of national education plans to meet the 2015 targets.

For more information about the Global Campaign for Education please email to: global.edu.campaign@ei-ie.org

90

The UN calendar for 2000 represents a golden opportunity to ensure that new urgency, purpose and energy are brought to bear on the agenda for meeting the 2015 development goals. The GAP meets the need for a renewed collective effort to achieve basic education for all. «Education,» wrote Julius Nyerere, the former schoolteacher who led Tanzania to independence and became President, «is not a way of escaping the country's poverty. It is a way of fighting it.»

- *Novib/Oxfam International*

STEERING COMMITTEE OF THE GLOBAL CAMPAIGN FOR EDUCATION

The Steering Committee members come from the following organisations:

- ActionAid;
- Education International;
- Global March against Child Labour;
- Oxfam International;
- Associação Brasileira de ONGs/Ação Educativa–Brazil;
- Campaign for Popular Education, Bangladesh;
- South Africa NGO Coalition/AETASA.