

## Pro-poor Education Policies

Like health, education is both empowering and income enhancing in its impact on the poor. A literate person is more likely to be able to assert his or her property rights, the right to a minimum wage, to obtain credit, to follow instructions regarding the use of medicines or fertiliser and to participate in the political process. And as education promotes self-esteem, it helps the poor to assert their place in society. Basic education is also a catalyst for change: as children from different social groups and gender sit together in school, social barriers are broken down and social prejudice dispelled. If there is one lesson from development experience that rings out loud and clear, it is the profound impact that the education of a girl-child will have on political freedoms, gender equality, and poverty reduction.<sup>45</sup> The experience of South Korea, Sri Lanka, Kerala (India) and Mauritius bear out these expectations.

It is in appreciation of the enormous benefits of education for peace, democracy and development that the Dakar Summit in April 2000 adopted six comprehensive goals:

- Improving early childhood care and education;
- Ensuring by 2015 that all children have access to, and complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality;
- Ensuring equitable access to life skills programmes;
- Achieving a 50 per cent increase in adult literacy by 2015;
- Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005;
- Improving all aspects of the quality of education.

But, as noted earlier, illiteracy remains high, and progress in reaching these goals is far from satisfactory:

- More than 100 million children worldwide are out of school, and 60 per cent of these are girls;
- One in four children does not complete five years of basic education;
- Nearly one billion adults are illiterate; all of them live in developing countries;
- The Dakar goals are at risk: more than 30 countries are not on track to achieve universal primary enrolment by 2015. Given current trends, 75 per cent of those out of school in 2015 will be in Africa;

- Completing primary education of good quality is the indicator of success, and almost 90 countries are not on track to achieve this. Also, 35 countries are not on track to meet the 2005 gender goals at primary and secondary levels.

However, in the absence of public action in far too many developing countries in providing basic education and health care, the private sector is stepping into the gap. The result is that the poor are excluded from these services by lack of income; and as the rich find that their needs are effectively met in this way, the elites lose interest in pressing for public action. Indeed, public institutions suffer as the more able teachers, doctors and nurses find it more profitable to work in the private sector, further compounding the problem. It is, therefore, necessary to adopt pro-poor policies to achieve effective action.

Achieving the Dakar goals requires pro-poor policies at national levels and significant mobilisation of international support.

Governments at national level must enlist local communities, private trusts and NGOs, and increase the share of national budgets devoted to high quality primary education, at the same time giving greater priority to the education of girls and women. As the wide disparities in the levels of education among developing countries shows, success is not beyond their wit or resource if there is political will to learn from good practice and implement it. For example, the literacy drive in Madhya Pradesh in India that has handed over power to a network of village committees has seen the literacy rate in that state rise from 44 to 66 per cent in the past eight years – almost double the rate at which literacy has grown in the rest of the country.<sup>46</sup> Such examples – and the example of the TEHIP project in Tanzania in the context of health quoted earlier – show the potential.

That education policies in many poor countries are now effectively driven by poverty-reduction strategies – enabling sector-wide approaches and better attention to education and health – is to be welcomed.

Having said that, it is also clear that the material, institutional and human resources at the disposal of poor countries are not sufficient to achieve the Dakar goals, and that support from the global community will be needed to reach them. The G8 governments agreed in Dakar that ‘no countries seriously committed to *Education for All* will be thwarted in their achievement of this goal by a lack of resources’. Besides the pledges made at the Monterrey Conference in 2002, there is no indication of further progress. In this context, the pledge by the G8 Leaders at Kananaskis in July 2002 to support the efforts of UNICEF and other UN agencies to promote access for girls and gender equality in education should be welcomed. Overall, as discussed above, much greater support is needed from the global community than has been placed on the table so far.