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Privatising Education

The concept of privatising the educational system is gaining ground in poor African countries unable to sustain the cost of educating the population. More and more governments are shifting the burden to parents through involving them in self-help schemes, class-room building and through fees. Where fees have not yet been introduced governments are actively considering doing so. State expenditure in the educational sector is declining as for instance in Kenya where the decline is from 19% (1975) to 13.8% (1986), Lesotho from 23.5% (1975) to 14.8% (1984), Angola 18.8% (1982) to 16.7% (1984) and Ethiopia from 13.4% (1976) to 8% (1985).

The results can be seen in declining enrolment levels. For instance primary school enrolment dropped from 1.32 million in 1984 to 1.26 million in 1986. In Angola the decline was even more drastic as enrolment dropped from 1.7 million in 1980 to only 930,000 in 1985. Although economic pressure caused by increasing debt liabilities and uncertain sources of revenue are partly to blame for the cutbacks in spending on education the educational set-up must take some responsibility for the failure to ignite the flame of learning among the people. The number of schools serving rural children are disproportionately small and most of those who do manage to get through the primary system do not continue their studies. Merely transferring the cost of education to parents is not going to change what is basically wrong in a system which generally produces students with the wrong type of skills.

The proposal to introduce school fees for primary and secondary schooling in most of the African countries will of necessity hit the poor and will make education the preserve of the privileged few, exactly the thing poor developing countries have been trying to arrest. It seems to us that education and schooling in these African states is taking a step backwards. The trend common today in these countries to inhibit the output at higher levels will also, we feel, hamper the growth of intellectual pursuits without, necessarily, improving standards of general education at lower levels. We would do well to study the importance of what is happening in Africa today in the light of our own experiments in compulsory primary education so that we do not fall into the same pitfalls.