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**E**ducation for All, universal access to primary school and satisfaction of basic learning needs: these are the main educational objectives which developing countries and the international organizations have established for the 1990s.

Ever since the World Conference on Education for All (Jomtien, Thailand, March 1990), the improvement and expansion of basic education services have regained a prominent place on the agendas of international meetings, on the programmes of the main international organizations and bilateral cooperation agencies, and in the action plans prepared by educational authorities in the majority of developing countries.

There is no doubt that, despite the economic difficulties experienced in the 1980s, impressive advances have been achieved in the last thirty years in terms of expanding primary education. The growth of enrollment has been considerable; the number of schools has doubled and that of teachers tripled.

Nevertheless, the results obtained should not lead us to overlook the three main obstacles which still prevent us from attaining the objectives established by such common agreement.

### Three obstacles preventing universal access to basic education

The first obstacle, and perhaps the one which has received most attention, arises from the large numbers of boys and girls who have no access to the educational system, at present numbering over 130 million, more than half of whom are concentrated in four countries only (Bangladesh, India, Nigeria and Pakistan). In some cases, the future prospects are not bright. In southern Asia, for instance, population growth represents a serious challenge in terms of the additional resources required to continue expanding educational services. In Africa, already in the 1980s the school-age population was growing faster than enrollment, so that the gross rate of school attendance fell from 79% in 1980 to 72% by 1988.

The second obstacle, related to conditions of poverty and the low income levels of vast social sectors, is the high proportion of school drop-outs. Many students abandon the educational system before they have completed primary school, probably without having acquired a satisfactory standard of knowledge, abilities and skills. In other words, their rights to education is more formal than real, considering that they do not manage to derive full benefit from the brief time they spend at school, and in many cases will never again be given any opportunity to learn once they have quite the educational system.

Taking the Asia region as an example, although the problem is not restricted to that region only, 1985 data suggest that in India, Myanmar

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and Pakistan only half the children enrolled in the first grade ever reach the fifth; in Bangladesh and Laos, little more than one third, while in Nepal only 27% complete the first years of the basic cycle and 40% drop out in the first grade.

The third obstacle, which is more related to the quality of education supplied, resides in the significant quantity of students who repeat courses, especially the first grade. This means to say that a considerable number of boys and girls who have just entered the educational system do not enjoy the experience, or feel the pleasure and the satisfaction of learning, but on the contrary only the frustration of having to repeat their grade, as if the time spent in the classroom had produced no sort of learning whatever. This is unlikely and the remedy is somewhat unusual (i.e. starting the studies all over again), if one considers the progress made by modern teaching methods where child development is concerned.

Repetition in primary education, and its problematic relation with learning and school failure, has been the subject of much research in recent decades, looking into both its frequency and its causes, as well as trying to assess better ways of gradually reducing the size of the problem.

With a view to making a new start in the study and analysis of repetition, UNICEF and the International Bureau for Education (IBE-UNESCO) held a technical meeting in Geneva from 15 to 18 February, attended by experts from different disciplines and different geographical areas.

### How many cases of repetition are there and how much do they cost?

Exactly what is known at present about the dimensions of repetition in the developing countries? A quick look at the specialized literature and comparisons made so far, taking the last decades as a reference, appears to highlight at least two critical aspects of the phenomenon its enormous size and its persistence.

The figures for 1990 covering 84 countries suggest a total of 35.6 million cases of repetition in primary education. Almost half of these are concentrated in four countries (China, India, Brazil and Mexico). This figure, however, gives only an incomplete and partially outdated general view, considering that the data refer basically to 1990 and do not cover all the countries. There are no reliable data concerning countries with very large school-age populations, such as Pakistan, Nigeria, Vietnam and Myanmar. There is no doubt, moreover, that the many con-

flicts which broke out after 1990 in Africa and in several Balkan countries have had devastating effects on the supply of education. Equally, in Russia and several countries of Eastern Europe, the serious socio-economic crisis has certainly had a negative impact on the quality of public social services, while little is known about the educational situation in the new former Soviet Republics, especially those in Central Asia.

As a result, the official figure of some 35 million cases of repetition is far below the real figure. Over and above the cases in countries for which data are available, there are still those not recorded in official statistics which need to be added.

It is really in Latin America that it has been observed that are often marked discrepancies between data given in official statistics and those obtained either through surveys or by applying computerized statistical simulation models. Enquiries made in several countries (Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic to mention but a few) have indicated that the real repetition rate is almost double the average official rate, especially where first grade repetition is concerned.

Assuming these estimates are correct, and nothing appears to indicate that they are not, towards the end of the 1980s in the countries of Latin America the real percentage of repetitions in the first six grades of primary school would amount to 40.9%, compared with the figure of 15.3% officially declared by the countries, while the real repetition rate in the first grade would be as high as 41.4% on average, instead of the official rate of 21.7%. In overall terms, the total number of repetitions in the region would then be close to 20.5 million, (more than double that indicated in official data,) mostly concentrated in Brazil, (11.4 million) and in three other countries (Mexico, 2.7 million; Argentina and Colombia, around 1 million each).

According to available data and to studies carried out by UNESCO, the underestimation of repetition in Latin America would be due essentially to poor collection and processing of data. Many pupils who obtain poor qualifications drop out before the complete their school year, because they know they will have to repeat their grade. These same pupils then re-enroll the following year in the same grade, but are statistically considered drop-outs rather than repetitions. Moreover, in rural and more remote areas, where teachers are less well trained and receive less supervision and advice from the educational system, the task of collating data to fill in sometimes

complicated registers and forms can easily lead to mistakes or simplifications, so that data are often unreliable.

Repetition rates in Africa, and in particular in sub-Saharan Africa, are already a matter of concern in themselves, especially where the first primary grade is concerned. If they are underestimated, on the other hand, the problem could take on truly alarming proportions.

In Asia, it would appear that the collection and processing of statistics presents problems in several countries. May it then be assumed that repetition is underestimated there too? It is difficult to say with any certainty on the basis of available information, although there are plenty of analogies with the situation in Latin America. Assuming an underestimated proportion of repetition of the order of 50% in the regions of Latin America and Asia alone there would be over 50 million cases of repetition. This fact and the alarming situation as regards many countries in sub-Saharan Africa make repetition one of the main causes of internal inefficiency of educational systems and one of the main obstacles preventing the spread of primary education. What is more, it is not a temporary phenomenon, but one which has existed for a long time and one where no improvement has been achieved despite all the efforts. Although analyses of repetition trends are few and far between there seem to be few educational systems which have managed gradually and steadily to reduce the size of the problem. Regional averages obviously do not reflect the great diversity of situations, but they can give a general idea of the trends.

Taking official statistics of around 1990 as a starting point, compared with 1980 in the African countries, for instance, there was a tendency for both the total number of repetitions and their overall percentage to increase, especially in countries of sub-Saharan Africa. The problem takes on alarming proportions in French and Portuguese-speaking countries, where in many cases overall percentages close to or above 15% have been observed, distinctly higher compared to figures from elsewhere in the world. On the other hand, many of these countries have to cope with the twin problems of having a formal educational system with insufficient coverage and with poor internal efficiency, which means that the limited proportion of school-age children attended by the system experience considerable difficulties making regular progress with their studies. In the Arab States, with few exceptions, the repetition trend appears to indicate a fall in the overall percentage and an increase in number of repetitions. The trends in the region of Asia and Oceania are less uniform and the data for the period considered are incomplete. In any event, it is clear that there have not been any significant improvements. — UNESCO