

## Universal Primary Education Educating All Children

**I**N Latin America mothers learn how to stimulate their young children's curiosity and emotional development so they will be primed to learn when they start school. In South Asia, teacher trainers join in a collective attempt to draw a cat as part of a lesson in creative teaching methods. In Africa students learn and teach about ecology and grow their daily lunch in a school garden.

These are some of the largely unsung successes in the worldwide effort to improve primary education. They represent the bright news in what for the last decade or so has been a deteriorating story of primary education in developing countries. Education for All today remains a vision despite decades of progress in schooling the children of the developing world and despite the hopeful words in the declaration of the 1990 Education for All conference in Jomtien, Thailand: "Every person — child, youth and adult — shall be able to benefit from educational opportunity designed to meet their basic learning needs."

More than 130 million children — about two thirds of them girls — are following in their elders' uneducated footsteps and face a life in a world separate and unequal to the one inhabited by those who are schooled. In that world they will be unable to calculate the change they receive from a merchant, understand the instructions on a packet of oral rehydration salts, read a letter from a loved one, comprehend political developments reported in a newspaper or advance beyond the most menial and ill-paying work.

After two decades of progress education began to stall in the 1980s. Economic crises and a population boom amount children of primary school-age have cut into educational resources. Under the pressures of debt and falling commodity periods, expenditures on education fell during the 1980s to the extent that by the end of the decade the goal of universal primary education was reaching rather than advancing in nearly half the developing countries.

In many countries, fewer teachers are being trained, fewer textbooks printed, fewer schools opened. High percentages of children, particularly minorities and those living in rural areas and urban slums, either never enter a classroom or fail to complete primary school. The number of girls enrolled in primary school is 10 to 30 per cent lower than the number of boys.

The Education for All Summit of Nine High-Population Developing Countries was aimed at developing and supporting innovative ways to change those trends. The nine countries represented at this meeting — Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria and Pakistan — are home to more than half the world's population, almost three quarters of the illiterates and more than half the out-of-school children.

These nations, powerful in both numbers and resources, have the capability to solve their educational problems. However, doing so will require unprecedented mobilization and commitment to ambitious but realistic plans of action.

Achieving Education for All is a matter of both quantity and quality. The large percentages of drop-outs and students repeating grades are a testament to systems that have not served all the people. It is unclear whether children who do finish primary school actually learn the academic basics and the skills necessary in live full lives in their societies, and there are few adequate means for measuring these achievements. In addition, teachers' skills vary widely, and unimaginative methods and irrelevant curricula often kill children's curiosity and creativity. It's no wonder that parents, many of whom must sacrifice heavily to put their children in school, often pull them

out before they have achieved literacy and numeracy.

The issues of quantity and quality and the experiences of the last 30 years point to the need for looking at education through a microscope and a telescope — that is, acting locally in each community and village while analyzing common problems, comparing notes and learning from each other. Equally important, communities themselves must participate in evaluating and monitoring the success of the schools. Economic, cultural and political realities demand creative approaches, whether in the formal school system or in alternative programmes, that reflect local conditions and priorities.

If there aren't enough professionally qualified teachers to go around, for example, enthusiastic but untrained women and men must be given the support and supervision that will enable them to fill the gap. If rural families need their children's labour, schools will have to accommodate their daily and yearly work calendar. If cultural rules prohibit girls from sharing classroom with boys, girls-only schools or home schools will have to be developed.

Many programmes have already demonstrated that students can learn just as much in "informal" classrooms at the same or lower class as in the formal school system. These programmes offer the chance of a better life to working children, street children, ethnic minorities, girls and other educationally disadvantaged students. But alternative schools must not be looked at as secondclass; they deserve the same careful design and thoughtful assessment as the formal schools. It's clear that both types of schools may have something to learn from one another, especially in view of positive evaluations of

several alternative programmes.  
**Examples**

One of them, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, is educating poor rural children at a cost of only \$15 per student per year, and 90 per cent off the students graduate into the formal school system. *Curcos Comunitarios* (community courses) in Mexico offer primary education to children in remote rural areas not reached by regular schools by combining methods of formal and non-formal programmes. The part-time primary education programme in Pune, India, makes it possible for children who are 9 to 14 years old to have a second chance at primary education.

These programmes prove the potential of alternative approaches. Their successes also help to create a culture of literacy that feeds on itself and enhances the likelihood that Education for All can really reach "all". The flexibility to experiment with these "whatever works" approaches must be the cornerstone of education in the future.

No matter how cost-efficient the approach, though, education is not free. Compensating for the shortfall left over from the 1980s and scaling up for the transformation will be costly. The effort will require national and local governments to profoundly rethink their priorities. It will require what has come to be known as "20/20 vision": developing countries devoting at least 20 per cent of their budgets to the priority human needs of their people, and 20 per cent of all international aid supporting those priority needs. It will require a large share of the total national budget and the education budget to primary and basic education. And it will require new resources from multilateral agencies such as UNICEF, international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the Regional Development Banks, and the bilateral agencies of the industrialized countries to put more of their assistance into basic education.