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Education: The Key To Development

THE village, a patch work of ragged settlements, is down a track that is impassable during the rainy season. The buildings are mud and plaster or cement block with roofs of thatch or corrugated tin.

The primary school, enclosing a dusty playing field, is dilapidated.

In a room with two and a half walls and some plaited banana fronds where the roof ought to be, teacher drills a small class of children. He has spread one wall with a scrapping of damp mud for use as a blackboard. The pupils have two benches to sit on, but there are no books, no paper, no pencils. The teacher will drill them for an hour or two,then send them home.

"The roof fell in after a storm last year, he says," "and we have been waiting for repairs. But as you know, education in our country is SAPped-".(SAPped is a newly coined West African expression meaning short of funds because of the SAP, or Structural Adjustment Programme, imposed on the advice of economists from the industrialized nations.)

The teacher has not been paid for months, and even if the school had books and he could do his job properly, he would still have to spend time farming in order to feed his family.

The village is in Northern nigeria, but its name, Uganda, is appropriate. The conditions are present practically anywhere in sub-Saharan Africa.

Educational Tailspin. It is the reality of schooling for many children in rural Africa, where economic hardship has recently sent two decades of educational progress into a tailspin.

In other areas, especially in South Asia, the problem is also cultural, involving discrimination against women. The primary school enrolment rate for girls in most countries in that region ranges from about 50 to 80 per cent of the rate for boys. Literacy rates for women range between approximately one third and one half those for men.

Between 1960 and 1975 school enrolment more than doubled in developing countries in an effort to reach universal primary education by 1980. But many fell far short, and during the 1980s entolment actually declined in one third of the 35 countries that are worst off educationally.

Public expenditure on education shrank in 19 of those countries, and since resources are invariably skewed towards secondary and higher institutions, primary schooling was hit hardest. Only 10.5 per cent of all international aid is given to education, and just 0.5 per cent of overall aid is dedicated to primary education.

The amount spent per teacher and pupil has been dropping in many countries, in some quite dramatically. Dilapidated classrooms empty desks and lockers, out-of-date and irrelevant textbooks, are the all too common result. In the lowest-income countries, the median amount spent on teaching mateirals per pupil per year in 50 cents, compared with US$68.20 in industrialized countries.

The Lion's share of primary schoo, expenditure is devoted to salaries for teachers, but these too are pared to the bone because of cuts, SAPs and economic hardship. In some African countries—Ghana, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Zambia—salaries have slumped by over half since the mid–1970s.

The accompanying decline in morale has further contributed to the drop in educational quality, which means that many children in school take years to master basic skills, becoming perennial repeaters.

A decade of set-back has badly damaged the prospect of universal primary education, even by the year 2000.

The scale of needs is daunting. More than 100 million children of school age, 60 million of them girls, never step inside a classroom. More than 960 million adults, two thirds of them women, are illiterate. At least another 100 million children and countless more adults do not complete their basic education. They attend classes irregularly and eventually drop out.

Many are pressured by competing family demands. Boys have to herd livestock, girls help out with younger siblings or caring for those sick at home, older children and mothers go out to work. Others stop school because they cannot afford the cost of books, materials or uniforms.

Education And Development Linked

Education and development are two sides of a single coin. The process of building human capital is the vital key to economic growth, technological prowess and social transformation. Nations and people are both keenly aware that education is the passport to a materially better quality of life. Even among the least well-off, the appetite for learning, and for the certificates which promise a future with respectable, well-paid employment, is prodigious.

However inadequate the classroom and the books, school opens possibilities; no school means no prospects for the future. Many parents do their utmost, therefore, to keep a child in school, particularly sons, traditionally bound to assume responsibility for the elderly.

The value of sending a girl to school is not so tangible to many parents in the developing world. In the short term, the benefits of her domestic labour are forgone, and when she marries and leaves home the family stands to lose its investment altogether.

But schooling for girls has far-reaching social and economic benefits . Research shows that a wide educational gender gap, in which far more boys attend school than girls, has a negative effect on a country's economic productivity.

A wide gender gap in education is also reflected in social conditions , such as higher infant mortality rates and larger family sizes—averages of seven or eight children compared to averages of three or four. Educated mothers feed and care better for their children, who therefore learn faster and do better in school. Healthier families mean, ultimately, a healthier work-force; smaller families put less strain on already over-stretched services and thin job markets.