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The state of primary education

IN A recent survey in Kenya, farmers were presented with a diseased maize plant and asked what they thought had caused the damage and what measures might be taken to control it.

An unschooled farmer ventured three possible causes: weeds, birds and hailstones. None of these, as it happened, were responsible. When a farmer with seven years of primary schooling was presented with the same problem, however, he made a much more sophisticated diagnosis: "This is what amodonde, the stalk borer, does. It attaches the stem and makes it wither at the buds, sometimes without you knowing it." He then went on to describe in detail two ways of dealing effectively with the problem. This anecdote, drawn from the extensive literature on how primary schooling improves cognitive skills, sheds light on a key truth. Industrial and agricultural development is rooted in knowledge and skills, says Nat Collects, Deputy Executive Secretary to the Inter-Agency Commission of the World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA).

"Unless policy-makers begin to see (primary) education in its relationship to other sectoral development — at the core of other sectoral development — they will continue to treat it as a kind of lost cousin or step-child," Mr Colletta points out.

Unfortunately, primary education has not been gaining much ground world-wide over the last few years. Enrolment rates are declining in many low income countries. Fewer than 60 per cent of children entering school in these countries complete a full primary course.

As a result, adult illiteracy rates remain high. The repetition rate is also a problem: children in lower-income countries are two to five times more likely to repeat a grade than those in higher-income countries. This repetition increases the drop-out rate, costs money and demoralises students and teachers.

Even students who finish primary school are not necessarily well schooled. Many of them are not able to meet the academic standards set by their own countries.

PROBLEMS

Several factors affect the quality of primary education. The availability and quality of textbooks vary greatly from country to country. When 10 to 20 children have to share one textbook, when books fall apart in a matter of months or when they are full of misinformation or contain dauntingly difficult material, children can get very little of value from them.

Teaching resources are often inadequate. Teacher guides for example are especially valuable when teachers are under-trained or have had little access to text books in their own schooling. But these manuals tend to be in extremely short supply. In Guinea-Bissau, a World Bank study reports, there were no teacher guides for any grades or subjects other than Grade 1.

It is no wonder then that teacher motivation suffers. In addition to the lack of satisfactory books and materials, teachers may be poorly trained and supported. In areas where there is a shortage of qualified primary school teachers, standards drop. According to the World Bank, a third of all primary school teachers in Nepal lacked post-primary education themselves. In Nigeria, only five years of primary education were required for entry to teacher education in 1981.

Almost universally, primary school teachers are poorly paid. Being a sch[illegible] teacher is always one of the lowest-paying positions for an educated person in any [illegible]icty.

In additi[illegible] teachers in remote areas [illegible]ve special problems. 'In the [illegible]leveloping world, primary sch[illegible] teachers in rural areas rea[illegible]y have it rough: no equipment, no collegial support and pay is slow in coming," says an education researcher familiar with the situation in developing countries. She recalls the plight of a teacher in Indonesia who was paid some US $30 a month, had to depend on the community for housing and received short rations of government rice mixed with dirt.

OPTIMISM

There is, however, reason for optimism. "Parents are not foolish and neither are their kids," says the researcher. "If they see their kids learning, they will sacrifice a lot and support the teacher and support the school." In Sri Lanka, she notes, after a reform increased local control of schools, "there was a tremendous response from parents who made teaching materials."

Programmes such as Venezuela's Instrumental Enrichment are being singled out for their successes in helping teachers develop strategies to deal with the problems of very disadvantaged schools. Such programmes can lead to learning less by rote and more through active classroom participation.

In addition to educational quality, two other major problems in the field are access and equity. One hundred million children do not attend school. A high percentage of these are from poor rural and urban families, from religious and ethnic minority groups or are disabled. Many of them are girls. Sometimes there is no school they can get to, sometimes they are prevented from going and sometimes they are discriminated against in school. Millions cannot attend because they are needed to work at home. Half the children in rural areas of the world complete only four years of school.

Often, both parents and children perceive the education offered as irrelevant to their lives. UNESCO reports that in India, where nearly 900 languages and dialects are spoken, there are only 15 languages in which instruction is given. For girls in much of the world, enrolment is still lagging; when they do enrol, girls may be given an inferior education.

INCENTIVES

But these problems of equity and access are being dealt with creatively all over the world. 'People believed 40 years ago,' says a WCEFA source, "that naturally, over time, educational systems would grow and everybody would be included. In the last few years, it's become obvious that because of all the competing demands, it's not a natural process."

In recognition of this fact, programmes such as the Brazil Street Children Project have been developed. The initiative in Brazil consists of 70 different programmes that use various methods to reach out to seven million children living in the streets and give them help and an education they can really use.

Operation Blackboard in India assigns two teachers to every primary school — even small, remote ones. One of the teachers is always a woman. In this way, people who are reluctant to send their daughters to school are reassured that a woman will be teaching them. This project also helps teachers with the problems of isolation and lack of collegial support.

In other countries, primary education is being made available in the evening, so children can get their work done in the daytime. There are also projects which involve child care for younger siblings, so that older sisters can attend school.

All these efforts have yielded promising results and more ideas are constantly being generated. "What makes me optimistic," says a WCEFA official, "is that it really isn't that expensive. Even if you doubled the expenditure per person for primary education, it would still be minuscule," compared with the costs for higher levels of education. Societies could hardly find a greater return on their investments.