

A study on primary

by CILIA JOLIS

DURING THE LAST decade, primary education has taken a turn for the worse in many developing countries. Moreover, even where primary schooling continues to grow—which is generally still the case—progress towards universal primary education has slowed. The financial resources for paying teachers and maintaining the quality of educational services are drying up.

These are the conclusions drawn from a new study, primary Education and Economic Recession, to be published in 1990 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The study shows that since 1980, 40 per cent of the world's developing countries have seen the "key educational goal" of universal primary schooling move further beyond their grasp.

On the eve of the Bangkok "Education for All" conference in March and International Literacy Year (ILY) 1990, proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly, these findings provide alarming evidence that universal primary schooling, so crucial for

literacy, is a daunting challenge.

As long as enrolment stagnates, current inequalities, such as a limited access to school for girls and women, are bound to persist. Complicating the situation is the declining quality of education, exemplified by poorly-paid teachers and an inadequate supply of books and other learning materials.

"Unless an all-out effort is made to boost the quality of primary schooling, to make it accessible to all children, and to give education renewed financial priority, the fight against world illiteracy will not be won," says Dieter Berstecher, one of the UNESCO specialists responsible for the study.

The UNESCO study focuses on what has happened recently to primary education in the world's 42 Least Developed Countries (LDCs). Of the countries exam-

ined, 28 are in Africa, 13 in Asia and the Pacific, and one (Haiti) in the Caribbean. However, the study also examines 66 nations which are not considered "least developed" by the United Nations classification system, but which have been hard hit by debt and economic stagnation during the 80s.

According to the study, enrolment is dropping in one out of every five developing countries. In some African nations, primary school student numbers declined between 1980 and 1985 by as much as one-third. The reasons behind this decrease are various. The structural adjustment programmes devised to deal with the economic crisis have often had a negative impact on social expen-

diture, including education.

According to UNESCO, lead UN Agency for ILY, when inflation is taken into account, educational spending per primary school student has declined over the last decade in half of the world's developing countries. The trend is particularly marked in Latin America and the Caribbean, but visible in Africa as well. "It is clear that as a proportion of national budgets, education today commands a lower priority", says Berstecher.

The quality of primary schooling has deteriorated in many developing countries, the report states. For example, teachers are receiving lower pay in many countries. According to Berstecher, almost two-thirds of the

education

teachers in developing countries may receive lower salaries than they did in 1980.

"As the quality of education falls, many parents hesitate to send their children to school", says Berstecher. "Why send a child to school when you know he or she will not learn anything?"

Worse still, many of those boys and girls who attend school have little incentive to stay on. On average, only four out of every ten school children in the developing world tend to complete their primary education. Drop-out and grade repetition rates, especially in rural schools, are, according to UNESCO, "extremely high". Most of those who leave primary school after only two or three years are bound to relapse into illiteracy.

The 1960s and 1970s saw an impressive expansion of primary

education in the developing world. By 1980, 444 million pupils were attending primary schools in the Third World, compared with 310 million ten years earlier. Sub-Saharan Africa alone doubled its school enrolment from 20 to 46 million pupils. Many experts believed that universal primary schooling was only a matter of time and investment. "Today, with only ten years to go to the year 2000, this faith is difficult to keep", says Berstecher.

During 1990, to help boost literacy among children and adults, UNESCO will launch a comprehensive decade-long "Plan of Action" for literacy. The Plan will build upon the Organization's four regional programmes already under way in Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Arab States, and Africa.