

Transitions in pastoral communities in Uganda

Classes under the trees

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In the past, the children of pastoralists in Karamoja, Uganda, never went to school because their forefathers had cursed education. It was not an outright refusal of education, but rather the competing need for subsistence labour. The Alternative Basic Education for Karamoja (ABEK) programme and the Early Childhood Development and Education (ECDE) programmes, introduced among the Karamojong communities, has encouraged them to enroll their children in schools. The programmes help smooth the transition from non-formal to formal schooling, and monitor the children's performance, contributing to avoiding high dropout rates in the formal school system.

Access to informal schools

The ABEK programme is funded by several organisations, including Save the Children and the Bernard van Leer Foundation, and it approaches education knowing the realities of a pastoral childhood. Through it, the people of Karamoja, who have a precarious labour-intensive lifestyle with an over-dependence on women and children for domestic and agro-pastoral activities, recognised that education and pastoralism can go together. In a symbolic ceremony in 1995 they cleansed the curse that their forefathers had pronounced on the pen, marking the birth of formal education in Karamoja. The ECDE programme, meanwhile, strengthens the capacity of early childhood care, development and education, and facilitates the transition from home to ABEK and then to formal schools.

In support of the Millennium Development Goal of Universal Primary Education¹, ABEK focuses on changing negative attitudes to education in general, and on the education of girls in particular. It does this by providing a curriculum relevant to the Karamojong child and encouraging a path to formal school. Teaching is conducted in community centres

near the Karamojong homesteads, but increasingly children are taught under trees, at suitable hours so that learning does not interfere with domestic chores, by community tutors known as facilitators. The facilitators are recruited from the immediate vicinity and trained on the job. Karamojong elders are involved in all aspects of planning, approving and monitoring the programme.

The ABEK scheme makes education relevant to a pastoral lifestyle and has drastically changed parental attitudes. Rather than seeing education as a threat, the majority of the Karamojong parents now wave their children off to school.

The curriculum is fused with topics emphasising reading, writing, numeracy, life skills and occupational skills. It is a package in 10 non-linear thematic modules, written in the local language with instructions on literacy and numeracy in both English and the local language, within the context of pastoral life. Teaching methods are participatory and functional, and linked to indigenous knowledge and basic life skills.

A smooth transition to formal school

To strengthen the link between ABEK and the formal schools, the district implementation teams organise workshop training for formal school teachers, school management committees, and parent-teacher associations on the ABEK philosophy and methods. The training discusses ways to follow up, optimise knowledge and skills and support children who cross from ABEK to formal schools. It also sets a framework for similar standards within ABEK and the formal school system to ensure a smooth transition. Children are encouraged to move to formal schools whenever they are ready. Since 1999 over 7,000 Karamojong children have joined formal schools, out of a total of nearly 33,000 learners in 268 ABEK learning centres.

Approach

Planning for more effective transitions from informal to formal schools for children should take into account:

- support of family literacy practices to improve literacy skills;
- strengthening of classroom practices to support the community lifestyle;
- sharing of good practices in each setting;
- differentiation between discontinuities common to all children and those linked to their culture or social context, taking into account both home and school environments that encourage continuity.



Photo: Courtesy Save the Children-Uganda

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Effective transition has also been aided by the Karamojong students themselves who have identified ways of interacting with significant family and community members who function as socialisation agents. In addition, the Ugandan government assumed responsibility for the recruitment, training and payment of non-formal instructors, as part of a foundation for transition and a basis for building the professional capacity and competence of the facilitators.

Challenges

- The ABEK programme, in encouraging the Karamojong to endorse education, calls for substantial government investment in schools and ECD interventions, the latter currently vested in the hands of the private sector. Each formal school must adhere to minimum Ministry of Education standards.
- Verbal interaction promotes early literacy, but children who enrol in formal schools are held back by lack of reading materials at home, resulting in a limited vocabulary. The revival of traditional literacy practices in pastoral communities, such as story telling, should be supported.
- The ABEK teachers are local para-professionals with limited training, selected from within the community. This greatly affects the teaching strategy during the transition to formal school. Identification of learning processes, a wide curriculum, versatile activities and a good

teaching language are central to building connections between ABEK and the formal system.

- Traditionally, Karamojong beliefs were that education was unnecessary as a livestock livelihood provided for all needs. Families still rely heavily on children for housework, childcare and other tasks, but parents are asked to release at least one or two children from their duties to attend formal school, which is critical to keeping students in school. When ABEK learners join formal schools they are no longer as available to do domestic chores.
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The challenging livelihood and socio-economic realities of pastoralist communities demand that children are engaged in contributing to household survival. A flexible education system recognising this reality may be the only option to provide an opportunity for children in this context to balance schooling with household obligations.

Note

- 1 The second goal of the Millennium Development Goals sets out by the year 2015 to “ensure that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling” <www.un.org/millenniumgoals>