TOWARDS UNIVERSAL EDUCATION WORLDWIDE:
MAJOR CHALLENGES AND STRENGHTS

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THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN FOSTERING AND PROMOTING development, both at individual and at social level, has been recognised over the centuries by most civilisations around the world, and education is today declared as a fundamental human right. Nevertheless, the access to education – either through formal or informal channels – is still far from reality for millions of people worldwide. One of the UN Millennium Development Goals is indeed the achievement of universal primary education by 2015. All parties involved in accomplishing that goal – nations, politicians, local communities and NGOs – are facing multiple and complex challenges, particularly in the way they relate to each other and to the individuals concerned. It is thus essential that the means used to address these challenges be not simply effective, but also relevant and sustainable.

Informal education is the primary channel of instruction in Africa[1] and in most of the regions on which the UN's Education for All (EFA) programme is focused. Although its peculiarities may vary from country to country, or even among local communities, informal education has been generally recognized as a means for involving all sectors of a society in the endeavour towards universal education. A remarkable example in Africa is the Uganda Youth Development Link (UYDEL) programme *Building Capacities for Non-Formal Education and Life Skills*[2], instituted in April 2004 with financial and technical assistance from UNESCO Section for Literacy and non-Formal Education 2004-'05 and the participation of the Uganda Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, along with Makerere University. The scheme provides troubled youth with the opportunity to receive practical training from an expert artisan over a period of three months and also includes an HIV/Aids prevention message to all trainees. Training activities comprise hairdressing, tailoring, motor vehicles mechanics, carpentry, welding and electronics, and always provide an activity-related 'toolkit' to each child.

> **❝** *Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.* **❞**
>
> **NELSON MANDELA**

→| **DISCUSSION**

Although most of the teacher-artisans do not generally have a post-primary education, as many as 288 participants have been placed since 2004 in valuable professional situations, and the majority of them are now working. Another project in the region is the Lusaka Vocational Training *Chawama Youth* in Zambia.

Vocational schemes like these are essential to ensure that education can reach even the most marginalised children, particularly those having no or little access to formal education. Moreover, such methods of instruction are relevant to and in line with the traditional local notion of education. Micheal Omolewa notes that «the traditional African education is structured in a way to ensure that every person can develop a set of skills. In the process, provisions are made for learning and training centres which gradually introduce the apprentice into the craft and skill of the chosen profession[3].»

As evidenced and emphasised in recent years, a means of improving the success rates of such programmes is the involvement and the active participation of stakeholders and end-users. Nancy Kendall identifies two main success factors in relation to said participation: the 'democratisation' of educational development programmes with their more transparent mechanisms, and the greater effectiveness of a project, in terms of management and planning, when it is owned by stakeholders[4].

The work of the International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD) reflects this very trend, whereby regional projects are first developed using a 'round table' system involving stakeholders, in addition to the support of local partners for implementing the programmes and encouraging the involvement of end-users. Since parents are often the primary determinants in the choice of sending a child to school, excluding them from the process of implementing or planning an educational programme would radically undermine its main goal.

An obstacle to universal education is the gender disparity in school enrolment. In the countries lacking universal

access to education, parents often prefer to send their son(s) to school, at either the primary, secondary or tertiary level of education, and to have their daughter(s) assist with the domestic duties or get married. The UNESCO report *Gender Parity in Education* (2008) states that «Globally, about 72 million children were out of school in 2005, with girls accounting for 57%». That data shows however consistent regional differences: in sub-Saharan Africa 54% of out-of-school children were girls, compared to South and West Asia with 66% and Arab States with 60%[5]. The gender unbalance appears even in contradiction with the output ranking: according to the Education For All Global Monitoring Report 2007, the enrolled girls not only perform like or outperform the boys, but also remain in education for a longer time, have higher graduation rates and lower repetition rates[6].

Another critical issue concerning the goal of universal primary education, and education policies in general, is the quality of the educational service, as opposed to the mere access to it. Daniel Sifuna notes a recent shift away from

Teachers' training and qualification are therefore key factors to achieve universal primary education[9] and a higher education quality at global scale. Achieving and maintaining high teaching standards is a tough challenge for all countries, both for developed and for developing ones, although in the latter the conditions are much harder. Regarding the use of ICT in education, for example, the need to upgrade teachers' skills and standards is really global. In January 2008 UNESCO launched the ICT Competency Standards for Teachers. It defines in detail a «clear set of internationally recognized guidelines on what constitutes appropriate ICT skills and professional development for teachers» and aims at helping policy-makers and curriculum developers identify the ICT skills that teachers need[10].

The issue about training and recruitment procedures for teachers has been addressed with a variety of solutions stemming from different countries. In Kenya and Tanzania, in-service teacher training programmes have become increasingly popular for sourcing teachers[11]. However, some of the steps taken towards the improvement of the
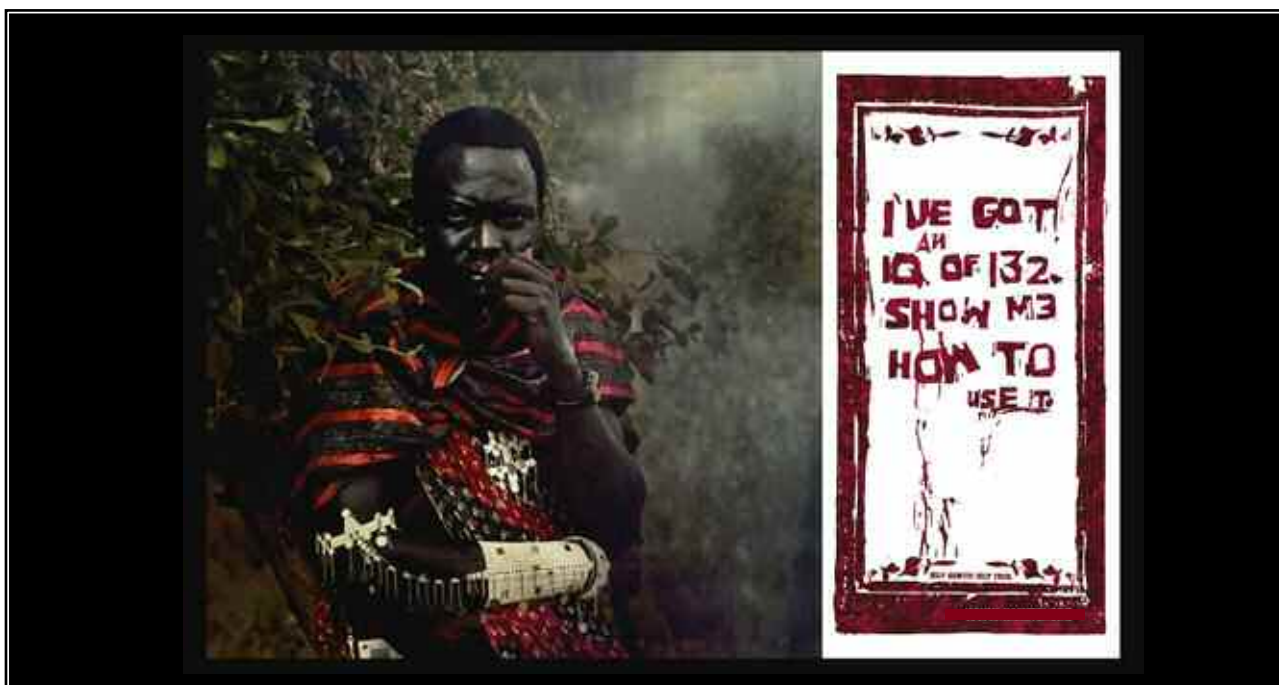
measuring educational goals exclusively in terms of access to education[7]. And regarding the question of how to define and to measure the quality, he clarifies that «common strands are now emerging in the way of assessing the quality levels, particularly referring to Inputs, Outputs and Process. Inputs concern the materials such as textbooks, desks, blackboards as well as teachers and students. The quality of these Inputs is often measured quantitatively or through status indicators, such as the degree of qualification of the teachers, the relevance of textbooks and the students' intellectual and nutritional status. Outputs include proxies of achievement (promotion and completion rates) and the measures of actual achievements, such as the type and the amount of learned facts, concepts and skills. Process refers to the proper organisation of the lessons, the correct use of texts and homework, the implementation of child-centred learning and the overall amount of time spent on a certain task»[8].

teaching standards overlooked the context and the particular circumstances, like, for instance, the different language used at school with respect to the mother tongue of both the students and the teachers. «With the help of external consultants, teacher guides have been worked out and teacher training courses have been given to have African teachers become more 'learner-centred', and to help them activate their students and engage them in critical thinking and dialogue. Teachers are asked to refrain from an academic approach where students just copy the notes from the blackboard, learn them by heart and repeat them at tests. However this might be the only possible teaching style when neither the teacher nor the students master the language of instruction»[12].

As a final remark regarding the mobility of students, UNESCO's *Comparing Education Statistics Across the World Report* found that Sub-Saharan Africa students have the highest

mobility worldwide, with «one out of 16 students (about 6%) from the region studying abroad. Central Asia (3.9%) and the Arab States (2.9%) follow»[13]. These are the regions where both the accessibility and the quality of education are particularly problematic, so that many students, when they can afford, prefer to attain their education abroad, generally in Western Europe and Northern America.

[9] Seventh Ministerial Review Meeting of the Nine High-Population Countries (also known as E-9 countries: Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria, and Pakistan). They represent half the world's population, but only half the teachers are trained in some countries and account for over two-thirds of the world's adult illiterates and more than half of out-of-school children. Ministers and education experts from the E-9 countries are meeting to strengthen their cooperation and focus on strategies to improve the number and qualifications of teachers.

[1] OMOLEWA, MICHAEL, «Traditional African Modes of Education: Their Relevance in the Modern World», in *International Review of Education* (2007) 53:593-612.

[2] Project Report: *Non-Formal Education and Livelihood Skills for Marginalised Street and Slum Youth in Uganda*, (June 2006), available on http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/28/03/39.pdf .

[3] *Ibid.* p. 596.

[4] KENDALL, NANCY, «Parental and Community Participation in Improving Educational Quality in Africa: Current Practices and Future Possibilities», in *International Review of Education* (2007) 53:701-708 (703-704).

[5] UNESCO Institute for Statistics, «Gender Parity in Education: Not There Yet», (March 2008) p. 1, available on http://www.uis.unesco.org/ev.php?ID=7191_201&ID2=DO_TOPIC .

[6] Education For All Global Monitoring Report 2007, «Strong Foundations: Early Childhood Care and Education», p. 45, available on http://www.unesco.org/education/GMR/2007/Full_report.pdf .

[7] SIFUNA, DANIEL, «The Challenge of Increasing Access and Improving Quality: An Analysis of Universal Primary Education in Kenya and Tanzania Since the 1970's», in *International Review of Education* (2007) 53:687–699 (689).

[8] *Ibid.* p. 690.
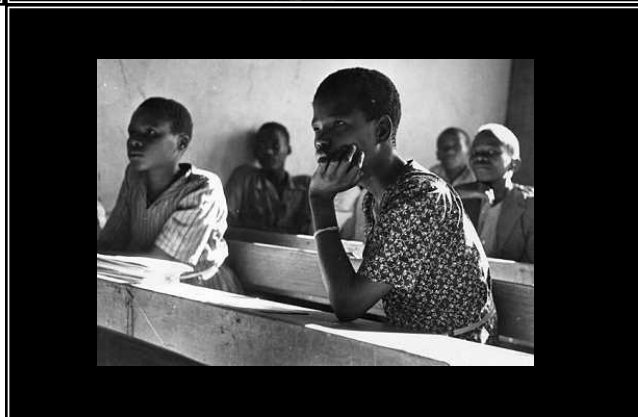
[10] UNESCO ICT Competency for Teachers: *Policy Framework, Competency Standards Modules and Implementation Guidelines*, available on http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=25740&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html .

[11] *Supra note* 7, p. 696.

[12] BROCK-UTNE, BRIGIT, «Language of Instruction and Student Performance: New Insights from Research in Tanzania and South Africa», in *International Review of Education* (2007) 53:509–530 (512).

[13] UNESCO Institute for Statistics «Global Education Digest 2006: Comparing Education Statistics Across the World», p. 37-48, available on http://www.uis.unesco.org/publications/GED2006 . ◾