

Number 8, February 4th 2000

Achieving Universal Primary Education

Key Messages

The world is facing a silent education crisis. The victims receive no television coverage, and their voices go largely unheard. But the consequences of this crisis are immense in terms of wasted opportunities for economic growth and social justice.

The education deficit is particularly acute in sub-Saharan Africa, where problems caused by lack of funding are compounded by conflicts, population growth, HIV-AIDS, and gender discrimination. In Zambia, more teachers died of AIDS than passed through teacher training last year.

The World Education Forum in Dakar in April provides an opportunity to launch a concrete programme to deliver the internationally agreed target of achieving Universal Primary Education by 2015.

The British Government should provide the international leadership required to tackle the global education crisis. This kind of leadership has been extremely effective on debt relief. The Prime Minister should make the attainment of Universal Primary Education one of his personal priorities for the new millennium. He should take the lead in launching a global initiative aimed at mobilising \$8 billion per annum in support of national education reform strategies with robust monitoring of progress towards Universal Primary Education.

In the current resource round, the Government should further increase the UK's overall aid budget in line with their manifesto commitment. The proportion of the aid budget allocated to basic education should be increased towards the proposed 8% figure.

Introduction

Education is internationally recognised as a human right. It is the great liberator which lifts people out of poverty and fuels economic growth with social justice, especially in an increasingly knowledge-based global economy. As the Prime Minister has said: "There is no more noble cause than education of quality for all".

At the Jomtien World Conference on Education For All in 1990, governments from 155 countries pledged to provide all of the world's children with access to good quality basic education by 2000. Ten years on, the world's governments have fallen shamefully short of their original goal. On the eve of the new millennium, the world is facing a global education crisis.

Over 125 million primary-aged children are not in school. Millions more children drop out of school in the early grades, most of them before becoming literate. Almost 880 million adults in the developing world are illiterate, and the numbers are growing. Young girls account for two out of every three children not in school. The next generation of illiterate adults, like the current one, will be predominantly female.

In much of the developing world, the education provided to children is of an abysmal quality. 'School' in much of sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia is a crumbling building without a roof, without access to clean water, and often without toilets. Millions of children are being taught by poorly trained teachers in classrooms which lack a blackboard, chalk, chairs, or desks.

The costs of educational deprivation are incalculable. Lack of basic education undermines efforts to generate the sustained and equitable growth needed for poverty reduction. It also hampers progress towards human development goals such as reduced child and maternal mortality, improved public health and nutrition, and strengthened opportunities for more secure and productive livelihoods. Education is also a necessary foundation for improved governance and thriving democracies. The international community has embraced a new set of international development targets for 2015. These include halving the proportion of the world's population living in poverty, Universal Primary Education, and targets for child and maternal mortality. Achieving the education target is a vital pre-requisite for meeting all of the other targets.

The Dakar Conference: Launching a Programme for Universal Basic Education

Oxfam believes that the UK Government and the Prime Minister are in a unique position to drive forward the goal of education for all. The Government has rightfully won plaudits for taking the lead over international debt, using its influence to secure agreement and funding for a more generous package of debt relief. If the Prime Minister champions the cause of Universal Primary Education in the same way, he could make all the difference. He has already taken a strong lead on domestic education; he should project this into the international arena and send out a powerful signal to the rest of the world that the time has come to tackle the global crisis in education.

The World Education Forum in Dakar in April provides one opportunity to launch a concrete programme to deliver Universal Primary Education. Oxfam has shown how this could be achieved through a Global Action Plan. We urge the Prime Minister and Government to take the international lead in supporting the proposals below.

A Global Action Plan

It is vital that efforts to tackle the global education crisis have national ownership and public participation at their heart. A central plank of Oxfam's Global Action Plan is that governments should establish National Education Action Plans (NEAPs), through active engagement with civil society and other partners. The NEAP would both review and evaluate national progress towards basic education for all, create a policy framework capable of supporting accelerated progress, and spell out ways of overcoming barriers to more equitable access and improved education quality. The NEAP would not be an additional layer of planning, or increased conditionality, but part of national planning frameworks. A key part of these plans should be the withdrawal of charges for education, special incentives for enrolling girls in school, and improvements in quality.

In particular NEAPs would prioritise:

- Improved learning conditions and outcomes
- Relevant, realistic, and flexible curricula
- Better student readiness, through early childhood development programmes
- Effective measurement of progress, including education quality
- Institutional strengthening, increasing efficiency, accountability and responsiveness
- Long-term financial sustainability
- Equity in education policy and spending
- Development of targeted education strategies for ‘hard-to-reach’ learners
- Linking and integrating education strategies to the wider poverty eradication agenda

The key point of the Global Action Plan is that no government committed to delivering Education For All, should be unable to do so because of resource constraints. Oxfam urges governments and the international community to pledge resources to achieve Universal Primary Education (currently estimated at about \$8 billion per annum for ten years, the equivalent of four days’ worth of global military spending). This *can* be achieved.

Developing country governments could raise half of the amount through:

- Increased resource mobilisation
- Redistribution of wasteful public spending, such as military spending
- Reallocation within education budgets towards basic education

The international community could mobilise the remaining \$4 billion through:

- Increased aid
- Reallocation of aid from higher to lower levels of education
- Debt relief
- Contributions from private capital

Donors should aim to increase the proportion of aid allocated to basic education from its current average of around 2% to at least 8%. DFID has already increased its commitments in this area and estimates that in 1998, it allocated 5% of bilateral aid to basic education.

Oxfam’s proposals include ongoing monitoring and evaluation of progress toward Universal Primary Education. This would ensure that both governments and donors are using their resources effectively to further the aims of the NEAPs and meet their stated commitments. Detailed progress reports on a range of national, regional, and local access, equity, and quality education indicators would inform and improve ongoing programme design, and help ensure that good practice is learned from. Where the capacity exists or can be developed, civil society groups would play a key role in this monitoring and evaluation process. This will often be most effective and valuable at the local level, where community-led assessments can enhance ownership and accountability.

A Compact for Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa faces particularly severe challenges in education. It is now the only part of the developing world in which the number of children out of school is increasing. If current trends continue, there will be 57 million primary school age children out of school in 2015. These children will account for about three-quarters of all children in the world denied the right to an education.

Chronic financing pressures are the main block to achieving Education For All in sub-Saharan Africa. Other factors, however, conspire to make the education crisis in Africa particularly acute. The lethal interaction of slow economic growth with rapid population growth, conflict, HIV-AIDS, and gender discrimination are all contributing. So too is the failure of governments to develop appropriate curricula and teaching methods capable of delivering good quality education. On a more positive note, several countries – among them Uganda, Mozambique and Burkina Faso – have introduced far-reaching education reforms that hold out the hope of progress.

In order to tackle the crisis in sub-Saharan Africa, Oxfam is proposing a compact for Africa as part of the Global Action Plan. This would mobilise the estimated \$3.6 billion cost of achieving Universal Primary Education. Governments in sub-Saharan Africa would mobilise \$1.6 billion per annum by reducing military expenditure and increasing resource mobilisation. Northern governments would mobilise the remaining \$2 billion through increased aid and debt relief.

Suggested Action for MPs

1. **Write to the Prime Minister urging him to:**
 - **Make the attainment of Universal Primary Education one of his personal priorities for the new millennium.**
 - **Attend the Education For All conference in Dakar, and take the lead in launching a global initiative aimed at mobilising \$8 billion per annum in support of national education reform strategies with robust monitoring of progress towards Universal Primary Education.**
 - **Use other opportunities in the millennium year such as the World Social Summit, G8 Summit, and the UN Millennium Assembly to raise the issue of Education For All.**
 - **Increase the UK's overall aid budget during the current resource round and continue to increase the proportion of aid spending which is invested in basic education to the proposed target of 8%.**
2. **Support Early Day Motion #351 "Achieving Universal Primary Education":**

Sponsors: Tony Worthington MP, Bowen Wells MP, Jenny Tonge MP, Dafydd Wigley MP, Oona King MP, Valerie Davey MP.

That this house believes that it is a scandal that at the beginning of the 21st century over 125 million primary-aged children around the world are not in school and that the ranks of the 880 million illiterate adults continue to grow; acknowledges that education is a human right and a vital pre-requisite for economic growth and social justice; notes the internationally agreed target to achieve Universal Primary Education by 2015; notes that there are a number of opportunities this year to make Education For All a global priority, starting in April with the Dakar conference; urges the Prime Minister to take the same international lead on education as he and his Government have taken on international debt; and therefore urges the Prime Minister to launch an international initiative which mobilises funding in support of national strategies to deliver primary education for all.

For More Information Please Contact Oxfam's Parliamentary Team:

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