

»» Challenges in the education sector: improving access and quality

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Education is a human right and an indispensable prerequisite for many other advances to be made in development. The Millennium Development Goals (MDG) have principally addressed access to education. Considerable improvements have indeed been achieved in this area, even if some deficits remain. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) now additionally focus on the quality of education, where the deficits are significantly more pronounced.

Modest progress in education despite better access

Since 1999 the rate of enrolment has risen by 7% to 91% globally. A key factor behind this has been the extensive abolition of tuition fees. Nonetheless, at the end of 2015 the number of school-age children not attending primary school was still a disappointing 57 million. This means that MDG 2 (universal primary education) has by no means been achieved. On the plus side, the proportion of girls at school increased considerably. However, there is still plenty of catching-up to do, primarily in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The achievements of the "Education for All" initiative are also modest. Increased access to education in some countries went hand-in-hand with poorer learning outcomes. In Sub-Saharan Africa, only 58% of children make it through to the final year of primary school but many of them still lack adequate basic skills. A study by the World Bank shows that in Mozambique, for example, nearly all children attend school, but only half of those in grade 4 can perform simple addition, while just one child in twenty is able to successfully complete a double-digit subtraction. The study also revealed that only some 65% of

mathematics teachers are capable of performing these calculations correctly themselves.

Poor quality of vocational training and tertiary education

In the vast majority of countries vocational training for skilled workers has a negative image. It is a relatively new situation that many governments now perceive it as an alternative to general education, not least thanks to the success of the German system of dual vocational training.

There is a need to align basic and advanced training opportunities better to the labour market and develop vocational training in particular in close partnership with private industry.

The large number of secondary school graduates has boosted the demand for tertiary education. Particularly in Africa, this high interest is faced with the low capacity and poor quality of university education. Graduates for whom there is no demand on the labour market and who find no suitable employment in the long term have also become a factor in politics. For example, they were among those who played an important part in the Arab Spring in Egypt and other North African countries. Stagnating donor funds and limited national budgets have only made matters worse.

Future activities in terms of development policy

Education systems have developed over time and have, therefore, different characteristics in each country. Accordingly, development measures have to be based on a meticulous analysis of each country's specific educational situation. Developing countries should focus on addressing the following three areas for reform:

- *Equal access:* This entails the targeted promotion of disadvantaged groups (in terms of gender, ethnicity, religion, poverty, disabilities, etc.) as well as a safe and barrier-free infrastructure.
- *Quality of education:* The SDGs shift the focus onto this aspect. Improved and more practice-oriented basic and advanced training of teachers is deemed to be the main solution here. Attractive working conditions also play a role, as do better teaching and learning equipment based on adjusted curricula. The progress achieved by the measures must be assessed on the basis of regular surveys of what has been learned.
- *Education management:* In many countries there is still huge potential in this regard (especially in the areas of forward planning, supervision and use of new teaching methods, ICT-supported distance learning and e-learning). The most efficient approach to educational planning and guideline setting is normally through centralised structures. Conversely, school finances and staff administration are often better organised locally. Independent schools that are monitored by external bodies are deemed to be particularly successful. The introduction of quality competitions between schools and of "quality certificates" is frequently a simple way of achieving significant impacts at low costs.

Conclusion

Improving the education sector continues to be a priority task for all countries in terms of development policy. It is necessary to further dismantle barriers to access but also to focus more on improving the quality of education. ■