

EDUCATION

The challenge of universality

The emergence of the information society has opened up new possibilities in education but it has also exposed some basic deficiencies. While illiteracy is now almost negligible in the developed countries it is still only too prevalent in the poorest nations. Although indicators show that overall progress has been made, future demographic growth is going to cause serious problems in some parts of the world. The educational systems in the developing countries are in urgent need of greater public investment and contributions from the international community.

Social Watch Research Team¹

Selected indicators:

- Literacy (15-24 years old)
- Enrolment rate in primary education (net)
- Children who reach 5th grade
- Enrolment rate in secondary education (net)
- Enrolment rate in tertiary education (gross)

Improving education has been on the agenda of international bodies, governments and civil society organizations for decades. Education is a basic instrument for eradicating poverty, constructing citizenship and improving people's ability to control their own futures, and it has attracted the attention of numerous actors and given rise to policies to tackle the main problems. Good progress has been made overall, but in the background we can still discern serious inequalities.

The new systems of production and new kinds of culture that the information society has brought in its wake have helped to push education back into the spotlight of world interest, but the response to this challenge from the decision-makers has been fragmented and inadequate.

In the modern world there is an unprecedented flow of information, but paradoxically some of the major problems facing education on a global level have still not been overcome. For example, many countries have virtually banished illiteracy, but many others are still struggling to establish universal literacy. There are nearly 800 million illiterate adults in the world today (two thirds of whom are women) and more than 100 million children who do not go to school (80% of them in Africa), so this challenge involves huge swathes of the world's population.²

The Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, has made the point that teaching people to read and write is not just an end in itself, it is also a vital tool for eradicating poverty, promoting gender equity, improving health, fostering political participation and improving people's lives in many other dimensions. It is a basic human right, and as such it cannot be renounced.

TABLE 1. Least literate countries, by region

COUNTRY	REGION	% OF LITERACY
Niger	Sub-Saharan Africa	27
Burkina Faso	Sub-Saharan Africa	40
Mali	Sub-Saharan Africa	41
Iraq	Middle East and North Africa	46
Bangladesh	Southern Asia	51
Mauritania	Sub-Saharan Africa	51
Senegal	Sub-Saharan Africa	56
Benin	Sub-Saharan Africa	59
Comoros	Sub-Saharan Africa	60
Ethiopia	Sub-Saharan Africa	61

The developed countries have achieved almost universal literacy but the poorest countries are still plagued with widespread illiteracy. In India more than a third of the people cannot read or write, and this problem is also severe in sub-Saharan Africa, the Arab world and large parts of Asia.

Of the ten countries with the highest illiteracy rates, eight are in sub-Saharan Africa, which is the by far the most deficient region in this respect.

It is vitally important that enrolment rates in formal education be raised, because there are still more than 100 million children growing up without any primary education, which is a serious deficit for humankind. However, in many cases the task of extending the coverage of formal educational systems is complicated since it can be difficult to reach children in rural areas or with special needs, or children who belong to cultural or linguistic minorities.

The latest data from UNESCO shows that between 1998 and 2002 school enrolments worldwide went up very slightly, by just one percentage point, from 83.6% to 84.6%.

The current situation as regards primary, secondary and tertiary education is very different in different regions of the world. In the richer countries the percentage of university graduates in health sciences, engineering and computing is more than double the rate in the poor countries.

Another dimension to the problem is that not all children in the world who go to school finish primary education. For example, in Latin America there are around six million adolescents who did not complete their primary school education. This is further complicated in parts of Africa because educational facilities are simply not avail-

able, partly due to lack of public funds, as was recently reported by some African Ministers of Education. In some African countries the budgetary allocation for education is less than 3% of GDP. It is policy decisions like this that define the future of education in these countries.

The situation of education in the world today is very far from uniform, and the indicators show that rates of progress vary greatly from one region to another. Between 1990 and 2000, the number of children without schooling fell by 20% in Asia, due to the fact that the educational systems in that part of the world have developed very rapidly and efficiently. However, in the same ten-year period, the number of children without schooling in sub-Saharan Africa increased by 13%. Demographic growth has been cited³ as the cause of this trend, along with a more general phenomenon called 'de-schooling' which is the result of many parents taking their children out of education or, what is worse, not even enrolling them in schools in the first place.

One of the factors that underlie these problems is that most of the countries in that region have high fertility rates. According to some estimates, the school population will grow by 34 million between 2000 and 2015. These demographic characteristics exert an influence on how the challenge of providing universal education is met, and on the direction that public policies will take in the years ahead.

Another generalised difficulty has to do with the ability of educational systems to retain the children who have enrolled, and here again the outlook is rather bleak. The problem is to keep children in school until the last year of primary education. There are many countries, above all in Africa, that have primary school retention rates of less than 70%, and the worst case is Malawi which retains only 22% in primary education.

An efficacious educational system has to do more than simply keep children in school, it has to teach them, and the repetition rate, the percentage of pupils who have to repeat a year, which is connected to retention, is one indicator of how effective the teaching is. The repetition rate is under 3% in most of the countries for which UNESCO has data, but more than half the nations in sub-Saharan Africa have rates above 15%, and the figures go as high as 34% in Gabon and 40% in Equatorial Guinea.

A further complication in schools is classroom overcrowding. In Southern and Eastern Asia, for example, overcrowding in the classroom is a serious hindrance to effective learning. On average there are 40 children per teacher, but in some cases there may be

³ UNESCO (2005). *World Report Towards Knowledge Societies*.

¹ The members of the Social Watch Social Sciences Research Team are listed in the credits at the start of this book.

² Henceforth the figures given are taken from various UNESCO reports.

many more, and for example in Bangladesh, one of the most populous countries in the world, the average is 57 pupils per teacher.⁴ The only solution to this is to undertake teacher training on a large scale.

The latest information⁵ that has become available shows the differences in the amounts of public expenditure allocated to education. This expenditure, as a proportion of GDP, is greater in the richer countries, and these are usually the countries that have reached the goal of universal education. To bring the global picture into focus we can consider mean expenditure on education for different regions of the world. The figures speak for themselves: in North America and Western Europe the mean is 5.52% of GDP, in Asia and the Pacific it is 3.9%, and it is a mere 3.3% in sub-Saharan Africa.

One of the most urgent needs of the educational systems in developing countries is increased public investment. In cases where human, financial and other resources are lacking, the international community should step in and provide them. This is laid down in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR); it is a binding obligation that the developed countries have with respect to the developing countries.

Higher education is becoming increasingly commercialized, and this is opening up unprecedented possibilities for the future. There are predictions such as the following, "it is very possible that in 2010 the so-called corporate universities that were originally founded to update employees' competencies will outnumber traditional universities",⁶ and if this kind of situation emerges the question of democratizing tertiary education will be complicated by problems that have never been met before.

When we survey the general panorama in the world we find that almost all the countries in the best overall situation in terms of education indicators have a medium or high rating on the Basic Capabilities Index (BCI). There is a very strong correlation between these two variables (BCI ranking and the final position given by combining the various education indicators). All the countries that rank high on the BCI are in an above average position in education, and 41 of the 45 countries in the middle range on the BCI are also above average in education.

It is no surprise to find that all 25 countries with a critical BCI rating are below average in terms of education, and of the 26 countries in the very low BCI group only one, the Philippines, is above average for education.

There has been a significant overall improvement in the area of education in the world, and only 8 out of 164 countries have slipped into a worse situation while 127 have improved. Besides this, headway has been made where it was most needed, in countries in an unfavourable situation; these mostly showed some improvement in education. Apart from a few exceptions (Gabon, the Cook Islands and the Turks and Caicos Islands), the

4 UNESCO (2004). Regional Bureau for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean. <www.unesco.cl/esp/atematica/eduygenero/noticias/1.act?menu=esp/atematica/eduygenero/>.

5 UNESCO (2005). *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2005. The Quality Imperative*. Available from: <www.efareport.unesco.org>.

6 *Ibid*, p. 98.

CHART 1. Current situation in education, by regions

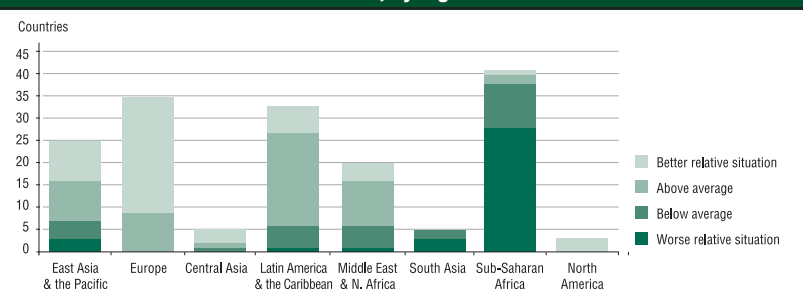


CHART 2. Final position of education according to BCI

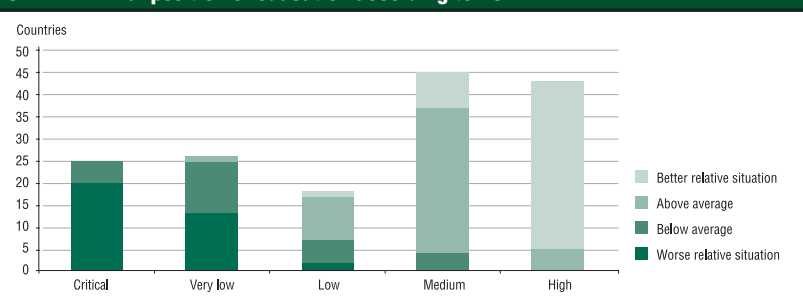


TABLE 2. Current situation by evolution in education

	SIGNIFICANT REGRESSION	SLIGHT REGRESSION	STAGNATION	SLIGHT PROGRESS	SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS	TOTAL
Countries in worse situation	1	2	4	13	16	36
Countries below average	0	0	5	14	7	26
Countries above average	0	4	15	25	8	52
Countries in better situation	0	1	5	39	5	50
Total	1	7	29	91	36	164

TABLE 3. Averages by indicator of countries in better and worse relative situations in education

		LITERACY (15-24 YEARS OLD)	ENROLMENT RATE IN PRIMARY EDUCATION (NET)	CHILDREN WHO REACH 5 TH GRADE	ENROLMENT RATE IN SECONDARY EDUCATION (NET)	ENROLMENT RATE IN TERTIARY EDUCATION (GROSS)
Countries in worse situation	Average	69.4	65.1	65.6	24.1	3.3
	Number of countries	30	33	31	27	35
Countries in better situation	Average	99.6	95.9	97	88.9	54.8
	Number of countries	31	49	30	48	50
Total	Average	84.8	83.5	81.1	65.6	33.6
	Number of countries	61	82	61	75	85

below-average countries have not regressed, and most have made some kind of progress even if it is only slight.

The two regions that have the best indicators for education in relative terms are North America and Europe; not one European country is below the world average. Latin America and the Caribbean are in a relatively good situation since 27 of the 33 countries in that region are above the world average. Last on the list comes sub-Saharan Africa which, like in so many other dimensions, is in the worst situation of all. More than 90% of the countries in this region are in a below average situation, and only the Seychelles figure among the nations that are in the better situation.

The averages for each indicator show how great the difference is between the countries in the worst and the best situations. In the former group over two thirds (69.4%) of the population are illiterate, but in the more advanced countries less than 0.5% of the people cannot read or write. There are similar or even greater gaps between the two groups when it comes to school enrolments and educational efficacy indicators, and the widest gulf of all is in enrolment in tertiary education: the countries in the best situation send more than 50% of their young people into higher education, but in the countries in the worst situation the average rate is a paltry 3%. ■