

Introduction to the open file

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This research-action-training project entitled “Analysis and curricular innovation on ‘Education for All’ in Sub-Saharan Africa” was launched by the IBE in 2003, at the request of nine countries in sub-Saharan Africa, namely Angola, Burkina Faso, Burundi, the Republic of the Congo, Mali, Mauritius, Mozambique, Niger and Rwanda. These countries—which are among the poorest in the world—had made a formal request to the IBE to support them in their efforts to improve their school curricula with respect to poverty alleviation and to achieve the goals of Education for All (EFA) by 2015.

This project was also made possible thanks to the foresightedness and support of the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science. Indeed, it was the urging of the Spanish partners that moved IBE-UNESCO to develop this initiative in late 2003. They took the risk of supporting it in a first phase of exploratory and innovative reflection based on a clear perception of the potential for innovation that could result from a systematic analysis of the links between poverty alleviation, curriculum and the achievement of the EFA goals. They then accompanied and solidly supported the ensuing phases of its implementation. The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) joined the team and supported the programme when it was launched in the field in November 2004. UNESCO then added its support to the IBE through its EFA capacity-strengthening programme.

Nine national teams, made up of curriculum, planning, inspection and teacher training specialists, were designated by their respective ministries to work together within the framework of this project. The base teams were strengthened and expanded depending on the subject being studied. External experts from Belgium, Benin, Brazil, Madagascar, Portugal, Rwanda, Switzerland and South Africa, and from UNESCO, also joined in to enrich the group's discussions and work.

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The commitment of all parties has remained unwavering since the first seminar was held in November 2004. It is worth noting in particular that few changes were made to the teams, which shows how greatly both the countries and the individual participants have been interested in the project.

Less explored links between curriculum and poverty alleviation

Education constitutes one of the means by which the poorest countries can improve their situation and guarantee a life of dignity for their citizens: The Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) recognize that education and training play a vital role in poverty alleviation and development. They emphasize the importance of education as a vital contribution to the development of a country's or a community's human capital. However, they focus especially on the issues of access and quality in terms of infrastructure and education systems management.

There is a patent lack of emphasis on the need to also change contents as well as teaching and learning strategies. Strategies that go beyond merely schooling all children are needed to ensure that all children, including the poorest, remain in school and that their educational outcomes improve. Studies on poverty show that primary education is an essential component in any strategy aimed at equipping the most destitute with the minimum life skills needed for their inclusion in the economic and social channels that would enable them to escape poverty. Furthermore, other factors linking education and poverty alleviation brought to light by several studies show that access to schooling does not necessarily guarantee access to the knowledge and skills needed to reduce poverty.

To escape poverty, individuals must acquire the knowledge, skills and "know-how" needed to find a job, to keep it, to advance or to be better paid; or even to create their own employment, if necessary; to adopt healthier living habits and be able to integrate them by developing their competencies. Individuals should be able to update and renew their knowledge through the acquisition of lifelong learning skills. The course charted by the EFA campaign with regard to educational contents, teaching and learning strategies, and school life remains generic and non-contextualized, given the global nature of the commitments. They are thus insufficient in practice to strengthen the capacity of education in order to contribute effectively to poverty alleviation via basic education curricula.

The initial goals of the IBE project were to explore the links between the basic education curriculum and poverty alleviation, and to design strategies for changing the curriculum to address this latter issue. In concrete terms, this meant investigating whether and how basic education curricula could improve the chances of these nine countries of attaining both the objectives of EFA and those of poverty alleviation. The task also involved facilitating a parallel framework for inter-learning and inter-training between the nine countries, the IBE team and external experts, in order to explore various curriculum innovations related to quality education and poverty alleviation. The next step was to analyse the conditions required for the practical implementation of these innovations in schools, taking as a point of departure the curricula in those nine countries participating in the project; the commonly identified specific needs that curriculum should meet in each case, to alleviate poverty; and the curriculum reform under way in each of those countries. As the work progressed, the essential question regarding the role of education in the peace-building process was soon added. How could what we have already learned in the fight against poverty enrich the reflection on education for peace and contribute to the quality of education and the fight against exclusion? This project has opened up what is practically

unexplored territory and shown the relevance of the links between the quality of basic education curricula, poverty alleviation and education for peace.

This reflection is vital for the achievement of both the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and those of the Dakar World Forum in 2000 (see Box 1) on quality education for all. It is also one of the primary concerns of the international education community, of which UNESCO is an important part. Our efforts have made it possible to provide tangible support to Member States in the area of curriculum development as related to content, methods and educational structures, with the ultimate goal of achieving quality education for all, alleviating poverty and fostering sustainable development and peace-building.

World Education Forum—April 2000, Dakar, Senegal

The World Education Forum, held in Dakar, Senegal, in April 2000, was the first and most important event in education marking the beginning of the new century. In adopting the Dakar Framework for Action, the Forum's 1,100 participants—ministers, decision-makers, researchers, teachers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), bilateral and multilateral agencies—reasserted their commitment to achieving EFA by 2015 through the adoption of the following six goals:

- 1 expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children;
- 2 ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality;
- 3 ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programmes;
- 4 achieving 50% improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults;
- 5 eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality;
- 6 improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

Education for poverty reduction and peace-building

Poverty is often both a cause and an effect of violent situations, which in turn affect the quality of education. Exclusion from, inter alia, basic social services, means of economic production and political participation are important factors that trigger conflicts and violence within and between societies. The situation can be even worse with wars and civil strife that not only have a direct, profound impact on education systems—due to the destruction of school buildings and infrastructure, children being unable to go to school and broken or destroyed families—but they also affect the standard of living and economic development as well as relationships among different social groups. Thus, a curriculum that reduces poverty and aims to foster greater equity should also contain elements that are essential for education for peace and sustainable development.

Quality education has a duty to support and transmit the knowledge and skills needed to strengthen social cohesion and to facilitate understanding and respect between cultures so that students become responsible and tolerant citizens, able to live together in harmony. However, the democratization process in several of the nine countries involved in the project is quite recent and still fragile. Social cohesion is essential to create the conditions necessary for economic development. Thus, education is expected to contribute to this process by training citizens to defend their rights and to share their ideas in a spirit of mutual respect.

Sometimes national curricular policies concerning skills and contents to be acquired in school, desired teaching methods and school life within a political territory (e.g. country, province, district or town) contain choices that are inadequate or questionable. Moreover, they fail adequately to address two closely interrelated levels—the official curriculum development process and the curriculum implementation process—which include contents, programmes, textbooks, teacher training and other support measures for the different actors involved in schooling, including parents and local communities.

Designing change

Once the problem had been defined, the IBE and the countries that had joined the project agreed on the specific goals of their collaboration. It readily became apparent that the task involved not merely the examination of the prescribed curricula or making generic recommendations; it also meant identifying effective strategies for changing the prescribed curriculum and implementing those changes, while respecting the individual context of each country. In other words, once it was decided *what* needed to be changed, the focus was on *how* to change, in terms of necessary conditions, strategies and processes to be implemented so that those changes would succeed.

The project did not aim to accompany the nine participating countries in their curriculum development and reform effort day by day. Rather, its goal was to guide and support those processes through a systematic, critical, innovative analysis of various possible measures and to reflect together on the innovative solutions and the complex processes any change carries in its wake. Thus, in addition to conceptualizing the links between curriculum, poverty alleviation and education for peace with the aim of achieving EFA, the project aimed at transforming education systems, by examining innovative practices capable of bringing about change, strengthening the competencies of curriculum specialists, developing tools for change and setting up a network of experts to foster communication between the nine participating countries.

Questions to guide reflection

From the very outset it was clear that certain questions and issues needed to be raised in order to analyse the effects on improving the quality of education that our approach towards poverty alleviation and education for peace in the basic education curriculum may have.

First, we needed to define more clearly what we meant by poverty and peace building. How does poverty manifest itself in each of the participating countries? How does it affect the quality of education? What are the factors triggering conflicts and violence in each of the participating countries?

Then we needed to assess how the current curricula for basic education contribute to the EFA goals and to poverty alleviation and peace building. What should be changed in the

basic education curricula, and how, so that they take more systematic account of poverty alleviation and make it possible to live together in harmony? How can the degree of flexibility required to take account of the needs of all learners be built into the curriculum? How can curricula be designed that foster equity? What contents and teaching methods are needed to cater to the capabilities and needs of all, including those who at present are excluded from education? How can useful knowledge and competencies be instilled to make it possible for all children to participate and evolve in everyday life and to be able to understand and to adapt to change and diversity? How can the needs of all learners be better integrated: both those of the most underprivileged and those of the community as a whole? What are the promising innovations that create inclusive schools and mobilize existing resources?

Finally, we addressed the issue of the effective strategies for change that needed to be developed, in light of the prescribed curriculum and the one effectively implemented. This includes teacher training, management and organization of school life and support to be given to all the education actors involved.

Working principles and methods

Throughout the project, three essential principles guided our activities and made it possible to advance and deepen analysis and reflection. The project had been conceived as a long-term effort, which, even if it had to answer certain urgent questions, also had to mature and allow a climate of trust to develop. The mutual trust that was established between the participants allowed straight talking, inter-learning and inter-training in discussions that were both critical and constructive. It was important that the project remained firmly anchored in the reality of each country, so that genuinely useful questions could be asked and answers found that are specific, concrete and realistic. It was not enough to examine problems and difficulties and then develop recommendations. As the work progressed we learned how to refocus our work and seek realistic action strategies for effectively changing the school in the short, medium and long term, according to a common vision of what constitutes quality education.

In practical terms the work was divided into two alternating parts. On the one hand, international seminars were organized twice yearly to share analyses, experiences and progress made. During each seminar we had the opportunity to visit “real” schools involved in the project and talk with those working there. On the other hand there was the bilateral work in each country, carried out between seminars, taking account of each country’s specific needs and contexts. Each team was thus able to integrate and apply the tools developed, put the newly acquired knowledge into practice, test ideas presented in the seminars and, in this way, enrich the curriculum development process in their respective countries. The IBE experts and other international specialists engaged in the project accompanied those international seminars as well as specific phases of the work carried out in each country.

How the project evolved

The first phase focused on exploring what poverty means in each country and its impact on the quality of basic education. We then elaborated a tool for the systematic analysis of the relevance of curricula with respect to poverty alleviation, which enabled an assessment to

be made of the current situation, brought to light several gaps and inadequacies and pointed to paths towards improvement in many areas. The assessment also showed that the conditions for living together in harmony had to be created at the same time as those for poverty alleviation. In other words, poverty alleviation and peace building—one of the fundamental goals of UNESCO—are closely interrelated.

The second phase dealt with the question of change and the tools needed to bring it about. We kept the realities of each country in view and strove not to become trapped in a “circle of impossible solutions”, but rather to turn to approaches that were feasible because they were already being tested elsewhere. The different aspects—and instruments—of change were addressed and identified (see Box 2). These are presented in greater detail in this Open File and include the need for a continuous political dialogue at each stage of the development process, the need to include, and hence identify, all the key players and define their roles, to understand the barriers to change and to analyse the conditions for overcoming them. Finally, the issues concerning the role of the teachers and their training were discussed, given that teachers are the nucleus of the educational process and are key players in transforming the school—or not.

Summary of the assessment of basic education curricula

A curriculum that contributes to poverty alleviation and peace building involves:

- a better understanding and consideration of the needs of the learners and other players involved in poverty;
- a better balance in the curriculum between theory and practice;
- contents and teaching methods that are more adapted to the needs of the local contexts;
- more flexibility in implementing the curriculum at regional levels;
- new approaches to bilingual education in multilingual contexts;
- a better understanding of school management and its impact on the quality of education;
- more policy dialogue at all levels and at every stage of the curriculum development process.

Achievements and outlook of the project

This Open File presents the work carried out under this project between 2004 and 2007. It describes how the project began, its outcomes and the implications for future efforts. The problem areas, background and methodological approaches of the project are also briefly discussed in this section of the Open File.

The second part discusses three of the methodological tools for change, developed jointly with all of the countries and partners involved in the project. The first tool concerns good educational practices for change. These practices question and challenge the traditional school and act as a catalyst for innovation. As we anticipated, they have proved to be an efficient tool for structuring change aimed at achieving an inclusive system of education. The second tool consists of a roadmap for action in managing change. It was developed jointly as a guide for developing systematic, carefully planned action strategies

that focus on the various dimensions of achieving EFA and a school that combats poverty and fosters peace building. The third tool proposes a systematic reflection on the roles of the teachers in an inclusive school of good quality and their training as key players in moving towards an inclusive school system that can be a factor in poverty reduction and peace building. This tool includes pedagogical approaches to be used in the classroom, the organization of schools and the design of their educational projects. It also covers the relationships to be established between school authorities and local communities.

The third part of the Open File examines in detail five good educational practices fostering change towards quality education for all. These practices have been identified and studied in the field, in the participating countries, using the tools and criteria that were worked out jointly. Each in its own way shows that it is possible to build flexibility into the curriculum, take account of the specific needs of out-of-school children and dropouts, open the school up to the local community and train the teachers to be well prepared to work in a truly inclusive school. The question underlying all five articles is whether it is possible to reproduce those good practices in different contexts.

The conclusions of this Open File offer a broad picture of the progress made within the framework of the project at different levels, that is, in terms of the changes being implemented or already in place, and the tools and the networks developed to share successful practices.

Finally, the prospects and strategies for action needed to pursue, share, consolidate and disseminate our work are discussed.

Author Biographies

Christine Panchaud (Switzerland) Holder of a degree in political science from the University of Geneva, Switzerland. From 2003 to 2007, she was programme officer at the UNESCO IBE in Geneva, where she coordinated the transversal HIV/AIDS programme, as well as the programme on curriculum innovation and the fight against poverty in sub-Saharan Africa. Before then, she was a senior research associate at the Guttmacher Institute, New York, United States, and at the University of Geneva. Her research focuses particularly on the processes and dynamics of educational innovation and on the effects of social and political change on education, public health and social welfare policies.

Ana Benevente (Portugal) Holder of a Ph.D. in sociology of education from the University of Geneva, she is a chief researcher at the Institute of Social Sciences at the University of Lisbon, Portugal. From 1978 to 1993 she was a professor at the Faculty of Sciences, University of Lisbon, and subsequently, from 1995 to 2004, a Member of Parliament and Secretary of State for Education in Portugal. A member of the Centre for Research and Innovation in Education/Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (CRIE/OECD), she is also a coordinator for the ad hoc ADEA/IBE group on "Policy dialogue in education" and a consultant for UNESCO and the Organisation for the Iberian American States (OEI). She is the author of numerous studies on school dropouts and school failure.