

World Education Forum sets Africa as a priority

Dakar summit urges renewed global drive to achieve basic education for all

By Ernest Harsch

Dakar



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As a fundamental building block for development and peace in Africa, education must become available to all the continent's people, especially girls, declared participants in the World Education Forum, held 26-28 April in Senegal's capital. The conference should serve as a "cry of distress" about girls' low enrolment rates, asserted Mrs. Viviane Wade, Senegal's first lady, who vowed to help forge a global "women's alliance for the right of women to education." Reinforcing the message, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan launched a new UN initiative to promote

for All conference in Jomtien, Thailand, but extended the timetable for achieving them.

In the decade since Jomtien, most developing regions have made marked progress in improving school enrolment rates. Sub-Saharan Africa, however, achieved only modest gains (see article, page 30). Although 17 million more African children are in school today than a decade ago, 42 million have never been in school, out of 113 million worldwide, according to estimates by the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the main coordinator of the Education for All campaign. "We are still a far cry from basic education for all," UNESCO Director-General

Koichiro Matsuura acknowledged. "It is still but a distant dream for hundreds of millions of children, women and men."

Because of the uneven progress across regions, the Dakar Framework recognizes that "the challenge of education for all is greatest in sub-Saharan Africa, in South Asia and in the least developed countries."

Significant improvements in education also are vital for Africa to take advantage of new technologies and opportunities, declared Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo. Without adequate education, he said, "we cannot even begin to think of becoming part of the knowledge-driven, information-conscious, high-tech controlled and economically competitive world of the 21st century." Urging the international community in particular to provide greater support to Africa's educational efforts, he maintained that only then can globalization "begin to have meaning and relevance for Africa and Africans."



UNICEF / Lauren Goodsmith

Classroom in Mauritania: Educating girls is a "long-term investment that yields an exceptionally high return," said Secretary-General Kofi Annan, launching new UN initiative for girls' education.

girls' education. "Educating girls is a social development policy that works," he said.

More broadly, the conference's "Dakar Framework for Action" declares that education is not only "the key to sustainable development," but also "a fundamental human right." It states that by 2015 all children must have access to and be able to complete primary school. It also urges the elimination of gender disparities in access to primary and secondary education by 2005 and a 50 per cent improvement in adult literacy levels by 2015. In setting those goals, the conference reaffirmed the priorities set at the 1990 Education

Constraints and dilemmas

Together with their counterparts from other parts of the world, African ministers, educators, donor officials and representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) spent much of the conference debating the constraints and dilemmas hindering the goal of basic education for all. In a number of countries, war, political instability and cultural attitudes clearly were obstacles to improving school enrolment rates.

Overall, however, insufficient funding was identified as one of the most prevalent obstacles. This was despite Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade's cautionary comment that "universal education is not a function of the amount of money, but above all

of political will, the will to frontally attack and eradicate this handicap and injustice [of poor education] by involving all sectors of the population.”

Delegates nevertheless concurred that significantly greater financial resources are needed, although there was some controversy over the best ways to address education's financial difficulties. How should national governments balance the need to vastly expand access to education with other urgent priorities? To what extent could — or should — local communities help shoulder some of the financial burden? How can donor assistance be directed and utilized more effectively?

The conference did not clearly resolve such dilemmas, in the view of some participants, especially those from NGOs. The language in the Dakar Framework “is vague and lacks detail,” especially on financing issues, declared Mr. Thomas Bediako, chief coordinator of Education International in Ghana, representing NGOs as a whole. The NGOs, he said, had hoped for a clear commitment by governments to spend on education the equivalent of 6 per cent of gross national product and for donors to target 8 per cent of their aid to education, or four times what they currently allocate.

Some participants worried that the emphasis on quantitative

targets, especially primary school enrolment rates, has tended to divert attention from educational quality. Where many more children now are enrolled, adequate facilities and teaching materials are not yet available, while teachers remain poorly paid and too few new ones have been hired. Some African countries, such as Uganda, already are confronting some of the challenges raised by massive primary school expansion (see page 28). These include the need to strengthen secondary schooling as well, both to handle more primary graduates and to train the teachers needed in the primary schools, a topic that was addressed in Dakar only at a small session between the main plenaries.

Although adult literacy is formally defined as a component of basic education, in practice it has been a “neglected dimension” of the Education for All campaign, in the words of a 1997 UNESCO assessment of adult education worldwide. Despite this, sub-Saharan Africa has continued to make progress in reducing illiteracy rates over the past decade (see graph, page 26).

Higher education was scarcely mentioned at the Dakar forum — except by a few donor representatives who complained about its high costs. Yet as Acting Secretary-General of the Association of African Universities D. Nmah Tarpeh later told *Africa Recovery*, Africa's long-term development depends on advancing



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Education for an ‘African renaissance’

“We are more convinced than ever,” African education ministers declared, “that education is the sine quo non for empowering the people of Africa to participate in and benefit more effectively from the opportunities available in the globalized economy of the 21st century.” At one of six meetings held in different regions of the world to prepare for the education forum in Dakar, African ministers of education gathered in Johannesburg, South Africa, 6-10 December 1999 to assess the continent's specific challenges and priorities. They adopted a framework for action, “Education for African Renaissance in the 21st Century,” to complement the global framework adopted in Dakar.

The ministers noted that although primary enrolment has increased considerably in many African countries over the past decade, it still remains low compared to most other regions. The reasons are multiple. “Many countries,” the ministers observed, “have experienced austere economic adjustment programmes, an increased debt burden, a skewed global economic system, poor governance, inadequate and sometimes poorly used resources, as well as drought and floods. These factors, combined with the impact of HIV/AIDS and armed conflict, have continued to have devastating effects on

education in Africa.”

The number of students dropping out of school has increased, largely due to high costs and armed conflicts, the ministers reported. The quality of education generally is poor, and educational content is “often irrelevant to the needs of the learners and of social, cultural and economic development.”

Yet the ministers remained optimistic that Africa's educational systems can be significantly improved, given “the recent political progress and increased investment in education in parts of Africa and the opportunities offered by new information and communications technologies.” They called for combining African knowledge and values of solidarity with modern management techniques, social and physical sciences, and new technologies to solve Africa's chronic problems.

Toward that end, they urged concerted action in priority areas, anticipating the targets later incorporated into the global Dakar Framework. In addition, the ministers stressed developing non-formal strategies for reaching disadvantaged children, including street and working children and refugees; making curricula more relevant to local cultures; promoting use of the mother tongue in the early years of primary education and in

adult education; integrating education into the family, community and workplace; and involving teachers and their unions in the development of the teaching profession.

Besides using existing budgetary resources more efficiently, African governments should increase their educational outlays to at least 7 per cent of gross domestic product within 5 years and 9 per cent within 10 years. While governments have the principal financial responsibility, they must act in broad partnership with communities, parents and teachers' associations, non-governmental organizations, religious bodies, the private sector and families. Such partnerships should involve “not simply cost-sharing, but the whole education process, including decision-making, management and teaching.”

Meanwhile, external creditor institutions should ensure that the savings from debt reduction are invested in education and other social sectors, the ministers declared. Both multilateral and bilateral donor institutions should work with African governments and other partners “to assess the side-effects of SAPs [structural adjustment programmes], and other development programmes, on education.” They also should increase financial and technical support to education in Africa to “at least double the current level by 2015.”

the entire spectrum of education, from primary schools through to universities. The continent, he said, requires “highly-trained minds that can look at problems critically. Higher education makes a difference in the direction of a country.”

Focus on girls

Beginning from a very low base, the rate of girls' enrolment in sub-Saharan primary schools has more than doubled since 1960, to just over 70 per cent in 1994 (see graph, below). But girls in the region remain far more likely than boys to never attend school or to drop out early. They comprise 58 per cent of children not in primary school.

The Jomtien conference helped initiate a strong push for girls' education. Gender disparities have been narrowed almost everywhere, even in South Asia and the Arab states, where they remain the greatest. But in sub-Saharan Africa, the gap actually has widened slightly. In 1990, according to UNESCO figures, 50 per cent of primary school age girls were in school, compared to 59 per cent of boys, a gap of 9 percentage points. By 1998, the rate for girls had climbed to 54 per cent, but boys achieved a bigger increase, to 66 per cent, a difference of 12 points.

Reversing this trend is vital for Africa's development, Mr. Annan emphasized, noting that girls' education is “a long-term investment that yields an exceptionally high return,” since better educated girls and women contribute enormously to society's nutrition, health, development and peace. Explaining the UN's new

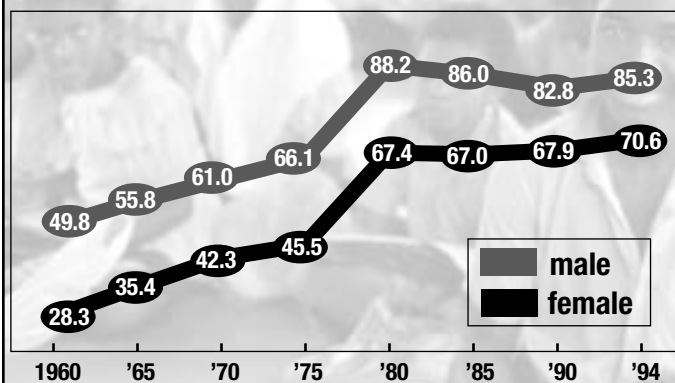
Schoolchildren greet UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in Senegal, at start of tour that also included the Central African Republic, Gabon, Gambia and Cameroon.



UN / Evan Schneider



Gender gap in primary education, sub-Saharan Africa (gross enrolment ratios)



Source: UN Africa Recovery from World Bank, World Development Indicators 2000, CD-ROM version

initiative, he vowed that within a year the UN would help each of the main countries affected to develop a plan of action to promote gender equality in education. But in this endeavour, he added, “political will must be underpinned by resources,” pledging that the UN also would assist countries to free up funds for girls' education through better use of development assistance and debt relief.

Girls are kept out of school by numerous economic, social and cultural constraints, a special panel on girls' education observed. In Burkina Faso, noted a participant, a 7-year-old girl must do 3.5 more hours of domestic work daily, compared with boys, and therefore has to work harder to stay in school if she is lucky enough to go. Poor parents often cannot afford school fees for both their girls and boys and thus tend to keep the girls at home.

Therefore, argued Ms. Vida Yeboah from Ghana, a leader of the continent-wide Forum of African Women Educationalists (FAWE), parents should be shown how their girls' education can improve income prospects. Ms. Abibatou Ndiaye, president of the Federation of Women's Associations of Senegal, stressed that mothers need to become more active within parents' associations.

Often, girls who go to school confront an “unsafe environment,” including sexual harassment from male teachers and students, so steps need to be taken to increase girls' security, emphasized Ms. Aïcha Dah Diallo, a former education minister in Guinea and now UNESCO's director for basic education. Ms. Satang Jobarleh, representing the Association of Non-Governmental Organizations of the Gambia, added that the “taboo” on discussions of rape and other violence against women must be broken. This point was picked up in the plenary address of UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) Executive Director Carol Bellamy, who noted that too often school environments “are unhealthy, unsafe, ineffective and unfriendly to girls.”

Donors' qualified commitments

In aiming for the basic education targets, declared the Dakar Framework, “no countries seriously committed to education for all will be thwarted in their achievement of this goal by a lack of resources.” But donor countries, as a group, made no specific

pledges of how much they would contribute. They did agree to "consider" several options, including increasing external financing and ensuring greater predictability and coordination in aid flows.

The conference debate tended to break down between those (generally from donor countries) who said more funds would become available once national governments had developed "credible" plans for achieving the targets and those (usually from developing countries and NGOs) who argued for more concrete pledges of additional funding now. The Global Campaign for Education, a coalition of 400 NGOs, urged donors to quadruple their current allocations for basic education to about \$4 bn annually, or half the estimated \$8 bn per year required over the next decade to achieve the goal of universal primary education.

Mr. Mark Malloch Brown, Administrator of the UN Development Programme, said that he had some sympathy for both points of view. "Resources alone do not change educational performance," he said. "It must be resources behind sound national strategies. While it is not reasonable to pledge \$8 bn of additional resources today, as national action plans are developed, as needs are identified, it is critical that there are plausible and early commitments by donors to meet this global target of universal education. Jomtien's disappointment was not lack of national action plans alone. It was lack of additional international resources for education."

Some donor representatives did make commitments. Mr. Gene Sperling, economic policy assistant to US President Bill Clinton, pledged that the US would increase its bilateral assistance for basic education internationally by 50 per cent. World Bank President James Wolfensohn noted that his organization had doubled its lending for education since

1990 to about \$1.9 bn a year, and had increased the percentage devoted to basic education from 27 to 44 per cent. The World Bank and other donors, he said, "must be ready to respond more quickly and help countries when they are ready to move."

Beyond increasing the amount of aid, donors also must simplify their often complicated procedures, coordinate more closely with other donors, and ensure that aid flows become more predictable, added Ms. Eveline Herfkens, development cooperation minister of the Netherlands. "We donors have to clean up our act," she acknowledged.

In the discussions on the Dakar Framework, representatives from Ghana and other developing countries raised concerns about the absence of any mechanism to monitor donors' performance, at the same time that aid recipients are expected to scrupulously fulfill a wide range of very specific conditions.

Donors also differed among themselves. Some tended to focus exclusively on education. Some emphasized education's place within a broader spectrum of development priorities. While the World Bank and others addressed the need to expand primary education in conjunction with other educational subsectors (secondary and tertiary, adult literacy, vocational training), a few donors tended to draw sharp distinctions.

Too much spending still goes to higher education, claimed Ms. Clare Short, the UK's secretary of state for international cooperation. Such spending, she maintained, often ends up "educating the sons and daughters of the elite at the expense of the poorest..."

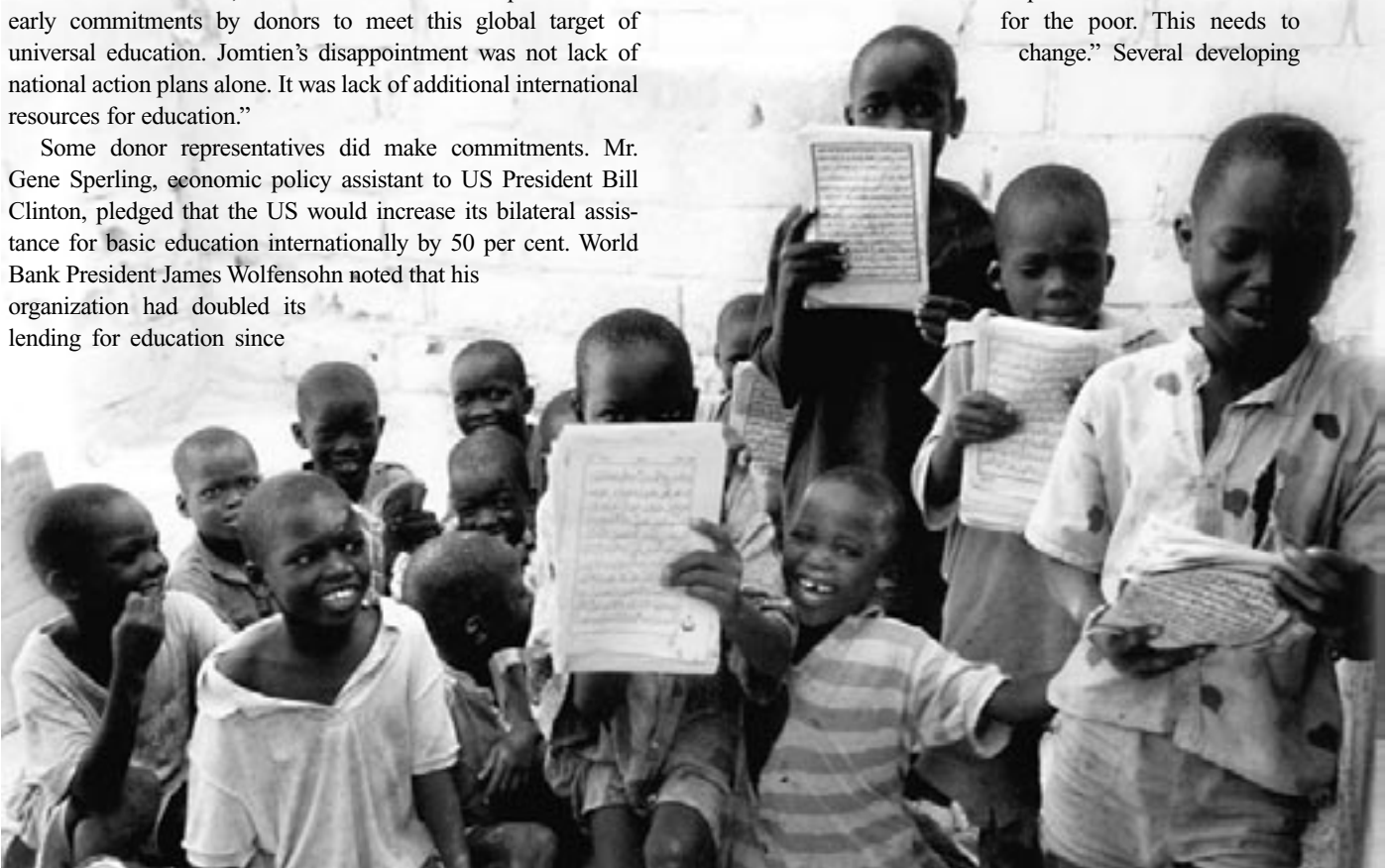
Development assistance should be for the poor. This needs to change." Several developing

Debt relief "allowed us to free up additional resources to finance public expenditures for sectors, including education, that are essential for reducing absolute poverty."

— Alcido N'guenha,
Education Minister, Mozambique



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UNICEF / S. Kamara



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country representatives disputed her emphasis. After some debate, the wording of the Dakar Framework's reference to donor assistance was altered to reflect a more inclusive approach: instead of suggesting that donors consider "increasing external finance for basic education," as originally drafted, the final text now recommends "increasing external finance for education, in particular basic education."

Debt relief dividends

The Framework's reference to debt also was modified at the urging of developing country ministers, who wanted stronger language. While the draft included a call for "providing earlier, deeper and broader debt relief," the final text added the words "and/or debt cancellation." The savings that governments realize from such debt relief or cancellation are to be used for poverty reduction, the Framework states, "with a strong commitment to basic education."

Some countries already have begun to reap the benefits of debt reduction. Mozambican Education Minister Alcido N'guenha noted that his country — one of the first beneficiaries of the heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC) initiative — was able to increase education's share of the budget to 19 per cent in 1999, from a low of around 11 per cent in the early 1990s, following years of civil war and structural adjustment. "The alleviation of external debt servicing resulting from the HIPC initiative," he told a roundtable on debt and education, "allowed us to free up additional resources to finance public expenditures for sectors, including education, that are essential for reducing absolute poverty."

HIPC also could significantly benefit education in a number of

Involving all stakeholders

While external support will be important for achieving basic education for all, African participants repeatedly emphasized that their own countries must bear the prime responsibility. "It's not enough to blame others for what they have failed to do," declared Ms. Graça Machel, a former education minister of Mozambique and one of the organizers of the Jomtien conference. "We have to make the effort to show our own commitments."

Those commitments do not rest with governments alone, pointed out Nigerian President Obasanjo. "The people must be totally involved," he said. The concept of bringing all sectors into the campaign for basic education — parents, teachers, local communities, NGOs, churches, businesses — was a key feature of the strategy initiated in Jomtien and reiterated in Dakar.

The nature of such participation has been a subject of considerable debate, however. Parents associations, teachers' unions and other local organizations have been pressing for greater decision-making input over the hiring of teachers, the siting of schools, the quality of education, and other matters. But for many cash-strapped governments and their external partners, the tendency often has been to view community involvement primarily in financial terms, as a form of "cost-sharing."

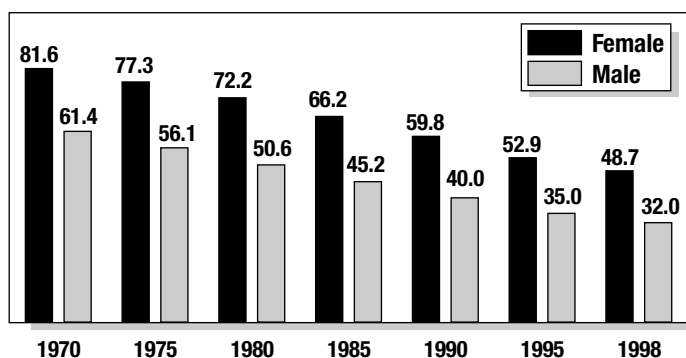
Community initiatives

Confronted with the deterioration or absence of public education, communities across Africa already are becoming increasingly active in raising supplementary funds for their children's schooling. In Nigeria and Kenya, community fundraising socials are common. In Botswana, local councils impose school levies. In Madagascar, farmers pay teachers with bags of rice. In Mali, villagers and external NGOs are financing a parallel system of "community schools," which provide education of a quality comparable to those of the government schools.

While perhaps necessary under current circumstances, reliance on school fees and other forms of community funding is not desirable, many participants in the Dakar forum believed. If access to primary education comes to depend on the ability of a family or community to pay, then only the better-off can get quality educations while the poorest will be left even further behind. In Kenya, Zimbabwe and other African countries where school fees and other costs are common, there are big differences in educational access along social, regional and ethnic lines.

For reasons of equity, and to ensure that basic education really does become available to all, UNICEF and such NGOs as Oxfam International have long been opposed to the introduction of primary school fees. Although the Jomtien declaration made no reference to "free" primary schooling, the Dakar Framework does, emphasizing that by 2015 all children should be able to complete "free and compulsory primary education of good quality."

Illiteracy in sub-Saharan Africa
(% of people aged 15 and above)



Source: UN Africa Recovery from World Bank, World Development Indicators 2000, CD-ROM version

other African countries, including Mauritania, Tanzania and Uganda, noted Mr. Birger Fredriksen, the World Bank's director for human development in Africa. Beyond the actual funds freed up, he added, by directly linking debt relief with social sector spending goals, the HIPC process has helped win education ministers a "seat at the table" alongside finance ministers and other key policy makers.