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Preparatory Conference of the African region for the 48th session of the International Conference on Education (ICE), 17 and 18 September 2008, Yaounde – Cameroon

Introduction

The Preparatory Conference of the African region was held from 17 to 18 September 2008 in Yaounde, Cameroon. This conference was held in preparation for the 48th session of the International Conference on Education (ICE) which will take place from 25 to 28 November in Geneva, Switzerland. The preparatory meeting brought together high level officials from the Ministries of Education of 11 African countries (South Africa, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Kenya, Mali, Mozambique and Nigeria). The Yaounde regional Conference, organized in conjunction with the International Bureau of Education (IBE) sought to arrive at a common and shared vision in Africa on inclusive education, taking into account the needs and peculiarities of the continent.

Participants in the conference thanked the government of the Republic of Cameroon, the Cameroon National Commission for UNESCO, the UNESCO Office for Cameroon, the Central African Republic and Chad, the Regional Office for Education in Africa (BREDA), as well as the International Bureau on Education of UNESCO (IBE-UNESCO) for their faultless organization of this conference which provided a forum for the participating countries, to consider, brainstorm and exchange their experiences on inclusive education.

Situation in Africa

Since the World Forum in Dakar (2000), progress has been made toward Universal Primary Education (UPE). The world net school enrolment rate (NSE) rose from 83 per cent in 1999 to 86 per cent in 2004. The mean primary school enrolment rate in sub-Saharan Africa increased from 55 to 65 per cent.

In order to enhance primary education, policies to abolish school fees, increase teacher training

and introduce incentives in the teaching profession as well as for marginalised young people, have begun to bear fruit, corresponding entirely to the spirit of inclusive education which is crucially important to African countries.

However, despite the progress made toward EFA in sub-Saharan Africa since 2000, there are still over 33 million children who do not attend school in the region. A good number of countries may not achieve universal basic education by 2015. The rate of student transition to higher education today is still below 10 per cent; the remainder enter working life with the little education acquired. Over the next 20 years, countries face the risk of being unable to provide lasting post-primary education to more than 15 per cent of young learners. Social, gender and regional (urban/rural) inequalities continue to persist; families are not sufficiently involved; less than 10 per cent of disabled children attend school. Education has not been sufficiently enlarged to include all social and cultural groups (e.g. with conventional, exam-orientated curricula) and, from this perspective, in-depth reform is necessary.

Main themes

1. Inclusive Education: from theory to practice

Inclusion is a real challenge to African school systems where the lack of human and material resources is often quite common. Introducing an inclusive education system through the design of appropriate strategies which enable a re-contextualisation and widespread application of the concept of inclusion. It requires a paradigm shift and progress toward educational systems and schools that provide opportunities for all (access, process and results). Inclusion can be understood as a principle aimed at enhancing Education for All (EFA), by seeking appropriate ways and means of achieving equity and quality. The following points can be highlighted:

1. The values and philosophy of inclusion must be reflected in the attitudes of teachers and all education stakeholders;
2. Educational systems must encourage the emergence of a framework for inclusion;
3. Curricula should be adapted to inclusion-oriented policy;
4. Political guidelines relating to teaching should provide teachers' working conditions conducive to inclusion;
5. Teachers must use effective teaching/learning and pedagogic methods that include all the learners;
6. The family and community in the broad sense of the word must be involved for inclusion to be successful;
7. The designing of an individualised education plan that responds to the needs of each and every learner, with the different resources necessary for inclusive education; and

8. Teacher training is one of the key tools in the implementation of inclusive education.

2. Public policies, increased Basic Education and Education for All (EFA)

Relevant discussions enabled participants to agree on a number of priorities to be included in policies with a view to better integration of inclusive education:

1. The recognition that each and every child has the right to education;
2. A sense of ownership of the notion in its broad sense, and a design of strategies in keeping with the cultural, social, religious, economic and political context;
3. The need for countries to formulate multi-sectoral and inter-ministerial educational policies (the relationship between social inclusion and inclusive education) involving all stakeholders, to develop legal and institutional frameworks, and to establish institutions using these frameworks and policies with the necessary resources for inclusive education;
4. The need to step up teacher training to provide them with tools necessary for taking care of children with special needs;
5. The need to build and support schools;
6. The need for communities to be involved in school management;
7. The need to open schools in neighbourhoods in the rural areas;
8. The introduction of indigenous languages in teaching in order to encourage to advance inclusion;
9. The development of bilingual schools;
10. The participatory approach of communities in curriculum development;
11. The involvement of parents in the educational process;
12. The prioritising of education for girls; and
13. The necessity to take non-formal basic education (NFBE) into account as a strong factor in inclusive education.

3. Democratising basic education in sub-Saharan Africa

Access to primary education (MDG2), still needs to be democratised, while basic education still needs to be broadened and diversified, 8 years after the Dakar Forum. Colonial educational institutions with their focus on the emergence of an elite have not evolved, despite the introduction of mass education. In order to break loose of the elitist system and adopt inclusive education, the principles and basis of our educational system must be reviewed.

1. The need to provide access for all to a basic education of 9-10 years within a perspective of life-long learning. Education must be diversified in order to facilitate links and school models (overcoming separation and facilitating the transition between early childhood care and education, primary and secondary education.)
2. The importance of learning contexts that favour learning which is child-centered with a flexible curriculum that is adapted to the learner's needs; and
3. The need to move away from the traditionally selective approach which emphasises a rigid organisation of subjects and exams. Curricular change is needed (towards objectives, structures; organisation of subjects and modes of evaluation, for example) based on competency-based approaches which recognises and rewards learning.

4. Managing linguistic diversity

1. The crucial role of school in terms of linguistic and cultural diversity (recognising, understanding and responding to diversity);
2. The necessary means for enhancing the value of the great richness of the linguistic diversity in the African continent within an educational context;
3. The difficulty of promoting national languages due to their great variety in certain countries; and
4. The willingness of African leaders to bring the school closer to its socio-cultural environment through the delegation of decision-making powers to schools.