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Reaching the marginalized – the key to Education for All

Abstract:

The article recalls the goals of Dakar-2000-conference as a benchmark for the assessment of progress within the EFA-process. The central challenges are envisaged being apparent and it is shown at what stages the need of action is most prominent till 2015 to reach the marginalized in successful and sustainable ways.

Zusammenfassung:

Der Beitrag erinnert an die Ziele der Konferenz von Dakar im Jahr 2000 als Bezugspunkt der Bewertung von Fortschritten im Prozess der Bildung für alle. Beschrieben werden die zentralen Herausforderungen, die anlässlich des Erscheinens des EFA-Monitoring-Reports augenscheinlich sind und es wird aufgezeigt, an welchen Stellen dringender Handlungsbedarf besteht, um die Benachteiligten erfolgreich und nachhaltig erreichen zu können.

Preliminary remarks

The goals adopted in 2000 at the World Education Forum in Dakar remain the benchmark for assessing progress towards Education for All. Much has been achieved: some of the world's poorest countries have registered advances on many fronts, demonstrating that national leadership and good policies make a difference. But the world is unequivocally off track for the Dakar goals and the battle to achieve universal primary education by 2015 is being lost. The 2010 Education for All Global Monitoring Report 'Reaching the marginalized' argues that changing this picture will require a far stronger focus on inequality and the most marginalized groups in society. Gender remains a priority area because of the persistence of institutionalized disadvantage for young girls and women. Strategies aimed at equalizing opportunity in education will also have to address disadvantages rooted in poverty and social discrimination. The monitoring evidence points clearly to the need for a greater sense of urgency on the part of governments and donors. With less than five years to the target date, the window of opportunity for putting in place the investment and policies needed to bring the education goals within reach is closing.

Marginalization as challenging barrier to education

Millions of children are denied their human right to education for the simple reason that their parents cannot afford to keep them in school. Social and cultural barriers to education form another formidable obstacle. In many countries, the education of girls is widely perceived as being of less value than that of boys,

with traditional practices such as early marriage adding another layer of disadvantage. Members of ethnic minorities often face deeply entrenched obstacles to equal opportunity. Denied an opportunity to learn in their own language and faced with social stigmatization, they are set on an early pathway to disadvantage. Millions of children with disabilities across the world also face far more restricted opportunities than their peers, as do children living in regions affected by conflict.

None of these disadvantages operates in isolation. Poverty, gender, ethnicity and other characteristics interact to create overlapping and self-reinforcing layers of disadvantage that limit opportunity and hamper social mobility. The interaction between marginalization in education and wider patterns of marginalization operates in both directions. Being educated is a vital human capability that enables people to make choices in areas that matter. The lack of an education restricts choices. It limits the scope people have for influencing decisions that affect their lives. People lacking literacy and numeracy skills face a heightened risk of poverty, insecure employment and ill health. Poverty and ill health, in turn, contribute to marginalization in education. So does the fact that the marginalized have only a weak voice in shaping political decisions affecting their lives.

Reaching marginalized children requires political commitment backed by practical policies. When governments met in 1990 at the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand, they recognized the need to overcome extreme inequalities holding back progress in education. They declared that 'consistent measures must be taken to reduce disparities' and called for active commitment to reach 'underserved groups', including the poor, remote rural populations, ethnic, racial and linguistic minorities, refugees and migrants, and those affected by conflict (UNESCO 1990, Article 3). The Dakar Framework for Action reaffirmed the commitment to 'explicitly identify, target and respond flexibly to the needs and circumstances of the poorest and the most marginalized' (UNESCO 2000, IV, para. 52). While some countries have made impressive efforts to back up such words by extending educational opportunities to their most marginalized populations, action has generally fallen far short of the commitments made at Jomtien and Dakar. Marginalization has remained a peripheral concern. The assumption has been that national progress in education would eventually trickle down to the most disadvantaged. After a decade of steady but uneven national progress, it is time to abandon that assumption. In many countries, large swathes of society are being left behind as a result of inherited disadvantages. Breaking down these disadvantages will require a far stronger focus on the hard to reach.

Tackling marginalization is a matter of urgency on several counts. The targets for 2015 adopted in the Dakar Framework for Action – including universal primary education – will not be achieved unless governments step up their efforts to reach the marginalized. Sustaining progress in basic education and creating the foundations for advances in secondary education will require a renewed drive to extend opportunity to individuals and groups facing the most deeply entrenched disadvantages. Progress in combating marginalization in education would dramatically improve the discouraging scenario in many countries. The case for action on marginalization goes beyond the 2015 targets. Extreme and persistent deprivation in education carries a high price for societies as well as for individuals. In the increasingly knowledge-based and competitive global economy, depriving people of opportunities for education is a prescription for wastage of skills, talent and opportunities for innovation and economic growth. It is also a recipe for social division. Marginalization in education is an important factor in the widening of social and economic inequalities. Working towards more inclusive education is a condition for the development of more inclusive societies.

Overcoming marginalization must be at the heart of the Education for All agenda. Education should be a driver of equal opportunity and social mobility, not a transmission mechanism for social injustice. The familiar routine of governments endorsing equal opportunity principles, reaffirming human rights commitments and signing up for international summit communiqués on education is not enough. Overcoming marginalization requires practical policies that address the structures of inequality perpetuating marginalization – and it requires political leaders to recognize that marginalization matters.

Identifying and measuring marginalization

Measuring marginalization in education is not straightforward. Household surveys and other data provide insights into the relationship between poverty, ethnicity, health, parental literacy and other characteristics on the one side and education on the other. But while these are all characteristics associated with marginalization, they do not operate in isolation. The marginalized in education are often poor and female, and from an ethnic minority living in a remote rural area. Understanding how different layers of disadvantage interact is a first step towards breaking the cycles of disadvantage that push people into marginalization. The new DME (Deprivation and Marginalization in Education) data set assembled for the 2010 Report is a statistical tool that helps chart the dimensions of marginalization and identifies patterns of individual and group disadvantage. The data are drawn from Demographic and Health Surveys and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys covering eighty developing countries, including 38 low-income countries. Data from these sources have been reconstituted to concentrate on key dimensions of education marginalization.

Time spent in education is one of the most important determinants of life chances in all societies. There is no internationally agreed benchmark for education deprivation. However, people with fewer than four years of schooling are unlikely to have mastered basic literacy or numeracy skills, let alone built a foundation for lifelong learning. Those with fewer than two years are likely to face extreme disadvantages in many areas of their lives. Of course, learning achievement ultimately depends as

much on the quality of education as on time spent in school. But the four year and two year thresholds are bottom lines that this analysis treats as indicators for ‘education poverty’ and ‘extreme education poverty’, respectively. The Report uses these thresholds to provide a snapshot of education deprivation for a selection of mostly low-income countries. It covers a reference group of young adults aged 17 to 22. Even taking into account average attendance, this is far enough beyond the standard primary school completion age to provide a credible picture of who has completed four years of education.

Three broad themes emerge. The first is the scale of global deprivation and inequality. In rich countries, the vast majority of young adults in this age range will have accumulated ten to 15 years of education. In 22 of the countries covered by the DME data, 30% or more of 17- to 22-year-olds have fewer than four years of education; in eleven of these countries, the figure rises to 50%. 19 of the 22 countries are in sub-Saharan Africa, with Guatemala, Pakistan and Morocco making up the remainder.

The second theme concerns cross-country differences. On average, as one would expect, the share of the population with fewer than four years or fewer than two years of education falls as the national average for years of education rises. Countries averaging more than eight years of education typically have fewer than 10% falling below the four-year threshold. This broad association conceals as much as it reveals, however. For example, Egypt averages more years of education than Kenya but has a larger share of 17- to 22-year-olds with fewer than four years of education. Such comparisons point to deeply entrenched national inequalities that are obscured by national average figures. Comparisons of the depth of education poverty point in the same direction. In countries with very low average years of education, the majority of people falling below the four-year threshold also have fewer than two years of education. However, Pakistan has a lower share of the population with fewer than four years than Rwanda, but a 50% higher share with fewer than two years. These comparisons illustrate the variation in the degree to which all sections of society share in average progress in education.

The third theme to emerge from figure 1 is the scale of national disparities based on income and gender. Wealth-based inequalities are a universal source of disadvantage in education. Being born into the poorest 20% significantly raises the risk of falling below the four-year threshold. In almost half of the countries including Cambodia, Ghana, Guatemala, India, Nicaragua, Nigeria and Yemen, the incidence of four-year education deprivation among the poor is double the national average. In the Philippines, being poor increases the likelihood of a 17- to 22-year-old having fewer than four years in education by a factor of four compared with the national average.

Marginalization in education is driven by social inequalities

Marginalization in education is the product of a toxic cocktail of inherited disadvantage, deeply ingrained social processes, unfair economic arrangements and bad policies.

Being born into poverty is one of the strongest factors leading to marginalization in education. Some 1.4 billion of the world’s people survive on less than US\$ 1.25 a day. Many are parents struggling to keep their children in school. Household

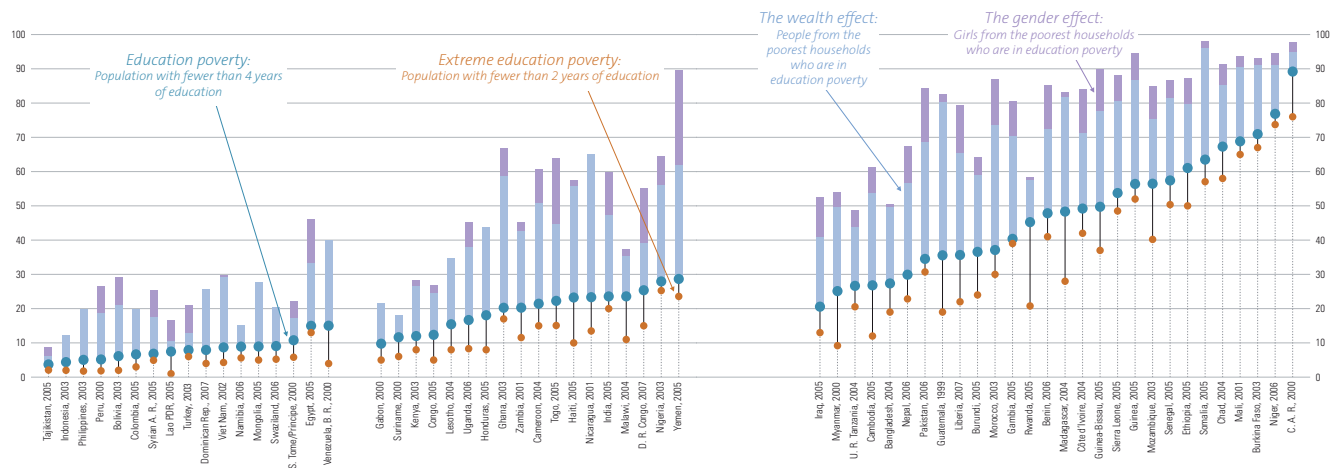


Figure 1: measuring education poverty across countries
 % of national population, the poorest households, and girls in poorest households aged 17 to 22 with fewer than four years and fewer than two years of education, selected countries, most recent year
 Source: UNESCO-DME (2009).

surveys point to parental inability to afford education as a major factor behind non-attendance. Household poverty goes hand in hand with vulnerability. Even a small economic shock caused by drought, unemployment or sickness, for example, can force parents into coping strategies that damage children's welfare. Girls are often the first to feel the effects. In Pakistan and Uganda, climate-related shocks result in far more girls being taken out of school than boys.

Child labour is another corollary of poverty that hurts education. There are an estimated 166 million child labourers in the world. Many of these children are locked in a losing battle to combine work with education. In Mali, around half of all children aged seven to 14 report that they are working. With labour activities taking up an average of 37 hours a week, most of these children do not attend school. Language and ethnicity lead to marginalization in education through complex channels. Poverty is an important part of the equation. In Ecuador and Guatemala, malnutrition rates among indigenous children are twice the level for non-indigenous children.

Other factors powerfully reinforce the effects of social deprivation. One reason that many linguistic and ethnic minority children perform poorly in school is that they are often taught in a language they struggle to understand. Around 221 million children speak a different language at home from the language of instruction in school, limiting their ability to develop foundations for later learning. At the same time, language policy in education raises complex issues and potential tensions between group identity on the one hand, and social and economic aspirations on the other. Parents in many countries express a strong preference for their children to learn in the official language, principally because this is seen as a route to enhanced prospects for social mobility.

Stigmatization is a potent source of marginalization that children bring with them to the classroom. From Aborigines in Australia to the indigenous people of Latin America, failure to provide home language instruction has often been part of a wider process of cultural subordination and social discrimination. Caste systems in South Asia also disadvantage many children. Research from India is instructive. It shows that children from low-caste

households score at far lower levels when their caste is publicly announced than when it is unannounced – an outcome that underlines the debilitating effects of stigma on self-confidence. Livelihoods and location are often strongly linked with social disadvantage in education. One reason pastoralists in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa register such high levels of deprivation in education is that their livelihoods involve children travelling long distances. Immobile school infrastructure is ill equipped to respond to the needs of highly mobile groups and the schooling provided is often irrelevant to their lives. Slums are also focal points for education deprivation. This is partly because of poverty and partly because many governments fail to provide slum dwellers with the legal rights required to establish an entitlement to education.

Conflict is a potent source of marginalization in education. Worldwide, around 14 million children aged five to 17 have been forcibly displaced by conflict, often within countries or across borders, into education systems lacking the most rudimentary education facilities. Less easy to measure than the impact on school attendance are the effects on learning of trauma associated with armed conflict. In 2008 and 2009, Israeli military actions in Gaza led to the deaths of 164 students and twelf teachers, and severely damaged or destroyed 280 schools and kindergartens. In an area where 69% of adolescents were already reported as experiencing post-traumatic stress before the latest episode of violence, many children returned to school carrying with them the effects of anxiety and emotional shock.

Some sections of society face problems rooted in public perceptions and official neglect. Children living with disabilities suffer from social attitudes that stigmatize, restrict opportunity and lower self-esteem. These attitudes are frequently reinforced within the classroom, where teachers often lack the training and resources needed to deliver a decent education. Children living with HIV and AIDS, and those who have been orphaned by the disease or are living with affected household members, also face distinctive pressures. Some of these pressures originate in economic hardship and the need to provide care. Others can be traced to practices rooted in social discrimination and to the effects of loss experienced by AIDS or-

phans. Evidence from many countries suggests that education planners are not responding effectively to these problems.

Reaching and teaching the marginalized

There is no single blueprint for overcoming marginalization in education. Policies need to address underlying causes such as social inequality, gender disparities, ethnic and linguistic disadvantages, and gaps between geographic areas. In each of these areas, equalizing opportunity involves redressing unequal power relationships. The inequalities that the marginalized face start in early childhood and continue through school age years. They are deeply engrained and highly resistant to change. Yet progress is possible with sustained political commitment to social justice, equal opportunity and basic rights. Three broad sets of policies can make a difference. They can be thought of as three points in an inclusive-education triangle.

Accessibility and affordability

Removing school fees is necessary to make education more affordable for the poorest, but is not sufficient to remove cost barriers. Governments also need to lower indirect costs associated with uniforms, textbooks and informal fees. Financial stipend programmes for identifiably marginalized groups – such as those developed in Bangladesh, Cambodia and Viet Nam – can help provide incentives for education and enhance affordability. Bringing schools closer to marginalized communities is also vital, especially for gender equity – a point demonstrated by the sharp decline in out-of-school numbers in Ethiopia. More flexible approaches to providing education and multigrade teaching in remote areas could bring education within reach of some of the world's most marginalized children. Non-government organizations often play an important role in extending access to hard-to-reach populations, including child labourers, out-of-school adolescents and children with disabilities.

In Bangladesh, one non-government organization has developed a system of 'floating schools' in order to reach the Bede (River Gypsy) community, whose livelihood depends on their moving about on boats. The provision of non-government organizations is most successful when it is integrated into national systems, allowing children to continue their studies in formal schooling or to gain meaningful employment.

The learning environment

Getting marginalized children into school is just a first step. Ensuring that they receive a good education poses significant policy challenges. Targeted financial support and programmes to facilitate improved learning in schools in the most disadvantaged regions can make a difference, as can programmes that draw well-qualified teachers to the schools facing the greatest deprivation. Language policy is another key area. Reforms in Bolivia have emphasized the important role of intercultural and bilingual education in providing ethnic and linguistic minority children with good-quality schooling, and in overcoming social stigmatization. Ensuring that children with disabilities enjoy opportunities for learning in an inclusive environment requires changes in attitude, backed by investment in teacher training and learning equipment. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities provides a framework for delivery that should serve as a guide to public policy.

Entitlements and opportunities

Many of the measures needed to overcome marginalization in education operate at the interface between education policy and wider strategies for change. Legal provisions can play a role in overcoming discrimination and realizing the right to education. Some marginalized groups, such as the Roma in Europe, have successfully challenged the legality of policies that result in institutionalized segregation. Legal provisions are likely to prove most effective when backed by social and political mobilization on the part of marginalized people – New Zealand's Maori language movement and Bolivia's indigenous movements are cases in point. Social protection is a critical pathway to mitigating the vulnerability that comes with poverty. Conditional cash transfer programmes in Latin America, for example, have a strong track record in improving school attendance and progression. Several countries in sub-Saharan Africa are also investing in social protection programmes. One large-scale example is the Productive Safety Net Programme in Ethiopia, which provides guaranteed employment for communities affected by drought, with positive educational effects. Increased investment in such programmes can enhance equity and accelerate progress towards the Education for All goals. However, equity and cost-effectiveness considerations require detailed attention to the design of interventions, targeting and levels of support. Redistributive public spending is one of the keys to expanded entitlements and opportunities. Because marginalization in education is associated with poverty, the regions most affected often have the least capacity to mobilize resources. Most countries have some redistributive element in public finance, but typically it is underdeveloped. The programme of federal government transfers in Brazil is an example of an attempt to narrow large state-level financing gaps in education, with some positive effects.

Overcoming marginalization in education is an imperative for human rights and social justice. It is also the key to accelerated progress towards the Education for All goals set at Dakar. No government seriously committed to the goals can afford to ignore the deep social disparities that are stalling progress in education. Nor can it ignore the wider consequences of marginalization in education for social cohesion and future prosperity. That is why the 2010 Education for all Global Monitoring Report Reaching the marginalized stresses the urgency of all countries developing strategies for more inclusive education linked to wider strategies for overcoming poverty, social discrimination and extreme inequality.

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