

Achieving EFA in Underserved Regions

The EFA Bar Is Now Higher

The community of nations has agreed that education is the key to development and no country can realize its potential without investing in public education. From this consensus grew the commitment to Education for All (EFA), first codified in 1990 and renewed at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, in 2000. This commitment was translated into the EFA goal that all children should be able to attend and complete free primary schooling of good quality by 2015.

Forum participants recognized, however, that school access alone does not guarantee education. Therefore, they also committed to the goal of improving educational quality. This requires that all students achieve measurable learning outcomes, especially in literacy, numeracy, and essential life skills. In short, the four main EFA goals are

- providing access for all children to quality education;
- eliminating gender-based and other access disparities;
- ensuring children complete primary school; and
- achieving measurable learning outcomes.

Whether these goals can be attained remains an open question.

According to the 2002 EFA *Global Monitoring Report*, “one-third of the world’s population live in countries where achieving EFA goals remains a dream rather than a realistic proposition.” Unless dramatically different means of funding and offering primary education are attempted, more than 30 countries—most of them in Africa—will fall far short of achieving full primary school enrollment and gender equity by 2015. There is even less prospect that most countries will be able to show tangible learning outcomes for all students.

The EFA Challenge

EFA aspires that all children get into school and no group is excluded. Another goal is that children continue in school until at least the end of the primary cycle, and they demonstrate a measure of proficiency in reading, mathematics, and life skills. This constitutes four challenges—access, equity, completion, and learning.

Participants in the World Education Forum in 2000 for the first time committed to a goal of “improving all aspects of the quality of education...so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.”

Goals of Education for All

The four main EFA goals are

- providing access for all children to quality education;
- eliminating gender-based and other access disparities;
- ensuring children complete primary school; and
- achieving measurable learning outcomes.

Access: School access for chronically underserved populations and regions must be addressed. Currently, 130 million school-aged children are out of school, most of them in regions where they have little or no access to schooling. In 20 countries where the national percentage of school-aged children entering primary school is nearly 80 percent, more than 40 percent of them in rural areas are out of school.

Equity: Countries with the lowest levels of educational access usually also experience the highest enrollment gaps. Certain groups tend to gain access first—boys, urban children, economically advantaged children, and ethnic majority children. Others—such as girls in rural areas—are served last or may never be served adequately by the country’s public education system.

Completion: A large number of developing countries suffer from high repetition and dropout rates, particularly during the first three grades. Overall, one-third of children who start school do not complete grade 5. Some countries expand access and begin to attain EFA enrollment targets, only to see high repetition and dropout rates siphon off large numbers of students before they reap lasting educational benefits. For example, Uganda and Malawi have been applauded for introducing policies of free and universal primary school access, but less than half of the students who enter grade 1 make it to grade 6. Quality and access are inextricably linked; merely expanding access does not build the foundation a country needs to develop.

Learning: Growing evidence on learning achievement suggests that most pupils do not master basic literacy and numeracy skills in many countries. Recent assessments in Ghana, Ethiopia, Uganda, Malawi, Zambia, and Nigeria indicate that fewer than 20 percent of children attain grade-level standards for literacy and numeracy. Without consideration of how best to create effective learning opportunities, resources and efforts devoted to expanding enrollment will be largely wasted. The EFA challenge is to achieve as yet unmet levels of effective schooling, not simply to extend the reach of formal systems.

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Constraints

Well-documented constraints to achieving higher rates of access, completion, equity, and performance include

- inadequate financing, reflected by very low per-pupil unit costs;
- teacher shortages and high pupil-teacher ratios produced by centrally managed teacher development and deployment systems;
- inadequate supervision and support for schools and ineffective school-community relationships that result from bureaucratic administration; and
- low levels of learning and almost negligible time on task, inevitable products of overburdened curricula and inadequate instructional methods and materials.

Overcoming these constraints is particularly difficult in regions where poor and isolated populations live. Such regions—which may encompass a significant proportion of national populations—exist in virtually all countries. Examples include the Amerindian regions of the Andes, lower-caste areas of India, rural areas of upper Egypt, northern Ghana, rural Mali and Burkina Faso, and vast areas inhabited by nomads in the Horn of Africa and East Africa. Simply expanding existing school models is not likely to meet the educational needs of these underserved populations, since they often do not share the languages, cultural traditions, or religions of mainstream populations.

The Impact of Civil Conflicts and HIV/AIDS

Even greater challenges face countries experiencing civil conflict and the breakdown of all institutions, including schools. For countries such as Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, Angola, and parts of Columbia, the issue is rebuilding—not restructuring—public education. This greatly increases the costs of achieving EFA. Almost half the countries now unlikely to achieve EFA goals have histories of civil conflict. At least 73 are grappling with internal crises or post-conflict reconstruction. Steep human and financial costs of prolonged periods of unrest require serious consideration of how to

- rebuild public education to cost less;
- make use of fewer trained teachers;
- cope with large numbers of out-of-school youth; and
- restore trust within communities.

The devastation of HIV/AIDS also threatens EFA goals. The pandemic has not only caused growing numbers of children to be orphaned and ostracized, but it is depleting the teaching force in regions such as southern Africa. In some countries, the number of teachers disabled or dying from AIDS exceeds the number produced by the teacher-training system. Again, the challenge is figuring out new models for providing public education.

Sadly, conflict, poverty, and HIV/AIDS often occur simultaneously. Countries where regions and populations have been neglected are often marked by conflict. HIV/AIDS tends to spread rapidly in poorer countries, especially during times of civic unrest and strife.

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Global Efforts So Far

Global EFA efforts have not yet pointed the way to solutions to these formidable challenges. Thirteen years after the initial commitment, the international community gave itself 15 more years to meet the goal of universal primary education. Over this period, the international community also

- reached consensus that educational achievement is measured when children learn something by attending school;
- has come to better understand the importance of investing in human resources development through conventions such as the Millennium Challenge Account and the Fast-Track Initiative; and
- renewed calls for additional resources from developing country governments and foreign assistance budgets.

To achieve universal primary education and gender equity, UNESCO estimates an extra \$5.6 billion is needed annually—more than double the current total for educational assistance. This expectation may not be realistic, given that education aid shrank during the 1990s, a period of sustained economic growth. Further, many developing-country budgets are strapped, and some already have committed large percentages to education.

Reason to Hope

In the face of cash-starved treasuries and shrinking aid, new models and effective approaches to providing education are being developed. Joseph Farrell refers to “a quiet revolution” in the developing world that is radically transforming “forms” of formal schooling (Farrell 2001). A growing number of these models are either fundamentally changing the organization of learning and teaching or radically altering the community’s role in running a school. When communities select teachers and organize support systems, high levels of retention and student learning are realized. The most effective and promising models reach underserved populations at lower cost, while producing measurable learning outcomes.

Countless examples exist of innovative, successful schools in extremely remote or otherwise challenging conditions:

- BRAC in Bangladesh is a well-known complementary model whose 35,000 schools now reach approximately 25 percent of the country’s rural communities. Over its 18-year existence, BRAC’s rural schools have produced 2.5 million graduates.
- More than 20,000 schools of *École Neuve* in Columbia serve half the country’s rural areas. They inspired similar schools in at least 10 other Latin American countries, including Guatemala’s *Neuva Escuela Unitaria*, whose 1,300 schools reach the country’s Amerindian population.
- Community schools in Zambia now serve 25,000 children in more than 200 schools. Many target students orphaned by the scourge of HIV/AIDS.
- Egypt’s community schools, started in 1992 in just four villages in Assiut, have spread to more than 1,000 villages and now serve some 25,000 children.
- Community-organized complementary schools in Balochistan, northern Pakistan, use 3,000 young women as teachers to reach 53,000 girls in approximately 2,200 communities.

Individual cases of these complementary models to the formal system, schools and approaches to schooling have been documented and analyzed. Despite this, the movement is still largely unrecognized by many as a means of meeting development and EFA objectives. The literature mostly consists of project evaluations and reviews for organizations championing basic education alternatives. They deal largely on a case-by-case basis, with reviews of *École Neuva* and BRAC at the forefront. UNESCO's 1990s series, *Innovations in Education*, were beautifully designed and photographed booklets on informal complements to basic education, but they lacked critical analyses and substantive data.

The steadily proliferating complementary approaches to public education importantly demonstrate how a variety of actors—in particular, civil society—can play key roles in expanding access to primary education and ensuring equity and effectiveness. Further, the complementary approaches do not amount to individual schools and isolated interventions. They operate at system-level, training and supporting teachers, developing curricula, dealing with the governance and finance of large numbers of schools, and creating policy. As such, they can offer invaluable lessons for much larger formal governmental systems.

The Task for EQUIP2

EQUIP2 will systematically document these emerging models. The analysis will help to reveal variations in how schools are organized, managed, and financed. The analysis will also review different combinations of human resources used to support teaching and learning as well as the learning systems and innovations employed. In each case, the objective is to understand how large-scale complementary approaches to organization, management, finance, human resources, and learning systems may contribute to meeting EFA goals of access, equity, completion, and learning.

EQUIP2 will highlight policy and institutional implications of achieving EFA goals through large-scale support for complementary public education models as well as the lessons they offer for the structure, financing, and management of public education.

Recommendations for program and project development will be offered to USAID and other agencies. Potentially, this will include advice on designing projects or programs that introduce complementary models or help formal models develop on a larger scale. EQUIP2 will also develop recommendations on how USAID and other donors can support policy and institutional environments that promote and take advantage of complementary models to reach chronically underserved populations and regions. The study may thus help shape donor policies and strategies for supporting EFA.

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Three Promising Conceptual Shifts

The study may offer fundamental lessons about how to change public policy on universal primary education. The implication is that public education can be delivered—and delivered effectively—by making the following three conceptual shifts that already show promise for realizing EFA goals in developing countries:

- 1. Seeing nongovernmental actors as viable providers of public education*
In almost all complementary models analyzed, civil society plays a critical supporting role in the education of children. Shifting away from government as the sole provider of public education is vitally important. Networks—communities, NGOs, and faith-based organizations—can work with government toward EFA objectives.
- 2. Changing the focus of government efforts from providing and supervising inputs to supporting the attainment of learning outcomes*
By focusing on demonstrated learning or proficiency, complementary models show a willingness to do whatever it takes to be successful. They use whoever is available as teachers; create systems of support as needed; and focus curricula, calendar, and instruction so children acquire basic reading, writing, and computing skills.
- 3. Broadening the definition of who is required to support learning*
The keys to the success of complementary models that reach and educate underserved populations may be who they enlist as teachers and how they are developed. The critical bottleneck in underserved regions is the traditional model of “teacher as expert.” This model entails predetermined levels of education and certification, as well as centralized systems of recruiting, hiring, and deployment. Complementary models suggest that a variety of arrangements can facilitate learning, including recruiting teachers locally who have less education than is traditionally required. Investments are then made in regular support and development for these teachers, rather than in preservice education and training.

These are the broad issues and themes that a systematic analysis will illuminate. The work should strengthen the case for a reform of national policies and help guide the design and implementation of programs that may help attain EFA goals in underserved regions of the world.

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