



Food for thought: Education for rural people

Knowledge as a tool to fight hunger and poverty

For children living in remote rural areas, from Angola to Zambia and Bangladesh to Brazil, attending school competes with a whole host of demands on their time and energy - collecting water, herding animals and looking after their younger brothers and sisters.

But knowledge is a powerful means of liberating these children, and their families, from the cycle of poverty and hunger.

Rural people need more schools, with improved teaching methods, techniques and materials, focusing on their real needs.

Lavinia Gasperini, organizer of a workshop addressing these very issues, talks about an FAO and UNESCO partnership programme which brings together international organizations, governments, universities and NGOs.

Q: Some 840 million people on the planet are hungry and some 880 million adults are illiterate - these numbers are startlingly similar. How are they linked?

A: The 840 million who are undernourished and the 880 million adults who are illiterate are mostly the same people, mainly the poor in rural areas. But we must add 130 million children to the number of illiterate people, bringing the total number to over a billion people. Some 180 million children are undernourished. The problems of illiteracy and hunger are related - studies have shown that increasing education has a direct effect on improving agricultural production. A World Bank study, for example, showed that increasing women's primary schooling could boost agricultural output by 24 percent.

Q: Education and agricultural development help to free people from poverty. How could a new approach combining both elements help resolve this problem?

A: Collaboration among education and agricultural specialists represents an important step forward, it has led to the creation of a new partnership initiative called Education for Rural People, launched during the World Summit on Sustainable Development. This initiative calls upon the world community - governments, UN agencies and civil society - to join forces and work together to address the needs of the rural poor. Up until now we have been working in a very specialised way - different UN agencies addressed different topics - FAO would address hunger, UNESCO would address education. Now we know that we have to work together to address people who have similar problems. The problems - and the solutions - to hunger and illiteracy are interlinked.

Q: What are the main challenges of providing education beyond cities and towns, in rural areas?

A: Most of the world's poor and hungry live in rural areas. Rural children who are hungry simply do not have the energy to attend school or to learn effectively. Hunger impairs both their mental and physical growth. If millions of hungry children cannot learn, or are forced to work instead of attending school we will not reach the Millennium Development Goal of universal primary education. There are infrastructure problems too - there is a lack of schools in rural areas because the state tends to invest in urban areas. Then there is the problem of an urban bias in teaching methods - much of what is taught in rural schools is prepared for urban schools by urban specialists and is taught in the official language instead of the language spoken in the village.

Q: How can education reach out to working and farmer children?

A: By offering incentives that encourage children to attend school and their parents to send them to school - a midday meal or midmorning snack, for example. With full stomachs children can concentrate and learn better. The curriculum should also be relevant to their lives. They might not care about the circus or the supermarket but they may need to learn how to milk a cow or how to handle pesticides. The school calendar should take their working lives into account. You cannot have classes during harvesting season, for example, and sometimes it may be necessary to have evening classes if the children are working in the fields during the day. Others are nomadic groups, so you need caravan schools which can follow the group around, these are just a few examples.

Q: How important is it to adapt teaching practices, including language, to local culture and values?

A: This is crucial. The intellectual development of children is very much linked to the language they speak. If they are taught in their mother tongue, then their intelligence develops, if they have to learn in a tongue which they don't understand, their development is constrained. It is very important to adopt the language of the village in rural areas. Often this doesn't happen because countries have many languages and it is easier to use the official one.

Q: Is there a difference between school attendance by girls and boys? Why?

A: Girls are usually less likely to attend school than boys. The reasons are both practical - often parents cannot afford the costs of fees, books and materials - and cultural - girls are expected to undertake domestic duties, look after their siblings or are not encouraged to study. According to recent figures from India, for example, 17.3 percent of girls said they had stopped going to school because they were needed to work at home. Some parents worry that an educated daughter may become unmarriageable or, away from the family's guidance, may be drawn to the city. Parents are also often worried about their daughter's safety in school and on the way there, fearing she may be physically abused.

Q: How can we encourage parents to send their daughters to school?

A: There should be a school in every village so a girl does not have to undertake a long and perhaps dangerous journey. Scholarships could be provided to alleviate costs or incentives offered to families. Another solution would be to

have female teachers, or, where having girls and boys together is not culturally acceptable, all-girl classrooms.

Q: FAO recently hosted a seminar on rural education: who attended and what did you achieve on an international and national level?

A: This workshop brought together international agencies like the United Nations, the World Bank, UNICEF and individual countries - France, Norway and the United States as well as NGOs. Our aim was to position education for rural people at the heart of the international aid agenda as a crucial part of the fight against poverty. And to give a voice to those who have none.

Facts and figures:

1 billion: number of illiterate people on the planet.

840 million: number of people on the planet who are food insecure.

130 million: number of children who do not attend school.

180 million: number of undernourished children.

70 percent: share of the world's poor living in rural areas.

15.3 percent: literacy rate in Niger (1999 figures).

7.9 percent: female literacy rate in Niger (1999 figures).

13.1 percent: proportion of Indian girls who have never attended school because it was considered unnecessary.

15.6 percent: rural schools in Cote d'Ivoire with no electricity.

52.6 percent: indigenous rural Mexican children who receive no homework assistance.

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