



# Education for rural people: addressing a neglected majority

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## **A crucial challenge**

People in rural areas are there to stay. They represent the majority of the world population and make up over 70%, or 840 million, of the world's poor. In 2000 they constituted about 53% of the world population, and are expected to account for roughly 48% in 2010. By 2020 (FAO, 2001) they will still form 43% of the world population. Such data indicate that the importance given to urbanisation trends and to rural-urban migration cannot provide a rational justification for neglecting the needs of rural people.

Rural people commonly suffer from unequal access to education, healthcare, infrastructure, technology, institutional support and markets. It is generally inequitable and inefficient to deny basic services to rural people, especially education. Although over the last decade international aid has rightly stressed the importance of concentrating on the poor, it has neglected rural areas and thus the majority of disadvantaged people, a phenomenon which is particularly true for education (IFAD, 2001). Basic education is a fundamental human right in itself, and essential for reducing poverty and improving the living conditions of rural populations.

Yet children's access to education in rural areas is still much lower than in urban areas, where adult literacy and the quality of education are much higher. In several countries rural illiteracy is two or three times higher than that in urban areas, and the gap is widening. Moreover, curricula and textbooks in primary and secondary schools often have an urban bias, are irrelevant to the needs of rural people, and seldom focus on the skills needed for life in rural areas.

There is also a general lack of awareness among ministries of education, agriculture, health, finance and others, as well as universities and research institutions, concerning the importance of targeting the basic learning needs of rural people.

Although past investments in rural areas have been scarce and progress slow, a new awareness and consensus about the importance of focusing on rural poverty has been growing, facilitated also by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set by the United Nations for the year 2015. The fact is that, in order to achieve the MDGs by 2015, including the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger and ensuring that all boys and girls complete primary education, investments need to be reallocated to rural people and the poor. Examples of this new emphasis on rural poverty can be found in publications such as: the IFAD *Rural poverty report 2001: the challenge of ending poverty*, and the forthcoming 2004 world development report of The World Bank, which focuses on 'making services work for poor people'. Another example of this new trend is the recent endorsement of the G8 Education Task Force's recommendations by leaders of the G8 Summit in Kananaskis (June 2002, Canada); the recommendations include targeting children in rural areas among priority actions (G8, 2002) for the development of the Education for All (EFA) national educational plans. Finally, a new flagship of the Education for All initiative, which focuses on education for rural people, was jointly launched by the Directors General of UNESCO and the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), during the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), September 2002.



### A new 'Education for All' flagship<sup>1</sup>

The new flagship on education for rural people came about as a result of an awareness-building process, which has been developing over the last decade. The following are among the major international events which, with their related follow-up, have helped to create the new flagship:

- The Education for All declaration and plan of action launched in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990 and reconfirmed in Dakar (Senegal) in 2000.
- The World Food Summit declaration and plan of action, Rome, 1996, and the 'World Food Summit: five years later', Rome, June 2002.
- The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 1992.
- The 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), Johannesburg, September 2002.

These events – two of which were led by UNESCO and FAO respectively – provided both the political framework and a set of concrete actions needed to alleviate poverty and achieve the major commitment to reduce illiteracy and undernourishment to half their present levels by no later than 2015 made by heads of state and governments during the Millennium Development Summit, New York, 2000.

The importance of building new partnerships to address the challenge of poverty reduction and to achieve the MDG was stressed during all the international events of the last decade, including those listed above. All these events led to the understanding that the compartmentalised, 'business as usual' approach to development is inefficient and no longer acceptable. It urgently needs to be substituted by new partnerships whose *modus operandi* is a multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary approach. This is the rationale behind the FAO/UNESCO-led flagship.

The flagship aims to reduce the education gap between rural and urban populations. Although education is universally acknowledged as a human right in itself and a prerequisite to building a food-secure world, educational opportunities are unequally distributed. To address these problems, the new FAO/UNESCO initiative on education for rural people is focusing on:

- building awareness of the importance of education for rural people
- encouraging countries to adopt specific plans of action addressing the basic educational needs of rural people as part of the national plans of action for EFA, Sector-Wide Approaches (SWAs) and Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRSs)

- encouraging dialogue between education ministries or departments and other key rural stakeholders, such as ministries of agriculture and natural resources, health, infrastructure, finance, the private sector, NGOs and civil society
- supporting the exchange of sound practices and knowledge on education for rural people
- building on the comparative advantage of partner institutions to improve education for rural people.

Although the flagship for education for rural people is a new initiative, a significant number of partners from education and rural development sectors have already confirmed their commitment to support it, thus forging an important network which includes governments, international organisations, UN agencies and civil society.<sup>2</sup>

The FAO's specific commitment to the flagship will go beyond its coordinating role; it will continue to provide technical assistance to member countries which request support in their effort to address the specific educational needs of rural people within their national plans of Education for All.

Several initiatives have been put together in order to consolidate, expand and work towards the goals of the flagship, such as:

- a regional workshop for policy makers in Ministries of Education and Agriculture on Education for Rural Development, organised in partnership with UNESCO and its Institute of Education Planning, Bangkok, November 2002
- an aid agencies workshop on Education for Rural Development, held by FAO, Rome, December 2002, with the technical collaboration of UNESCO and UNESCO/International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP)
- a forthcoming book *Education for rural development: towards new policy responses*, jointly prepared by FAO and UNESCO/IIEP.

### Next steps

The new multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary flagship partnership will succeed if it

- places the education of rural people at the core of national plans of Education for All and strengthens the institutional capacity to do so. Efforts aimed at reducing poverty and hunger should therefore be accompanied by sound education policies, which target the education of rural people as a crucial aspect. This can be achieved



if the educational needs of rural communities are given due consideration at every level of governance, including planning and finance

- expands access to, and increases attendance and completion of, schools in rural areas, by promoting or supporting initiatives aimed at improving children's nutrition and capacity to learn, including
  - school canteens and gardens
  - information and communication technology
  - distance education
  - the education of rural girls and women
  - lifelong education
  - flexible school calendars to accommodate the needs of local agricultural production cycles
- improves the relevance of education to meet the needs and interests of rural people. This can be achieved by supporting
  - participatory curriculum development
  - teacher training
  - life skills for a rural environment
  - nutrition education
  - education for HIV/AIDS prevention and mitigation
- forges strong new partnerships which are crucial to the success of the flagship initiative.

The hope of the FAO is that the international community involved in supporting educational systems in developing countries will turn the spotlight on this problem, work with national authorities that are committed to change, and begin the process of improving the lives of large numbers of rural men, women and children.

The challenge of education for rural people is complex and requires persistence and resources. However, the keys to success are closer to hand than they have been, so now is a favourable time to act and to help transform these and other opportunities into reality.

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### Footnotes

1 To join the flagship partnership, write to Ester Zurberti and Lavinia Gasperini, The Extension, Education and Communication Service (SDRE), Research, Extension and Training Division (SDR), The Food and Agriculture Organisation, Via delle Terme di Caracalla, 00100 Rome, Italy. Email: [ester.zurberti@fao.org](mailto:ester.zurberti@fao.org); [lavinia.gasperini@fao.org](mailto:lavinia.gasperini@fao.org)

2 Up to October 2002, partners were:

International Organisations:

FAO (Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations); UNESCO; ICRAF (World Agroforestry Centre of the CGIAR); IPGRI (International Plant Genetic Resources Institute); World Food Programme.

Governments:

The Government of Egypt; The Government of San Marino.

NGOs, foundations and others:

Terre des hommes, Italia; CELIM (Centro Laici Italiani per le Missioni, Italy); ACRA (Associazione di Cooperazione Rurale in Africa e America Latina, Italy); UCSEI (Ufficio Centrale Studenti Esteri in Italia, Italy); CISP (Comitato Internazionale per lo Sviluppo dei Popoli, Italy); OPAM (Opera di Promozione dell'Alfabetizzazione nel Mondo, Italy); ISCOS (Istituto Sindacale per la Cooperazione con i Paesi in via di Sviluppo, Italy); AIFO (Associazione Italiana Amici di Raoul Follereau, Italy); FOCSIV (Federazione Organismi Cristiani Servizio Internazionale Volontario, Italy); CTM (Controinformazione Terzo Mondo, Italy); C.V.C.S (Centro Volontari Cooperazione allo Sviluppo, Italy); CIDE (Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Educación, Chile); EDC (Education Development Center, USA and Europe).

### References

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G8. *A new focus on education for all*. Report of the G8 Education Task Force. Summit. Kananaskis, Canada, June 2002.