

**Capacity Building Workshop**  
**On**  
**"Education for Rural People and Food Security"**  
**Rome, FAO headquarters, 15-17 November 2002**

Opening speech by John Monyo, Assistant Director-General,  
Sustainable Development Department,  
FAO

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear participants and colleagues,

On behalf of the Director-General, Dr Jacques Diouf, I am pleased to welcome you to FAO and to host today among us so many NGOs which are partners of the Education for Rural People initiative, as well as representatives of the Italian Development Cooperation, another crucial partner of the ERP initiative.

I would like to start my opening remarks by telling you about life in Wikihi, a rural Mozambican village, on the Niassa Lake, near the Tanzanian border.

In Wikihi, the only form of transportation most people have seen is canoes. Cassava and maize are the daily diet for most, with the occasional addition of fish. Among the huts made of mud and thatched roofs, two are bigger than the others: the school and the health centre. In the school, which on Sundays becomes a church, rows of tree trunks serve as desks, and the children write in sand instead of exercise books. The students repeat each grade at least twice; and less than half of those who start primary school conclude it.

But many of the children – whose parents for the most part are illiterate – will never even enter primary school. The teacher himself has only completed grade four, and neither he or she nor the children -- taught in a multi-grade classroom -- have books. The teacher speaks and the children repeat in chorus, and while they write in the sand, he or she writes using dried cassava on an old wooden board with holes and bumps.

In the village, there is no electricity and the only existing shop, which is supplied with a few items, has no soap, sugar, salt or matches. With no soap there is no way of protecting the children from ringworm.

In Wikihi, where living conditions are similar to so many other villages in developing countries, the world does not look like a “global village”. In fact, it looks more like an exclusive club. A club where the richest one percent of the people earn as much as the poorest fifty-seven percent. Where 2.8 billion people still live on less than two dollars a day, the vast majority in rural areas.

In our era, inequalities have reached levels unprecedented in world history. Nor has the gap between urban and rural people closed. Think about these large groups:

Some 840 million undernourished people  
1.5 billion people who live without access to safe drinking water

2 billion people who live without electricity  
Some 850 million illiterate adults (more than half of whom are women)  
130 million children out of school  
14 million children who have lost their mothers or both parents to AIDS

Among each of these groups – and many of them overlap – the majority lives in rural areas.

Most of the 211 million children and adolescents exploited as workers on cocoa, tobacco or banana plantations – sometimes forced to work more than 12 hours a day in conditions bordering on slavery – are also rural. A large number of these children will join the growing ranks of the next generation of illiterate adults.

In this new millennium, in which our daily news is about terrorism, we know that inequalities feed delinquency and crime, which in-turn often constitute a sign of the poor's exasperation with world inequalities. One of the major inequalities affecting the rural poor is their unequal access to quality education, so important for social and economic development. In Wikihi, as in so many other African, Asian, and Latin American villages, what is needed is an efficient, inclusive and widespread education system, which addresses the basic learning needs of rural people.

Without basic education, rural people cannot comprehend simple texts, like the instructions on a bag of fertilizer, or medicine labels. They can't read the warnings on a box of pesticide, much less improve their lives, increase their productivity, adopt enhanced technologies, or fully benefit from their rights as citizens.

We all know that even though in the past decade international aid has stressed the importance of concentrating on the poor, it has neglected rural areas and that means the majority of disadvantaged people. This phenomenon is particularly true for education. Basic education is a fundamental human right in itself and an essential prerequisite for reducing poverty and for 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.

The gap between urban and rural illiteracy is widening and in several countries, rural illiteracy is two or three times higher than in urban areas. What's more, curricula and textbooks in primary and secondary schools are often urban-biased, with content that is irrelevant to the needs of rural people, seldom focusing 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, not to mention universities and research institutions, concerning the importance of targeting the basic learning needs of rural people.

In order to reduce poverty and achieve the Millennium Development Goals, specifically the first two goals which focus on eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, and achieving universal primary education, we need to change the traditional working modalities of the international community and address the needs of *the world's biggest neglected majority: rural people*. This can be achieved through new multi-sectoral and interdisciplinary alliances and partnerships among government and non governmental entities working in education and those working on agriculture and rural development. This is why we are here today.

## **Why FAO accepted the challenge of leading the ERP flagship**

FAO is hosting this workshop organized in collaboration with the Association of the Italian NGOs and ACRA, and in close contact with UNESCO, to continue to bridge the education gap between rich and poor, between urban and rural areas of developing countries, and to promote equal access to, and the completion of, quality basic education. This workshop is one of several activities foreseen as part of the Education for Rural People flagship partnership, jointly launched by the Directors-General of FAO and UNESCO during the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in September of 2002.

Several other initiatives have been undertaken since then in partnership with UNESCO to consolidate, expand and work towards the goals of the flagship partnership, such as capacity-building regional workshops for policy makers of Ministries of Education and Agriculture on Education for Rural People in Asia and Latin America; a series of books providing policy guidance on ERP among which the most known is the one entitled "*Education for Rural Development: towards new policy responses*" which you shall be receiving during the workshop; an ERP web site to share knowledge and experiences; or a pilot project in Kosovo where a National Strategy on Education for Rural People was launched. During this workshop we will refer to them, and discuss which new paths and initiatives we can promote together.

## **Next steps and follow up**

Whilst reaching the rural poor might appear to be more costly and time consuming than reaching the urban or peri-urban poor, and though there is no shortcut to reaching them, we believe this is a task that can no longer be neglected or postponed. If we want to contribute to building a world where peace prevails over war and terrorism, and prosperity over poverty, the cost-effectiveness of international aid for education for rural people needs to be analyzed in the long term and with a holistic approach. New partnerships like the ones we are building here with this workshop need to be put in place to address long-neglected priorities.

We are proposing that this workshop focuses on the following priorities on education for rural people and that we jointly discuss paths for joint action in the future.

First, we encourage you to discuss how to **place the education of rural people at the core of national efforts in promoting rural development, food security and how to strengthen the capacity to do so**. Efforts aimed at reducing poverty and hunger should therefore be accompanied by efforts to address the education of rural people and this can be achieved if we work in close coordination.

Second, how to **expand access** to education, and increase attendance and completion rates in schools in rural areas by supporting initiatives that expand school network, that address school feeding, that promote alternative delivery systems and non formal education and adopt flexible school calendars to accommodate the needs of local agricultural production cycles. More over we need to discuss how to reach groups that traditionally were discriminated such as rural girls and women, remote populations, working children, ethnic minorities or nomadic populations.

Third, how to **improve the relevance** of education to rural livelihoods and interests. This can be achieved by supporting participatory curriculum development, training of rural

teachers, production and distribution of learning materials relevant to rural life, and community involvement.

Fourth, we need to discuss how to **strengthen partnerships**. It is our hope that NGOs involved in supporting rural development and education in developing countries will work with international organizations, national authorities and all those that are committed to improving the lives of large numbers of rural men, women and children. FAO stands ready to help transform these and other opportunities into reality.

It is now my pleasure to declare this workshop open and to invite all of you to join FAO, UNESCO and other partners to strengthen the flagship partnership on *Education for Rural People*.

Thank you