MALAWIS’ RURAL ADOLESCENT GIRLS EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

There is a very close link between the Education for Rural People (ERP) flagship partnership objectives (http://www.fao.org/sd/erp), which has rural people at the center of its mission, and the development projects in Malawi carried on by various UN agencies and NGO’s.

Despite a decade of free primary education in Malawi, the number of girls dropping out of school continues to outstrip that of boys, according to a new report from the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF). This article, stemming from a direct experience in the field, between June and September 2004 in some Malawian Rural Schools, provides unbiased overviews and opinions of a UNICEF volunteer on the Education problems affecting Rural Adolescent Girls, together with some suggestions on appropriate strategies to solve them. The mission was developed in the Chikwawa District, in the Southern part of Malawi, near Zomba, where it was possible to collect direct evidence through the eyes of local people, and in particular, a local Traditional Authority, teachers from two schools and the Head of the writer’s UNICEF department. In Malawi, the main problem is that the free primary education policy does not translate into action on the ground. Making tuition free for pupils was not sufficient to ensure girls’ attendance at school. There are other non-tuition costs, such as school materials, which parents have to pay. Extra costs mean that poor families have to choose between educating boys or girls and, in a culture of early marriages where women’s rights are traditionally subordinate, boys are usually given preference.

When free primary education was introduced in 1994, enrolment figures jumped from around 1.2 million to over 3 million pupils. The government appeared to have been caught by surprise at the response. There were not enough teachers, nor classrooms nor learning materials, and the quality of education suffered.

A study carried out in 2003 showed that 10.5 percent of girls who enrolled in school each year dropped out against 8.4 percent of boys. Around 22 percent of primary school age girls do not attend school, while 60 percent of those enrolled do not attend regularly.

The introduction of life skills in the school curricula would empower girls to become more aware of their rights. This newly acquired awareness, however, will not achieve anything if the local communities do not address the dangers inherent in some of their cultural traditions. The reader will find inside a lot of updated information on the educational situation in Malawi. All these data are based on oral interviews made by a UNICEF volunteer in the field.
SUMMARY

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Visit to Milisi Village

Last June 2004, I visited the Chikuawa district, located in the Southern part of Malawi, near the town of Nchalo, where I had the opportunity of spending three weeks with the Adolescent Girls Literacy (AGLIT) project at the Misili village. I met Mr. Misili, the local Traditional Authority (TA) who explained the main problems affecting his community and, in particular, the obstacles that Rural Adolescent Girls meet in their education process.

According to him, the problem starts very often with the parents. They usually don’t encourage girls to go to school; they prefer their daughters to remain at home to help in house-chores or to seek employment in order to support the family. The poorer girls would prefer to procure food for themselves and their family, than to attend school. This year was particularly critical due to the drought that affected the village.

A second issue is represented by early marriages. He then mentioned the problem of orphans. In his community there are quite a number of orphans because of HIV.

Source: Andrea Valentini – Adolescent Girls Literacy project - Milisi Village, Chikwawa District, 2004
Then he spoke about distance and lack of infrastructures. These represent a serious problem for both pupils and teachers. Many adolescent girls can’t go to school because of distance. The lack of infrastructures, such as roads and bridges, represents a further obstacle. Teachers are faced with similar problems and this explains the difficulty in enrolling teachers for rural schools. In addition to all this there is the problem of traditional practices. Mr Misili explained how a girl, after her first menstruation, undergoes an initiation ceremony where she is given advice on how to behave when she comes of age. At the end of this ceremony a man (fisi) is appointed to have sexual intercourse with her as proof that she is sexually mature. These girls may face early pregnancies, and run the very real risk of contracting HIV Aids. This is a matter of deep concern and one wonders if the international community has been adequately alerted to the dangers inherent in these “traditional practices”.

The following is a brief listing of some of Mr Misili’s suggestions regarding the points mentioned above:

- A closer involvement of parents in their daughters’ education is essential. The head of the village should use his influence to achieve this at the beginning of each school year.
- The problem of distance could be solved by requesting the Ministry of Education to extend the grades in the school nearest the village to include the 8th grade, instead of the existing 1 to 4, and this would ensure that all the adolescent girls could attend.
- Rationalization of the existing curriculum with more emphasis on participatory and life-skills would go a long way towards solving the dropout crisis.
- The question of infrastructures must be addressed by the local community.
- Local culture and traditions must not blind people to the dangers inherent in oppressive male dominance. What the people identify as enduring values should be kept, while those aspects of culture which are patently dangerous to health and, ultimately, to the survival of Malawi, as a nation, should be abandoned.
Zomba CCHP Primary School

For a period of three weeks, in July 2004, during the mission to the CCHP School, located in the South-West of Malawi, near Zomba, it was my duty to monitor the conditions of the school, the enrolment, the teaching methodology and the problems which mainly affect rural adolescent girls’ education.

It was a standard class in a classroom with an enrolment of 32 pupils, 12 females and 20 males and a team of two teachers. The first impression was the lack of school infrastructures. During my stay in the school I noticed how the children seemed exuberantly happy and privileged to be there. It is really touching to see how these children, in spite of poverty, hunger, and difficulties of all kinds, appreciate what is being done for them in order to improve their lot. The subject under discussion that day was decision making and problem solving in community, with the support of life skills textbooks.
The topics that surfaced were certainly relevant to the pupils’ immediate circumstances: poverty, hunger, disease, promiscuity, HIV/AIDS, substance abuse, domestic violence and unemployment. The level of interest was high and the use of role-play was especially successful as it stimulated wide participation in the group.

**DOMASI Primary School**

On August 2004, I was sent to Domasi Primary School in the area of the Shire River for a period of two weeks.
I noticed that the horizontal approach as opposed to the vertical approach was favoured by the teachers in this school, also. The main difference between the two schools just mentioned was in the school population. The Domasi school was almost three times the size of the Zomba school but the number of teachers allocated to both schools was the same. In these conditions effective teaching was very hard to achieve and, indeed, I noticed that, despite the teachers’ best efforts, participation and interest were sadly lacking. The evident remedy is to reduce the size of the classes and to increase the number of well-trained teachers. These teachers demonstrated an impressive standard of efficiency in the way that they interacted with their pupils, maintaining their attention and participation all through the lessons.
Conclusions

The sources on which this analysis is based are rural people: local authorities, teachers, students, parents and education officers.

The person or persons who operate in the field should realise that their function is to seek as wide an involvement of the local community as possible in the matter of identifying and solving their problems.

I believe that this can be achieved by the following:

- **Advocacy**: promoting meetings with traditional leaders and school development committees to make both communities and families sensitive to the importance of education; to address the problem of orphans; to speak openly with children on HIV/AIDS and related matters.

- **Social mobilization**: This must take place at all levels in the community. The problem of HIV/AIDS must be tackled as soon as possible in the context of a large-scale mobilization, which should include not only local organizations but international agencies as well. Unless the aids problem is solved there will be no school population to provide education for!
• The **Training of Teachers** in the areas and in the methodologies mentioned above is one of the top priorities.

• **Service Delivery**: to provide school furniture and materials, teachers houses, water and sanitation facilities and school infrastructures.

These consideration and my experience are shared with the members of the with the FAO led Education for Rural People (ERP) flagship partnership initiative as a contribution to the common effort of ensuring that the needs of local people are placed at the centre of the international and national policy agenda.

**NOTES**

1 Adolescent Girls Literacy (AGLIT) is a project started in Chikwawa, combined Literacy and Health Education for Rural Adolescent Girls aged 10 - 18 years that have missed out on school. The goal is to improve girls’ health-enhancing behaviour, especially, reproductive health through acquisition of literacy skills, more up to date health knowledge and identification of strategies to overcome obstacles to health. **Source: UNICEF Malawi 2004**

2 Traditional Authority (TA). He is the so-called 'gate keeper' of a particular local community. This traditional figure continues from ancestral times, to transmit his decisional, almost absolute, power from father to son. It is impossible to enter a community without interacting with him because of his influence on the entire population. So, he should be considered as the main source of information for those 'hidden secrets', peculiarities and traditional practices which characterize that particular community. **Source: UNICEF Malawi 2004**

3 Parents: Teachers often regard schoolgirls as sexual partners using money and examination as a bait. Girls are promised good grades if they agree to have sexual relations with them. If they refuse they start to have bad grades and to fail exams. For this reason parents withdraw their daughters from school as soon as they reach puberty. **Source: UNICEF Malawi 2004**

4 Early Marriages: Usually, parents give low priority to girls and their education and encourage them to marry early. Sometimes this is a way of earning income for the
family, at other times it is a question of reducing the number of family members to be fed. Source: UNICEF Malawi 2004

Orphans: The orphan population in Malawi ranges between 950,000 and 1.2 million children under 18 who have lost one or both parents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total number of orphans</th>
<th># of maternal or double orphans</th>
<th>% of population under 18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>638,755</td>
<td>242,088</td>
<td>37.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>802,335</td>
<td>409,191</td>
<td>51.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>947,602</td>
<td>607,413</td>
<td>64.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>1,000,000</td>
<td>729,000</td>
<td>72.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>1,005,500</td>
<td>788,312</td>
<td>78.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N.B. 2005 and 2010 estimates are based on extrapolations from the NACP & UNAIDS

HIV/AIDS: The HIV/AIDS pandemic is compounding the situation of teacher shortage: about three-quarters of AIDS cases are found among adults between the ages of 20 and 40, the most economically productive segment of the population. Girls are hit harder and younger than boys: 10 times as many girls as boys are living with HIV. Moreover, the effects of HIV/AIDS lead to orphanhood, girls becoming heads of families to substitute for their mothers or parents and increase in number of deaths in the family leading to absenteeism from school and, HIV positive females, suffer social exclusion from the community making those living with HIV/AIDS to be more vulnerable and stigmatized within their communities. Source: UNICEF Malawi 2004

Rural Adolescent Girls Education: Spending money on girls' education is considered a waste because in Malawian society adolescent are expected to get married and be supported by their husbands. Women's profile has remained low and their voices have not been heard. The basic rights of female children have not been recognized. As a result, girls' educational attainments have remained low, their health, especially reproductive health, has been poor. They lack training in most vocational skills and generally, their participation in developmental activities has been minimal. In the past, some mechanisms such as free secondary school education, were put in place in an attempt to improve the situation but they were short lived and did not solve the problem. The project needs a more workable system to ensure that girls remain in
school as healthy, skilled and economically empowered persons. This will improve their position in society and increase their participation in developmental activities. 

*Source: UNICEF Malawi 2004*

8 Standards: Primary School in Malawi consists of eight years in school for pupils aged 7 to 14 and the grades or classes are known as 'standards'. Primary education is free but not compulsory, hence not all children are going to school and, of those enrolled, there are many dropouts, especially among girls.

*Source: UNICEF Malawi 2004*

9 Enrolment: The following figures give an accurate idea of Malawi Education: Malawi is a medium enrolment country. The Net enrolment Ratio is 77% of which that for girls is 78% and boys is 77%. Some of the factors that contribute to this scenario are:
- Children start school at a late age and the most affected are girls, mainly due to long distances to school and parents protection of girl children
- The percentage of children entering first grade of primary school who reach standard 5 is 79.4%
- Net school attendance primary is 43% of which 40% are girls and 47% are boys
- Survival rate from standard 1 to standard 8 is low: 18.9%
- Transition rate from Primary to Secondary level is 18%.
- The drop-out rate in Secondary is 7.6% of which girls are 3.95% and for boys are 3.64%
- The percentage of qualified Secondary teachers is 58 of which 20% are female and 79% male
- Transition from Secondary to Tertiary is 3%

*Source: UNICEF Malawi 2004*

10 Life Skills: A large percentage of adolescents are sexually active. At the same time, they lack basic knowledge about the functioning of their bodies and the risks involved in becoming sexually active at an early age. This ignorance often puts them at risk. Unwanted pregnancies, hazardous abortions as well as sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV/AIDS, are a real threat to uninformed youth. One of the best ways to provide adolescents with information and to guide them in becoming responsible decision-makers for their own lives, deals with Life Skills Communicating Strategy.

*Source: UNICEF Malawi 2004*