

entwicklung & ländlicher raum

Beiträge zur Internationalen Zusammenarbeit



Education for rural people at the front line to achieve the Millennium development goals

Worldwide 130 million school-aged children do not go to school and nearly a billion people are reckoned to be illiterate; most of them live in rural areas. This is why FAO and UNESCO launched a new global initiative: the »Education for Rural People Initiative – ERP«. This initiative focuses on the expansion of access and provision of basic quality education for children, youth, and adults with priority on gender imbalances.

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Photo: FAO

ERP focuses on better access of basic quality education for children, youth, and adults.

The fight for poverty reduction and food security, which is the aim of the first of the Millennium goals (<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/index.html>) is two sided: hungry people need to feed themselves to be able to learn, and people need to master basic knowledge, values and skills to fight against hunger and poverty. This means that the achievement of millennium goal 1 is strictly interconnected with millennium goal 2, aiming at universal primary education.

Investments in primary education have been shown to reap higher returns – estimates range from 11 percent to more than 30 percent – than investments in physical capital (A. Mingat, C. Winter, *Education for All by 2015 in Finance & Development, March 2002*). Since the majority of the poor, of the undernourished people, and of adult illiterate and children out of school live in rural areas, investments in education would need to target with a special emphasis rural people. One of the key challenges for the next fifteen years will thus be enrolling and keeping girls and children in rural areas in schools. This

is why the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation – FAO – and UNESCO promoted a new global partnership initiative on Education for rural people (ERP).

The global picture

First, over half of the world's population remains rural and, despite strong trends of urbanization, will remain rural for at least three more decades. These three billion or so people are to be found mainly in the less industrialized countries of the world, that is to say in countries with relatively low per capita incomes and high rates of poverty and malnutrition. Most of these people, which in several countries make up more than 80 percent of total population, make their small incomes from small-scale agriculture and forms of casual, family or self-employment, and many need the

assistance of their children in sustaining their households.

Second, nearly a billion people – two-thirds of them women – are reckoned to be unschooled, illiterate and unable to access the information that could help transform their lives and the lives of their children. Most of them live in rural communities. Most have no opportunity even for adult basic education. Not surprisingly, the gap between rural and urban illiteracy rates is widening, so that in several countries illiteracy in rural populations is two to three times higher than in the urban centers.

Third, 130 million school-age children are

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reckoned not to be in school, partly because there are no schools available, partly because those that are available are badly run, partly because their families cannot afford the costs, partly because they need their children's labour to keep the family going, and partly because some families cannot see what use schooling will be to their children. Most of these children are in rural families. Girls lag well behind boys in educational access and achievement. And this is particularly serious in Africa since more than half of the girls aged 6 to 11 are not in school – and a few as 10 percent finish even a primary education – and since there is a direct link among the level of education and the likelihood of contracting HIV aids. («A recent study in Uganda found that people who finished secondary education were seven times less likely to contract HIV». In: Gene Sperling, *School is the front line against AIDS*, in *International Herald Tribune*, May 28, 2003).

Fourth, dropout rates from the rural primary schools of many countries are still high and in many countries most of the children have dropped out by the age when they should have started in the fifth grade. High proportions of them will not have mastered the skills of reading, writing and counting sufficiently to retain and use them for a lifetime.

Two third of the nearly 1 billion unschooled people are women which is particularly the case in rural Africa.

Fifth, about 211 million children and adolescents need to earn money by working on cocoa, tobacco, banana or other plantations, which are all rural undertakings. Unlike the pupils in some developed countries, their doing is not combined or alternated with learning («Revisiting garden based learning in basic education» in: www.fao.org/sd/2003/KNo504_en.htm).

On the contrary, many are forced to work at mind-numbing tasks for more than twelve hours per day in conditions bordering on slavery. No educational opportunities are organized for them either at work or afterwards. Large proportions of these young people will join the ranks of the next generation of illiterate adults.

These facts signal not only that hundreds of millions of rural people are unable to access one of their fundamental human rights, the right to education, but also a missed opportunity for resource-poor countries to build their social and economic development on a solid human capital. A main reason for spending public money on schools and educational programmes is to invest in human capital that will promote and accelerate the economic, social, cultural and political development of a country.

Rural people, who in a great percentage have not been able to gain a proper schooling, are disabled from capitalizing on the knowledge, information and opportunities for improving their standards of living and contributing to strengthening development, peace and democracy. Education then is not only a human right, it is also a social necessity. Research indicates that the share of poor decreases with the rise in educational levels. The global picture described in previous paragraphs thus indicates that people who are

at greater risk of poverty are the rural primary school dropouts or rural people who never entered primary school.

FAO, UNESCO, and the flagship on «Education for rural people»

As the efforts to serve rural people have so far fallen short of what is needed, a special focus or «flagship» must strive to ensure that rural boys, girls, adolescents and adult men and women secure their due place in development and education plans. This is why the new global initiative launched by FAO and UNESCO advocates for renewed and increased support to basic education for rural populations. The Education for rural people initiative (ERP) focuses on the expansion of access and provision of quality basic education for the many different groups in the rural space (children, youth and adults), with priority on gender imbalances (women and girls), as a complex and urgent challenge.

FAO is the lead United Nations agency for rural development and consequently it is most concerned with rural people. Promoting better agriculture, better food security, better nutrition and better natural resources and environmental management requires not only promoting all the necessary supporting institutions and infrastructure, but also – and perhaps even more so – organizing appropriate education for all the people involved. FAO has been since long engaged in the education of boys and girls in rural areas and men and women through cooperatives, farmers' field schools and broader extension programmes. It has also cooperated with UNESCO and other agencies in promoting functional literacy for farmers and other rural groups. FAO is then a natural partner for UNESCO in leading a flagship to sustain the interests of rural people for the entire age range in education. An



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additional point is that this kind of partnership between »education« and »agriculture and rural development« serves to promote holistic thinking and interdisciplinary exchange and to mitigate the all too frequent tendencies to compartmentalize different sectors. The Directors-General of UNESCO and FAO, respectively, Messrs. Matsuura and Diouf recognized this, when they jointly launched ERP as the ninth flagship in the Education For All initiative during the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in September 2002. The partnership is open to members committed to working separately or together to achieve the common objectives of:

- building awareness on the importance of education for the rural people as a crucial step to achieve the Millennium goals of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger and achieving universal primary education,
 - overcoming the urban/rural education gap,
 - increasing access to basic education by rural people,
 - improving quality of basic education in rural areas,
 - fostering national capacity to plan and implement basic education plans to address learning needs of rural people.
- The flagship activities focus is national and international. At national level the



Photo: FAO

flagship encourages technical support to countries willing to address systematically the basic educational needs of the rural people through specific strategies and actions as part of the national plans on Education for All and of Rural Development. An example of this is a project recently launched in Kosovo in support of the formulation of a strategy to address the basic educational needs of rural people.

At the international level the flagship advocates and mobilizes partnerships for education for rural people by concentrating on strategic global, regional and inter-

Study on education for rural development

A global study entitled »Education for rural development: towards new policy responses« is undertaken in partnership by FAO and the UNESCO Institute of Education Planning (IIEP). The study aim is to build awareness on the importance of education for rural people as a crucial step to achieve the Millennium goals of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger and achieve universal primary education by increasing access to quality basic education for rural people and fostering national capacity to plan and implement basic education plans to address learning needs of rural people. Fifteen case studies from around the world have been compiled in a book to be published in 2003.

International seminars and a symposium on education for rural people.

The seminar on »Education for Rural People in Asia: experiences and policy lessons« (Bangkok, Thailand, November 2002) convened high level policy makers from Ministries of Education and Agriculture of ten Asian countries to discuss possible common actions in support of Education for rural people in Asia. A book on the seminar proceeding was published in 2002 (www.fao.org/waicent/faoinfo/sustdev/2003/KN0507_en.htm).

A second seminar was an aid agencies workshop on »Education for rural people: targeting the poor« (Rome, 12-13 December 2002, www.fao.org/sd/2003/-KN0604_en.htm).

A third event was the International Symposium on Rural Education organized by UNESCO and the International Research and Training Centre for Rural Education (INRULED, Baodin, China, 20-23 January 2003) where FAO and IIEP were organizers of two workshops addressing »approaches to education in rural areas for girls and women and disadvantaged populations« and »vocational and higher education for local development and lifelong learning in rural areas«.

Research activities undertaken by the initiative

Research was undertaken on the status of ERP in countries such as Bosnia, Serbia, Croatia, and will constitute the background for possible actions to improve basic learning condition of the rural poor in such countries. Similar exercises are planned to happen during the coming months in some Latin American and African countries.

In supporting education for all, the international community will hopefully recognize that that all strategies must focus on rural areas.

national events and research, and encouraging the same within countries. It also supports the exchange of good practices and knowledge on Education for rural people. Within less than one year from the launch, about 60 organizations, governmental, non-governmental and international, pledged themselves to work with FAO and UNESCO in this initiative. Examples of ERP activities at international level are shown in the box.

Next steps

As a follow-up to previous activities, the Education for Rural People flagship will continue its efforts to assist member countries and other partners in:

- Developing common views about the importance of dealing with education for sustainable rural development as a crucial component of Education For All and Rural Development strategies;
- Supporting a common approach to bringing about needed changes to promote education of the rural people;
- 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; and
- Supporting countries in analysing their existing education approaches in order to meet the needs of rural people and, as appropriate, formulate interventions that incorporate such processes within Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRS).

Beyond the coordination role, FAO will continue to provide technical assistance to Member Countries in their efforts to emphasise Education for rural people within their National Plans of Education for All. It is our hope that the international community involved in supporting education for all, rural development and poverty reduction strategies, will turn the spotlight on Education for rural people and will work with national authorities that are committed to improve the lives of large numbers of rural men, women and children.