



Girls engaging in learning using mobile phones.



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Flexible learning for inclusive education

Dr Qian Tang, Assistant Director-General for Education at the UN Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), outlines a range of strategies for achieving rights-based inclusive education for all children.

Despite the remarkable progress made since the 2000 World Education Forum held in Dakar, Senegal, the international community remains far from achieving the Education for All (EFA) goals. Across the globe, 67 million children and 74 million adolescents are out of school; 793 million people continue to lack basic literacy skills (UNESCO). If current trends continue, the number of out of school children in 2015 could be higher than today (*EFA Global Monitoring Report*, UNESCO 2011). It is therefore critical that we redouble our efforts to guarantee the right to quality education without discrimination or exclusion.

Marginalised and vulnerable people live in a range of different situations, and face diverse challenges in accessing quality educational opportunities. Many come from poor families, live in remote areas or are among the urban homeless, the displaced or refugees. They include indigenous people, pregnant teenagers, people with disabilities and those living with HIV and AIDS, among others. Many live in situations of

conflict or chronic social instability. Too often, they are deprived of the most basic set of human rights: the right to life, liberty and security. In most countries, girls and women face particular difficulties. Even in settings where educational opportunities are widely available, inequalities remain in the ability of all social groups to avail themselves fully of them, leading to early drop-out and failure to obtain a useful qualification.

Yet all people, regardless of their sex, race, religion, disability or national, ethnic and social origin, are entitled to a quality education. Denying them such an opportunity is not only an infringement of their fundamental human rights; it is also a serious waste of society's human resources. Indeed, education that is restricted to certain social groups deprives a country of significant assets and skills that could be tapped to build prosperous communities. Furthermore, it limits the impact of national efforts to create peaceful, just, fair and cohesive societies. Inclusive education is therefore non-negotiable.

Delivering commitments

Governments have an obligation under various international treaties and conventions to ensure the right to quality education. But how can they make good on their commitments and promote inclusive education systems, especially for the most vulnerable and marginalised children? Ensuring the right to education among disadvantaged populations can be an arduous task given the various difficult situation and conditions they are subjected to. UNESCO promotes three critical strategies for achieving rights-based inclusive education for all children, concentrating on those in the most difficult circumstances.

First, policies and programmes should be designed and implemented taking into account the ‘4 As’ principle of the rights-based approach to education: availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability:

- **Availability:** this implies that good quality education must be made available to all by eliminating all barriers, be they financial, physical, or institutional/systemic.
- **Accessibility:** the ‘available’ education must also be made accessible to all, by eliminating all forms of discrimination and through installing flexible modes of education, particularly for the most vulnerable and marginalised who otherwise may not be reached by conventional modes.
- **Acceptability:** it is not enough that learning opportunities are accessible; they must also be acceptable in terms of quality and relevance to the learners’ experiences and environment, and respectful of their circumstances and culture if learners are to truly benefit from education. This means ensuring that education meets the minimum standards set by governments, including the medium of instruction, curriculum and teaching methods.
- **Adaptability:** finally, education programmes must be adaptable to the various needs of the learners rather than expecting learners to fit in with a prescribed syllabus, uniform pedagogical style or system. This is particularly important when dealing with marginalised and vulnerable children.

Second, interventions should focus on strengthening interactions between learning in diverse settings, through increased synergies across various delivery modes of education – formal, non-formal and informal. Such synergies are imperative to meet the learning needs of marginalised populations. For example, community learning centres such as those

established in India, the mobile and floating schools of Kenya (see box) and Bangladesh, and equivalency and bridging programmes that allow out-of-school children to be reintegrated into or move between different education programmes, are among the many different interventions that have been valuable in reaching underserved children.

In fact, non-formal education has for years been an important mode for ensuring and expanding the right to education for millions of children, adolescents and adults underserved by the formal school system. Whether operating separately or as a part of a broader activity, non-formal education provides alternative pathways for disadvantaged groups, including out-of-school children, to continue learning and, where possible, be reintegrated into the formal sector.

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More recently, the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and non-formal distance education have opened up further opportunities, expanding the availability and accessibility of education to learners of all ages and needs. UNESCO’s recent work on teaching neo-literates with mobile phones in Pakistan is a good example of the possibilities offered by ICTs (see box).

Strengthening synergies between formal and non-formal education is crucial, since the formal system

Education for nomadic communities

In Kenya, the Ministry of State for the Development of Northern Kenya and other Arid Lands introduced a Nomadic Education Policy in 2008. The policy provides for the inclusion of traditional knowledge in curricula, the promotion of mobile schools, the setting-up of feeder schools within local communities, adjustments to the school calendar in line with the needs of nomadic communities, the hiring of teachers from nomadic areas and the use of distance learning through ICTs.



A mobile-based post-literacy programme

ICTs have the potential to address diverse learning needs. Content can be personalised and therefore is more meaningful to the learner.

In 2009, UNESCO, the Bunyad Foundation (an NGO) and Mobilink Pakistan (a cellphone company) collaborated on a pilot project to develop a mobile-based programme for new literates, who received and responded to messages using their mobile phones – a process that made learning fun and discouraged relapses into illiteracy. After the successful pilot phase, the programme was expanded to 50 centres, enrolling 1,250 newly-literate rural women aged 15-35.

has much to learn and gain from non-formal approaches. Synergies increase the options for policies and programmes to adapt and respond fully to the particular circumstances and needs of disadvantaged and out-of-school children. Moreover, programmes become more acceptable to learners when they promote diversity as an enriching element in the teaching and learning processes, rather than as an obstacle. The introduction of appropriate languages, the design of curriculum taking into account local knowledge and adjusted school calendars in line with local lifestyles are essential considerations in ensuring that learning and education are relevant.

Finally, we must improve our knowledge base on educational marginalisation. This is why UNESCO supports countries to build their capacity in monitoring and assessment, in designing and using education management information systems (EMIS) and in making available specific information on marginalised populations through thematic research.

Combating exclusion

If the right to education for all is to become a reality, we must ensure that no one is excluded from access to quality education and effective learning. The international legal framework supporting inclusion is already in place, with a number of normative instruments laying down governments' obligations.

In order to ensure that this framework is translated into real results in countries, the development of appropriate programmes must be accompanied by

changes in the power relationships and enabling environments of education. This requires the adoption of relevant legislation aimed at expanding the entitlements of disadvantaged groups to quality learning opportunities, resources and services, but also social and political mobilisation to strengthen the voices of the marginalised in decision-making. Children, their families and the broader community must therefore be actively involved in programme activities and the formulation of policies.

Implementing inclusive policies, including for example policies aimed at promoting flexible learning modalities, also requires strong political backing. In this regard, while governments hold the ultimate responsibility for achieving the EFA goals, they must not forget that non-governmental organisations and non-state providers are also at the forefront of efforts to increase opportunities for quality education – and their contribution must therefore be integrated into the design of systems.

By formulating, developing and applying policies that explicitly address equity and inclusion in education, governments are taking a critical step to building stronger, more harmonious societies.

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The **United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization** (UNESCO) contributes to the building of peace, the eradication of poverty, sustainable development and intercultural dialogue through education, the sciences, culture, communication and information. UNESCO advocates for, and provides policy advice and stimulates innovation to, enhance inclusion at all stages of the educational experience – including access, retention and performance.

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