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Policy brief

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The accessibility of education for children: How to break down the existing barriers

Achieving universal primary education is at the top of the global agenda, which is not a surprise as high illiteracy rates continue to undermine social and economic development in many parts of the world. Yet, despite significant efforts to promote universal education, about 115 million children are still out of school, the majority of them (62 millions) being girls (UNGEI, 2006a). So what is it exactly, that keeps children away from schools? Evidence suggests that the main barriers to education include, among others, poverty, war, cultural assumptions, lack of infrastructure and poor quality. This policy brief gives an overview of the situation today, summarizes the main barriers to education and describes some of the innovative programmes, which are put in place with the ambitious but essential goal of achieving education for all.

The ambitious goal of achieving universal primary education

At the Millennium Summit in 2000, governments agreed on a vision for the future and on eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), including the commitment to *"ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling (MDG 2)"*. In six years, significant progress has been made: net enrolment ratios in primary education have increased from 79% to 86% in the developing world, ranging from 95% in Latin America and the Caribbean to 64% in sub-Saharan Africa (UN, 2006). However, neither sub-Saharan Africa nor South-East Asia are on track and many countries will need to perform at historically high levels in order to achieve the education MDG by 2015. Today, an estimated 115 millions children are out of school, the majority of them (62 millions) being girls (UNGEI, 2006a). Clearly, a gender gap in education persists in many parts of the world and more efforts need to be concentrated on addressing the special needs of girls. Other children particularly at risk include minority populations, children affected or infected by HIV/AIDS as well as trafficked and working children. Moreover, it is important to note that rural children account for 82% of the children being out of school in developing countries (UN, 2006).

The benefits of education to both children and the broader society are widely acknowledged and cannot be overestimated. Firstly, education breaks the inter-generational cycles of poverty by enabling children to gain skills and knowledge for better jobs and wages. Moreover, education is strongly linked to improvements in health and nutrition conditions. Also, education empowers children to be active participants in society, to exercise their

rights and engage in civil and political life. Concomitantly, education works as "protection factor", since educated children are less likely to be trapped in exploitation, trafficking and armed groups. Finally, a more skilled and better qualified workforce leads towards a more competitive economy (ILO, 2003).

There is a growing recognition that the achievement of universal basic education is inextricably linked to the elimination of child labour – and that one cannot be achieved without the other (Fyfe, 2005; HRW, 2005; ILO, 2003). That is because on the one hand, education plays a multiple role in combating child labour while on the other hand working children comprise the largest group excluded from education (Fyfe, 2005). Even though child labour and education are interrelated challenges, this policy brief focuses on the educational perspective by exploring the particular obstacles preventing children from going to school. In addition, a few innovative programmes aimed at increasing school enrolment are presented in the last section.

What are the obstacles to education?

This section explores the structural barriers that exclude children from educational opportunities, both at the national level and at the household level. It is important to note that these barriers are not exhaustive, do no operate in isolation and are often interrelated.

Accessibility

Physical distance to schools. Each day, millions of children in the developing world embark on long journeys to their schools. This situation is most common in rural areas, with widely dispersed and low population density, where distance to school is a major factor behind non-attendance. In Mali for instance, enrolment rate exceeds 90% in the urban areas of Bamako where distances to school averages less than 1 km while by contrast, only 25% of children attend school in the rural areas of Timbuktu where average distance to school exceeds 7 km (Watkins, 2000). Moreover, research from Peru, Pakistan and Ghana (Maitra et al, 2000) shows that the provision of schools in the neighbourhood significantly increases school attendance.

Discrimination and cultural barriers. One of the greatest obstacles to universal primary education is not financial or material, but is cultural, i.e. in the minds of parents, teachers and political leaders. Two main groups are particularly victims of discrimination, namely girls and HIV/AIDS affected or infected children. In numerous countries, children affected or infected by HIV/AIDS are denied access to school or mistreated by teachers because of the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS. Such discrimination is often driven by ignorance on the part of parents, educators, and community members, and fuelled by school systems and officials that fail to address the problem and ensure the inclusion of such children. In many other instances, children and especially girls are pulled out of school to care for their sick family members (HRW, 2005). Cultural barriers also represent a significant impediment to gender equity. In many societies, customary practices result to girls' education being assigned a lower value than boys' education. In many parents' perception, the benefits of the investment in their daughter's education is 'lost' since it will transferred to the husband's household, once she marries and leaves the parental home. Illustrating this situation, a popular Telugu expression (from South India) says that "educating a daughter is like watering another man's garden"(Watkins, 2000). Moreover, traditional thinking

based on caste, religion or culture may prevent girls from going to school as their labour at home is seen as necessary and respectable. In some cases, parents view education as promoting behaviour considered unfavourable to their daughter's future marital prospects (Spence, 2006).

Getting girls into school in Turkey

Today, approximately 500,000 girls in Turkey do not attend school predominantly because of poverty and cultural traditions, which have historically kept girls at home. Several initiatives have been put in place by the Turkish government as well as international development organisations in order to increase children and in particular girls' attendance to schools. Among these initiatives is a conditional cash transfer (CCT) programme. The CCT programme, which was launched in 2001 is now covering 2,6 million beneficiaries and the number still rises. Within the programme a cash transfer is paid by the government to mothers every two months for every child between 6-18 years enrolled and attending at least 80% of a school year. The amount transferred is higher for girls (US$ 12 per month) than for boys (US$ 9), reflecting the will to focus on the disadvantaged girls. At the same time a campaign called 'Hey Girls, Let's Go to School' has recently been introduced in Turkey with the support of the United Nations Girls Education Initiative (UNGEI). The campaign depends on a vast network of volunteers who go door-to-door to lobby parents on the value of education. Among its many successes the campaign counts increased media visibility and support from prominent politicians. Among others ones, these initiatives have helped to create a hunger for change in Turkey, which promises to pay dividends for decades to come.

Source and information: www.ungei.org and www.unicef.org/turkey, International Conditional Cash Transfers Conference in Turkey (June 2006): http://info.worldbank.org/etools/icct06/welcome.asp

Child labour. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), an estimated 218 million children are trapped in child labour, including 126 millions in hazardous work (ILO, 2006). Premature and extensive labour is depriving these children of their only chance to acquire the literacy and learning skills that they need to escape poverty. While some of the child labourers are working full time and are clearly denied their right to education, some others are trying to balance education and their family's need for labour. Yet, any type of work, leading to fatigue and impaired intellectual development are also inconsistent with the right to education. Moreover, studies show that children's work even in limited amount, adversely affect the child's learning as reflected in a reduction in the school attendance and in the length of schooling (Ray et al, 2004). Supposedly, the first hours of working have a larger impact on school achievements than the successive ones (Rosati et al, 2001).

Affordabiliy

Households face a wide range of costs in sending their children to school, even in countries where primary education is officially free. These costs can be divided into two categories: the direct fees levied by education authorities to meet part of the cost of service provision and the indirect fees covering a wider range of expenses such as textbooks, uniforms, and school meals.

Direct and Indirect costs. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is unequivocal: "*Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages*". In principle, almost all countries acknowledged this right and the elimination or reduction of school fees has initially increased enrolment especially for girls (Birdsall et al, 2005). However and although formal tuition fees have been abolished in many countries, the associated costs of education (books, uniforms, supplies, transportation, etc.) plus 'informal' fees imposed by schools to make up for the lost income are still extremely common and prohibitively expensive for many families (HRW 2005; Birdsall et al, 2005; Watkins 2000). In Vietnam, people in the poorest quintile have to spend 22% of their non-food income to send a single child to school. In Tanzania, taking into account indirect fees, the poorest households have to spend around one-fifth of household income to send just one child to school (Watkins, 2000). Poverty event prevents children to attend school in Tajikistan because their family cannot afford to buy shoes, which are compulsory (AED, 2006). Experiences from different countries show that eliminating official fees will not help poor families unless other sources of financing are provided to offset the income lost from school fees and in order to ensure that schools do not impose additional informal fees. Clearly, evidence confirms that the combination of direct and indirect costs imposes a heavy burden on poor households, turning access to education from a human right to an unaffordable privilege.

Opportunity cost. When children go to school, their parents do not only incur the financial costs but also the opportunity costs, i.e. the time and effort that children might otherwise devote to household tasks, production, or income generation. These opportunity costs are often especially high for poor households, which are heavily reliant on domestic help children and income for child labour. Research suggests that opportunity costs rise with the age of children, as the potential for children to generate income increases (Watkins, 2000).

Quality

Ensuring that children attend school is however not enough. The quality if education is also an important element of concern, as poor quality of education is itself a depressant on the demand for education. Some children would indeed rather work than follow a curriculum, which is irrelevant to their needs (Fyfe, 2005). This situation has notably been experienced in the immediate aftermath of the fee elimination in several African countries, where the sudden lack of resources at the school level overwhelmed the education system. In Malawi for instance, the elimination of school fees in 1994 led to a 55% increase in enrolment (additional 1,2 million students), which largely exceeded the capacity of the schools (Rugh, 2000). Several years later and mostly because of the poor quality of education, drop-out rates increased significantly and completion rates were virtually to where there had been before the fee elimination. Later, a second generation of education reforms in Uganda, Tanzania and Malawi, which focused on quality improvements and financing had far more success in sustaining enrolment and increasing completion rates (Birdsall et al, 2005). Problems often encountered with regards to quality of education include:

- Poor infrastructure, facilities, materials and support systems for children
- Inadequate conditions of work for teachers (i.e. heavy workloads, low pay and status of teachers), lack of teachers as well as lack training, aids and materials for teachers

[1] Hazardous work is a one of the worst form of child labour and is defined by the ILO as « work, which by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or moral of the children". Despite having agreed upon this common definition, each country is free to identify which particular type of work they consider to be hazardous.

- Lack of sensitivity of education authorities and teachers to the needs of children at risk
- Irrelevance of curriculum to local needs, values and aspirations of children
- Irrelevance of curriculum to prepare students for gainful skilled employment
- Inadequate teaching language (official language versus local languages)

In this context, the concept of "right-based child friendly schools" which focuses on quality outcomes, has recently been developed by UNICEF and is considered in the next section.

Others

Other obstacles limiting children's access to education include:

Use of violence within or near schools. For some children, the biggest threat to their right to education is violence within or near their schools, which undermines their ability to learn or cause them to drop out entirely. Problems of violence include for instance ongoing use of corporal punishments as a disciplinary measure as well as harassment and sexual violence against girls (HRW, 2005).

Hunger and education. Increasingly, hunger is recognised as a barrier to learning. A hungry child cannot concentrate, a hungry child cannot perform and hungry children are unlikely to stay in school. In this context, an increasing number of governments and schools are introducing food for education programme, insuring that children are not denied their right to school because of hunger. Some of these programmes are considered in the next section.

Conflicts. In some countries, the presence of conflict has been one of the greatest barriers to education. Conflicts destroy lives, undermine education infrastructure and reduce the capacity of governments to finance basic education. Out of the 15 countries identified by the UN Special Initiative for Africa as requiring urgent support because they have enrolment rates below 50%, 10 are either experiencing or recovering from serious civil conflicts (Watkins, 2000).

Getting children to school - Snapshot of innovative programme and actions

Although the two fronts, that is reducing child labour and increasing school attendance, cannot be dissociated and policies need to work on both sides simultaneously, this section focuses on innovative actions aimed primarily at increasing access to education.

One of most innovative and common policies put in place in order to reduce the barriers of education is **conditional cash transfers programme** (CCT). CCT programmes consist in providing cash transfers to poor families conditional on investments in human capital, such as sending children to school and/or bringing them to health centres on a regular basis. Such schemes are especially used in Latin America, namely in Brazil, Mexico, Chile, etc. but also in other parts of the world such as Turkey, Burkina Faso and Bangladesh. Encouragingly, the CCT programmes show positive results worldwide, namely through increased school attendance both among boys and girls . Another type of programme increasingly used as an incentive to attend school by improving health, attentiveness and capacity to learn are **Food for Education programmes.** These programmes have been implemented in two basic forms:

- School feeding programmes: Children are fed directly in schools, which is most common.
- Food for Schooling Programmes: Families are given food if their children attend school (example: Food-For-Education programme in Bangladesh)

Both programmes combine educational opportunity with food-based incentives. The main actor in school feeding operations is the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP in partnership with donors and other UN branches), which is present in 72 countries and from which 16 millions children have benefited in 2004 (WFP, 2005). The average costs of feeding

one child one year through WFP school feeding is 34$. Results from the programmes in different parts of the world have been encouraging and evidence shows significant benefits. According to WFP (2005), absolute enrolment in Sub-Saharan Africa has increased by 32% after school feeding has been introduced. Research from Bangladesh (Ravallion et al, 2000) suggests significant effects on school attendance of the incentive provided by the Bangladesh's Food-For-Education programme. A stipend with a value considerably less than the mean child wage was enough to assure nearly full school attendance amongst participants, and thereby also reducing the incidence of child labour. According to the International Food Policy Research Institute (2001) "School-based feeding programs have proven effective in encouraging enrolment, increasing attention spans, and improving attendance at school".

Mobilizing Communities to get girls out of work and into schools in India

The MV foundation in India has developed a particular approach to education and child labour issues: mobilizing communities and governments around the principle of the immorality of bonded labour and in favour of children's right to education. It has a clear and non-negotiable message: no child must work and every child must attend school. A set of inter-linked strategies has been developed to achieve these objectives. The programme starts by creating an awareness and demand for education among the poor. This demand is not restricted to parents of poor children alone but includes all stakeholders such as teachers, employers of children, youth groups, women's groups, elected local representatives, district and state government officials. At the core of MV Foundation's strategy for transforming children from labourers to students are the bridge camps. These are residential camps where children who have never been to school are prepared to enter the formal school system in the class appropriate to their age. For the first time these children are given a clear space of their own where there are no demands on their time and there is ample opportunity to learn and play. A special attempt is made to recruit girl children and retain them in the formal school system and to involve the community in developing solutions for this difficult-to-reach group. MV Foundation has devised a set of strategies that engulf the school-going child from all possible angles, providing the much-needed support to prevent them from dropping out. Additional teachers, who are trained in pedagogy, mobilization and motivation techniques, are assigned to enable the school to cope with the influx of students who enrol as a result of the Foundation's efforts. Considerable attention is paid to creating a feeling of ownership of the school in the entire village community. They are encouraged to collectively define the needs of the school, and raise the funds required to pay the salary of an additional teacher, buy furniture or teaching materials and undertake building repairs. Concretely, nearly 150,000 children have been enrolled and retained in schools, more than 4000 bonded labourers have been released, and 168 villages are now child-labour free since the beginning of their work in 1991.

Source and more information: www.mvfindia.in and MV foundation UNDP series (Wezir)

Finally, there is an increasing focus on the quality of education as an important positive incentive to promote the demand for education. In this context, UNICEF has developed the concept of **"Right-based Child-friendly schools",** which is focusing on quality outcomes.

[1] For a detailed overview of conditional cash transfers programmes as well as their impacts, refer to the policy brief no.2 "Cash Transfers to Reduce Children´s poverty" (Grooten, 2006), www.governance.unimaas.nl

The idea is that children do not only have the right to education but to quality education. The framework for rights-based, child-friendly educational systems and schools include the following characteristics: *1) it includes all children* – it does not exclude, discriminate, or stereotype on the basis of difference, provides education that is free and compulsory, and respond to diversity-, *2) it is effective for learning* - it promotes quality teaching and learning processes with individualized instructions, provides structured content and good quality materials and resources, enhances teacher capacity, commitment, status, and income - , *3) it provides a healthy and protective for children* - it ensures a healthy, hygienic, and safe learning environment, with adequate water and sanitation facilities, free of corporal punishment and harassment, promotes the health of teachers and learners, helps protect children from abuse and harm and provides positive experiences for children-, *4) it is gender-sensitive* - it promotes gender equality in enrolment and achievement and eliminates gender stereotypes-, *5) it involves children, families, and communities* - it is child-centred: promoting child participation in all aspects of school life, family-focused: working to strengthen families and community-based: encouraging local partnership in education-. The framework of rights-based, child-friendly schools, which is increasingly adopted in different parts of the world, shows that it can be a powerful tool for both helping to fulfil the rights of children and providing them an education of good quality *(UNGEI, 2006b; Fyfe, 2005; UNICEF, 2000; www.unicef.org/lifeskills)*

As illustrated by these examples, efforts to reduce the barriers to education are to a large extend geared towards creating incentives for households to send their children to school.

Towards a global partnership and a policy framework for education

When considering the ambitious goal set by governments across the world of achieving universal primary education, there is ground for optimism. Indeed, evidence suggests significant and encouraging improvements in many parts of the world: net enrolment ratios in primary education are increasing in the developing world (UN, 2006) while the number of child labourers globally fell by 11% over the last four years (ILO, 2006). These improvements should however not lead to complacency, as much remains to be done and a strong and sustained global effort is still required. Indeed, ensuring every child's access to quality and safe education will clearly demand a stronger role by the international community, clear commitments by governments and comprehensive policy frameworks. Summing up important policy recommendations from diverse studies, the main elements include:

- **Political will** is the key factor and message that emerges from past and present experiences: governments have to want to do it, both from donor and receiving countries.
- **Compulsory education laws** need to be introduced progressively and over the whole country to avoid disparities by region or population groups
- **Birth registration** sometimes precedes the introduction of compulsory education and is crucial for its enforcement and of minimum age laws.
- **Making education free and attractive** is a necessity. Strategies to eliminate or reduce costs of attending school include lifting fees, conditional cash transfers, providing school meals, provision of transport, books or uniforms, etc.
- **Matching the minimum age for work and the school leaving age**
- **Quality of education** is the most important positive incentives to promote the demand for education and schools need to deliver real outcomes for children.
- **For a successful policy, all these elements should be linked up and properly sequenced.**

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