

Status of Education in Africa

Report based on findings presented at a forum held at Georgetown University on November 5th, 2007 by The Africa Society, Georgetown's African Studies Program, and the World Cocoa Foundation

Evaluating the Progress of Education in Africa: Different Perspectives

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In a bid to promote dialogue amongst different sectors and stakeholders, The Africa Society of the National Summit on Africa, along with the World Cocoa Foundation and Georgetown University's African Studies Program, hosted a forum on the status of education in Africa. Entitled, "Evaluating the Progress of Education in Africa: Different Perspectives," the event took place on November 5, 2007 at Georgetown University's Copley Formal Lounge.

The significance of the forum is evident in the impressive list of expert panelists that expounded on issues that are both necessary and timely. They include: Gene Sperling of the Council on Foreign Relations; Dr. Sarah Moten of USAID-Africa Bureau; Yolanda Richardson of CEDPA; Dr. Gail Ifshin of Discovery Channel's Global Education Partnership; Vivian Lowery-Derryck of AED; Bill Guyton of World Cocoa Foundation; Leon Collins of the Phelps Stokes Fund; Dr. Almaz Zewde of Howard University; and Ruth Mufute of Africare. Their wide-ranging analyses of the state and future of primary and secondary education in Africa were informative and substantive.

I. Issues

a. Rural Education

The first panel deliberated on education in rural Africa and the need to retain indigenous values and cultures alongside formal learning. Studies indicate that there are great socioeconomic disparities between urban and rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa. Regarding education, statistics are readily available that display stark differences in attendance, availability of resources, and teacher quality. The panel subsequently addressed specific actions currently being taken to "take education to the students" as Dr. Sarah Moten put it. This proactive approach to education is underscored by USAID policies, which highlight the need for educational agencies to address difficult circumstances and proffer creative solutions. Moten also acknowledged current innovative approaches being undertaken by USAID to advance education in Africa under the auspices of the Africa Education Initiative. The scheme sets out to make education accessible to children in rural areas of Africa, such that even boy herders in the remote mountains of Lesotho can be reached and informed. USAID has also created community resource centers in various countries, including in each geopolitical region of Nigeria, in an attempt to create sustainable learning centers outside formal educational institutions. In addition to other goals, these centers address issues of sustainability, which is why Moten stressed the importance of partnering with local institutions, such as banks, to create ownerships that will remain after USAID leaves.

Dr. Gail Ifshin cited a similar initiative being undertaken by the Discovery Channel's Global Education Partnership, which utilizes the media as a new and stimulating learning tool for children in African rural communities. She presented a video clip in which a charismatic school girl shared her excitement at being exposed to the use of electronic images in the classroom. Ifshin explained that utilizing the television as a learning tool serves as a channel for improving the quality of life while preserving African cultures and traditions. In line with USAID, Ifshin also highlighted the importance of creating learning centers, which Discovery has also embarked on. The resource centers, aside from incorporating communities in broad education initiatives, also provide overall sustainability for the future of education in these communities. In general, Ifshin insisted that the use of television is cheap to operate and is accessible to large audiences, including illiterate audiences. In this way it serves as a powerful and invaluable means of information.

Reiterating the need to provide easy and practical educational tools, Bill Guyton delivered a presentation that stressed two important points: 1) education should be supported by public-private partnerships and 2) practical education must improve the livelihood and skills of the people, especially those in the rural areas. Citing the need for increased public-private partnerships, which was brought up throughout the session, Guyton maintained that the coordination of resources, experience, and expertise cannot be achieved through one sector alone. The World Cocoa Foundation, for instance, goes beyond its own expertise to contract the help and coordination of governments, local institutions, donors, NGOs, and communities before building any education initiative. Guyton further explained that a review of the local context of a benefitting community is essential before embarking on any program, since this aids the design and implementation of feasible programs.

b. Gender Equity

The second panel discussed the implications of the second Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of attaining universal primary education, particularly as this applies to girls and adults. There was overwhelming agreement that female education is extremely important, not only because this would enhance the overall wellbeing of females, but also because of the immense socioeconomic gains for society. In her presentation, Vivian Lowery-Derryck restated the importance of educational standards set by the MDGs, and maintained that "MDGs are a guidepost to measure the human progress" since they raise "global awareness." She also held the view that the MDG goal of achieving universal primary education, combined with the third MDG goal of promoting gender equality and the empowerment of girls and women, is a springboard to realizing the other goals. Studies show that the more education a girl receives, the healthier she is, the less vulnerable she is to abuse; the less likely she is to become a single, teenage parent; and the better positioned she is to contribute to economic growth. For this reason, Lowery-Derryck questioned the failure to recognize the issue of female as an important global development goal. But even as Lowery-Derryck called for better quality schools and improved literacy, math, and IT training for girls and adult women, she warned of a backlash from an extreme focus on girls to the exclusion of other vital educational concerns. Supported by Sperling and Richardson, Lowery-Derryck argued that boys should not be ignored as a result of intense efforts to educate girls.

Declaring that “Education is life affirming,” Gene Sperling iterated that the second MDG goal of universal primary education should focus also on secondary education since the starkest differences in girls is after completing years of secondary schooling. He pointed out that the focus on universal free primary education is creating a demand for secondary education that cannot be met, thus leading to high dropout rates in Africa. In Egypt, for instance, Sperling disclosed that while primary school attendance is almost 100 percent, this figure drops to a dismal 10 percent for secondary education. In spite of this challenge, even the initial goal of universal primary education by 2015 remains an ambitious target for most of sub-Saharan Africa. The objective is seriously flawed and pathetic, Sperling argued, by virtue of its preoccupation with primary education. But even if this minimalist goal is to be seriously pursued, efforts should be made to enhance the quality of schools, because a focus on quantity does not equal a higher standard of life for children.

Still on the theme of girls and universal primary education, Yolanda Richardson claimed that, “We’ve known for 20-30 years now that the singular best investment, development investment, is girls’ education.” She added that it is only after this “investment” is carried out that the gap can be closed between aspiration and reality. Corroborating the earlier point that education must be taken to the students, Richardson stated that in-school intervention is not enough due to the complex social and environmental barriers within communities. She highlighted the issue of health as one such barrier. The connection between health (mental and physical) and education must be addressed as one sector is able to disrupt the other. A program started by CEDPA thus pays special attention to building girls’ self-confidence and self-esteem, preparatory to participating effectively in school and becoming ambassadors and leaders of tomorrow.

c. Responsibility

The third and closing panel spoke to the issue of accountability in relation to the improvement of education in Africa. Education in Africa is often viewed as a global issue; one in which outside support and investment is a must if progress on the continent. Yet, education may not demonstrate universal importance if it is entrenched in local philosophies, norms, ideals, and practices. This panel thus addressed the all-important issue of accountability regarding education in Africa and asked the question, “Whose responsibility is it?” Leon Collins agreed with the thoughts of most of the panelists, including the assertion that education must be borne out of the community, but also admitted that there is too much emphasis on data and statistics. The growth of educational standards in the absence of the community makes it difficult to implement successful learning programs. The Phelps Stokes Fund, for instance, handles its educational programs such that “learning” is the objective, and not just “schooling.” Making the distinction between schooling and learning, Collins noted that the formal context of the school must be complemented by learning strategies that incorporate the larger community.

According to Dr. Almaz Zewde, education in Africa does need the moral support of the international community, since it ought to be primary responsibility of individual governments. In her view, education is actually an internal evolution of indigenous knowledge, language, and idioms that shape generations of a nation. It is one that is not static, but dynamic; therefore, the change in an educational system must be fostered consistently from the internal fabric and agents of a nation. Education is vital as a means of furthering other concerns of a nation, such as

economic and cultural development. In Zewde's words, "Education is both the foundation and corner stone of development...Education is development if and when it is the right kind of education." The extreme importance and intricate web of education therefore necessitates governmental push in every facet of the process, from its conceptualization to its implementation. Zewde proffered this thought as the foundation of the development of education, which could receive support from NGOs and other such bodies. In essence, although education should be strategized and conceptualized from an indigenous perspective, Zewde did not discount the crucial role played by outside entities that support "the service of African development and oblige their governments to implement these."

Ruth Mufute closed out the forum with a resounding emphasis on the hope that lives and breathes within the African people. It is; first, with Africans that change will inevitably take place. She spoke about the need for governments and leaders to be more involved in building and sustaining the education sector within their given nations. Chronicling the last 30 years of education in Zimbabwe, she highlighted the progress that has been made up to this point in spite of the destructive colonial legacy that Zewde referred to. Mufute also cited wars, conflict, corruption, and bad governance as other factors that have impeded the progress of education on the continent. Consequently, she argued that it would take a global effort to revamp education in Africa, especially as most African governments lack the financial capacity. But Mufute continued to express optimism and referred to current, dynamic projects being carried out by organizations like Africare. Ultimately, the passion of the day was appropriately crowned with Mufute's assertion: "There's so much hope in Africa. And the hope is in the people; in us Africans. We are the source of the hope."

II. Recommendations

Recommendations varied, but the top four, based on evaluations and emphasis, were as follows:

1. Secondary education is necessary for girls, boys, and adults, which should comprise a free secondary education scheme (or 8 years Basic Education).
2. There should be collaboration between local communities, states, and the global community. An emphasis should be placed on formal and informal solutions to provide accessible education for all student populations.
3. Private-public partnerships should provide support for the MDG goal on education.
4. Educational initiatives should focus on quality. The curricula and overall content should incorporate:
 - a. Health and Self-empowerment
 - b. Television as a learning tool
 - c. Livelihood skills