

EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC CRISES

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The Global Economic Crisis: Setbacks to the Educational Agenda for the Minority in Sub-Saharan Africa

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This paper captures the impact of the Global Economic Crisis on educational programs serving minority groups in developing countries. It has been established that the most vulnerable groupings include nomadic and pastoralist communities, slum dwellers, children in war zones, and women. Various educational interventions such as mobile schooling, dual shift learning, scholarships, and distance learning have been utilized to mitigate the aggravations these groups experience in an effort to catch up on education. However, this paper predicts that these programs will encounter economic obstacles thereby countering the key efforts of ensuring Education For All by 2015 in developing countries. Finally, the paper proposes policy interventions to help in shielding the vulnerable groups from the harms that the economic crisis will visit on the education sector.

Whereas all educational efforts and energies are combined to meet the split demands of Education For All (EFA) by 2015 and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in general, a new dimension of the imminent frustration of these efforts is quickly taking shape: the Global Economic Crisis. It has been estimated that on the global front, the effects of the Economic Crisis have used up funds in the excess of \$14.5 trillion, translated as 33 percent of the worth of the world's companies (Pittman & Ivry, 2009). Yet this is only in the developed world. The global crisis has typically been approached from a narrowly economic view, leaving educators and policy analysts the task of ascertaining the enormity of the effects of the crisis on the educational programs both in developed and the developing countries. Of particular interest to educators is the magnitude of the crisis on educational programs serving minority or disenfranchised groups in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Challenges to Educational Inclusiveness

The challenge of school feeding programs

In an effort to attain EFA goals, governments, in collaboration with donor funding agencies (especially WFP), set up programs to cater for the provision of a midday meal at school. Pupils commonly refer to these as school feeding programs, such as those arranged by Undugu society for pupils from Nairobi slums in Kenya (Ouma, 2004) and by WFP in schools located in deprived regions (Nzomo et al., 2001). Studies show that school feeding programs have remarkable positive effects on both access and retention of learners, especially in arid and semi-arid lands (ASAL) and for nomadic families (Caillods et al., 2009; Kazianga et al., 2009; Lewis and Lockheed, 2008; Giffard-Lindsay, K, 2008; World Bank, 2008b). Given that households in such regions are already disenfranchised economically, the ability of such families to sustain themselves is almost nonexistent; thus there is over reliance on donor agencies, Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and the government for rations to realize the efforts of school feeding (Nzomo et al., 2001). Yet these agencies and the government in particular rely heavily on funds from the wealthy nations both in the form of taxes from citizens and donations from philanthropists.

With the aftershocks of the economic crisis still raw, it is apparent that funds to be channelled to ASALs and nomadic regions to sustain the feeding programs will be limited due to cuts in funds from both government agencies and private companies. Consequently, less funding will have the dual effect of locking out and driving away millions of children from school. Worse still, following closely on the ravaging trail of the global economic crisis is the food crisis and drought that have left many nomadic families facing malnutrition and poverty. This will cause increased unemployment and poverty, less food security, poor quality of nutrition and a rise in illnesses among the school-going ages (Shah, 2009).

The harsh choice, aimed at mitigating the harsh realities occasioned by the economic crisis, will be to withdraw children from school to supplement their parents in searching for their own food and forage for the already dwindling livestock. The effects on EFA goals and MDGs are dire. With reduced access to school and with low levels of retention, ASAL regions and nomadic families are apt to experience even more poverty, more human rights abuses, and other forms of alienation (Jimenez & Patrinos, 2008).

Shift learning dilemma

Slums in Africa and other parts of the world form a residence that is characteristic of the poor in society. Families in these informal settlements are unlikely to receive the required levels of education due to both their poverty and the unavailability of such infrastructure as schools (Ouma, 2004) and if schools are available, poverty itself is a deterrent factor (Lewis, 2008; World Bank 2008b). The implication is that many children from the slums do not enroll in schools and if they enroll at all, their completion rates are very low (Oyugi, et al., 2008; Ouma, 2004). To boost enrollments and participation rates, system wide strategies such as double shift school system come into play. The rationale is that in slum areas such as Nairobi's Kibera, the umjondolo of Durban and the baladi of Cairo, parents could still use young children as labour (Ouma, 2004; UNHSP, 2003). Therefore, the child could still catch up on lessons in the afternoon shift if he or she missed the morning shift. Lewin (2008) and Bray (2008) also argue that double shift not only rapidly expands access but also improves on retention of learners since there is an increase in supply of school places. Moreover, this is an equity-focussed strategy that is viable among pastoralist areas (Giffard-Lindsay, 2008).

But the dual shift system has been found to be unstable and unviable. In Tanzania, for example, double shifting is a particular issue because it is concentrated among the youngest pupils. They are most at risk of premature dropout and repetition, and may also experience the least-qualified teachers at a time when their learning needs, and their capacity to learn, are probably greatest (World Bank, 2008c). There are economic costs such as extra services of tutors and the need for parents to get childminders to look after their children when not at school (Bray, 2008). The global economic crisis will be felt heavily by the poor in society, and these are the slum dwellers and street families. According to Shah (2009), already large percentages of households in Sub-Saharan Africa are poor, and the large number of people will face malnutrition and its associated illnesses. Education will suffer as households channel limited funds to medical expenses and scarce food. Since the shift system of learning seems to offer parents a way to keep their children working, there is a likelihood of children being overburdened with work. This will have an effect on their attention span as they settle for the afternoon class. Bray (2008) argues that many of the children who attend the morning shift seem more cognitively ahead of those who attend the afternoon session. Therefore, if children will be at work in the mornings and in class in the afternoons, the

implication is that their performance in class is likely to assume a declining trend due to reduced attention span. The most catastrophic effect, however, is that of children dropping out altogether in order to fend for the family, as is the trend in slums.

A major effect of the economic crisis on double shift learning is observed in school infrastructure. Limited funding towards this school programme has the implication that there is a breakdown of physical infrastructure such as limited water and poor hospital facilities, thereby seriously affecting school-going children. These situations create a strong likelihood for low participation, absenteeism and dropout altogether (UNESCO, 2008). Double shift schools also require increased expenditure on facilities such as furniture. This is due to the wear and tear resulting from overuse of the same facilities by two sets of students in a single day. This eventually translates into high maintenance costs (Bray, 2008). Such costs are transferred back to the parents, who can rarely afford them since there are other pressing economic pressures such as food provision and housing. Such commodities are hard to come by in such informal settlements and at a time of an economic downturn. Consequently, learners must make do with dilapidated infrastructure that will have a lasting effect on their overall performance, since school facilities and resources are designed and enabled to support continuous change and development of approaches to learning (UNESCO, 2002).

Guns to pens: redeeming child soldiers

Children in conflict zones, street children and prisoners form a cadre of a unique disenfranchised group in that their education was either cut short or they never began at all. Their return to formal education is most difficult given adverse effects of their new environments. The rehabilitation of these groups is necessary so that they can catch up on education. The dilemma is that most do not fit in the regular curricula of their states, occasioning such governments to come up with programs such as Non-formal Education (NFE). It has been found that NFE has the effect of improving the skills of many enterprising young people (Caillods, et al., 2009); and thereby provides a means for the youth to earn a livelihood, and to escape the shackles of poverty. In most cases the providers of these programs are NGOs and religious organizations, which rely purely on the donations made by their affiliates in the developed world (Hoppers, 2008). These are affiliates who in turn depend on taxes and philanthropic donations from well-wishers, and are facing the harsh reality that their supporters cannot as generously donate due to the effects of the Global Economic Crisis.

Research has shown that children exposed to war and genocide experienced a drop in educational achievement of almost one-half year of completed schooling, and are 15 percentage points less likely to complete third or fourth grade (Akresh & Walque, 2008). Prudently therefore, sustained effort is needed to reinforce educational institutions and offer a «second chance» to those youth most affected by the conflict. In Uganda for example, Save the Children Fund-Norway has since 1995 funded the ABEK (Alternative Basic Education for Karamoja) programme in response to the unique socio-economic dynamics of the Karamoja (Hoppers, 2008). Similarly, Unicef and WFP are involved in reforming child soldiers in the northern part of Kitgum and Lira and their target is 6-18 year olds. The rationale is that such young people have the strength to constructively use their energy in building and improving their own livelihoods and in peace building in conformity with the requirements of the agenda 8 of the MDGs.

A sticking point in the effort to integrate these youth comes in the form of sudden withdrawal of aid agencies due to budgetary restructuring occasioned by the harsh economic downturn. Consequently, such “periphery” educational programs such as NFE face the risk of being neglected or grossly underfunded. When such youth integration programs as NFE eventually

collapse, youth are very likely to return to violence as a means of survival (Hoppers, 2008). The chain effect is that even those children who had successfully been fished from the war fronts and the streets will feel the urge to go back to their original and perilous lifestyles. Educational goals such as EFA will therefore suffer on top of escalating cases of poverty and diseases.

Solutions to Educational Inclusiveness

Participation through loans and bursaries

Studies done by the World Bank in Ghana, Thailand and the Philippines show that student loans have significant effects on access and equity. These issues can be adequately addressed through education loan schemes and expansion of regional quotas in regional universities (World Bank, 2002). In Zambia and Malawi, studies show that close to 70% of students are entitled to bursary schemes, which are supposed to cover 75% of tuition fees for most beneficiaries, and up to 100% for vulnerable groups (such as double orphans). Bursary programs are also favoured to improve retention of girls in the schools (Sutherland-Addy, 2008; World Bank, 2006). Even though these educational programs are designed to uplift the educational participation of the disenfranchised in society, it is apparent that the programs are bound to suffer the economic costs associated with the Global Economic Crisis. In an effort to increase the participation of children from slums, orphans, ethnic minorities and People With Disabilities (PWDs), governments have echoed the call of many researchers that bursaries and loan schemes for such groups are necessary. It is also evident that (university) loan schemes targeting poor bright children are an equitable mechanism of enabling learners to access quality education. It should be noted that the source of funding for such schemes is mostly the tax payer of the respective government (Oyugi, et al., 2008).

The economic crisis has however brought in a new dilemma for governments around the world, and especially the Sub-Saharan Africa region. The social sector of many governments including the US is bound to suffer deficits due to low revenues resulting from low taxes from all sub-sectors. Further, it should be noted that in many Sub-Saharan African states, bursary schemes and loans have always seemed to favour the well-to do and not the poor orphans and other disenfranchised groups (Caillods et al., 2009; Helms, 2008; Lewin, 2008). With less allocations therefore, it is likely that many poor families will be locked out of attaining quality education. It is also bound to affect participation of those with nomadic lifestyles; many of the poor will have to drop out of school and equity may be compromised. It is especially bound to reverse the gains made on improving the participation of women. Despite the argument that loan schemes had a “negative dowry” effect, it has been confirmed that in fact loans are more of a stimulus rather than a deterrent (Woodhall, 2007). It is put more succinctly by Varghese (2009) when he says:

Many universities with investments in foreign banks have already lost their investments. Student support systems, scholarships and student loans will be severely affected. Some of the largest providers of student loans have lost heavily during the crisis, and some of them have filed for bankruptcy protection. (p. 5)

Further still, it is argued that “reduced household income levels may not be able to support the full cost of studies abroad” (p. 24). Moreover, major concerns are already evident in regard to the ministries’ of education bursary schemes that are beleaguered with inadequate finances to provide for all eligible needy students (Oosterbeek, & Patrinos, 2008; Njeru & Orodho, 2003). Therefore, economic crisis will complicate the whole issue of how governments will be able to raise sufficient taxes to use in the social sector. Also, foundations and charities that assist in funding educational programs are not entirely cushioned from the harsh effects of the global economic crisis. Their

infrastructural needs, including how to procure extra funds from diminishing contributors, will suffer.

Access: Women and distance education

The appearance of a variety of new institutions alongside the traditional universities—short duration technical institutes and community colleges, polytechnics, distance education centres, and open universities—has created new opportunities to meet the growing social demand for education. Of special interest to many educational planners is the role of distance education in bridging the gender gap in educational attainment. Studies show that distance education and open universities hold out the promise of increasing coverage and facilitating access especially of women to tertiary education (Mason, 2006; World Bank, 2002). Mason's argument is that "online courses cater to the lifelong learning market and can be useful for some minority learners" (p. 56) such as career women.

Distance learning has made higher education significantly more accessible, particularly in rural Africa, but lack of infrastructure and the cost to individuals and institutions to acquire new technology may limit progress (Altbach, et al., 2009). Distance education may be non-elite, usually job-oriented and has the capability of providing new avenues of access, targeting non-traditional student populations such as working women and responding to emerging needs for workforce development and family commitment. The upside, both quantitatively and qualitatively, may be impressive (Bjarnason et al., 2009). The upside is that a large pool of competent human capital is formed, and when this capital is constituted of a percentage of women, then the efforts at employment gender parity would be real. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), of the three billion people employed around the world in 2008, 1.2 billion were women (40.4%) and in 2009, the global unemployment rate for women could reach 7.4%, compared to 7.0% for men (ILO, 2009). One way to reverse this is to improve the skills and competencies of women to increase their marketability. A solution therefore presents itself through distance education since it has been found to favour such disenfranchised groups such as women, child soldiers and slum dwellers as Altbach, et al. (2009) notes:

Much of the appeal of distance education is attributed to its ability to accommodate the needs of a wide variety of learners especially employed women and other women who are attempting to balance family and school commitments and even the incarcerated (p. 133).

By example, the African Virtual University (AVU) project in East and Central Africa has taken a paradigm shift by developing an open and e-learning model with the aim of exposing students and their lecturers to rigorous scholarship and groundbreaking research. More specifically in Somalia, the programme has the capability of empowering women and enhancing their human capital (Makokha, 2009). AVU is therefore seen as a pillar in institutional development able to insulate women who have previously suffered marginalization in the hands of extremism. And to garner the full benefits of that distance education programs, specific infrastructural endeavors such as extensive use of ICTs have been undertaken. Mason (2006), for instance, states that to "improve quality, increase access, reduce costs ICT has been seen as the way out of the dilemma caused by the demand to reduce costs and increase access and student numbers" (p. 56).

However, setbacks to the distance education achievements are possible especially considering that there is a high likelihood of a freeze on educational programs (Varghese, 2009). There is also the imminent risk of the "digital divide" gap widening even further given that funding for digital programs is bound to decline in the poorer states thus putting them at a disadvantage

(UNESCO, 2009a), and damaging the gains made in e-learning. Consequently the quality of distance learning stands on the brink of failure. Altbach, et al. (2009) equally affirm that «freezes» on hiring, construction of new facilities, improving information technology, and purchasing books and journals are likely developments. . . (p. xx) that will upset distance education efforts of achieving equity and quality in education.

Policy Interventions

What are the possible policy interventions to cushion the vulnerable from the fallouts of the economic crisis? Even though there is dialogue about the ability of education to survive an economic downturn (Bjarnason et al, 2009), solutions to how developing countries (where most of the disenfranchised groups exist) can cushion these groupings, while maintaining equity and quality concerns, should be envisaged. A number of governments in Sub-Saharan Africa, including Kenya and Namibia, resorted to increased borrowing to sustain their budgets and in turn maintain a substantial allocation to education (UNESCO, 2009b). The allocation to education should be upped to comfortably cover development expenditure in terms of improvement of infrastructure and other operational costs involving meal services and health equipment. Given that efforts to realize EFA by 2015 have generated huge enrolments in developing countries thereby occasioning a squeeze on the teaching force, governments have two options to improve quality: one, utilize teachers on contract terms; and two, reengineer and enforce the dual shift system. A special stimulus package should be reserved for these interventions.

The option of economic stimulus packages is significant in reinvigorating the economic systems affected by the economic downturn. Stimulus packages in underperforming economies can be used to amplify both the economic and the social sectors of the developing countries in a manner likely to reinforce economic infrastructure and more especially, the agricultural economies to improve food security and medium-level job creation. On the social sector front, an intensification of the development budgets for the education and health sectors is able to guarantee basic education improvement to support the huge number of hungry school children. If well instituted in the marginalized regions, the dynamics of equity will widen access to all school age children irrespective of region and gender. Moreover, development budgets in education are definite mechanisms for lifting off the educational spending burden of most poor households, thereby allowing room for improved access to education among the poor. Alternatively, the availability of stimulus packages in the health sector is a significant procedure of ensuring standard health to all. With enhanced health infrastructure through construction of health facilities and provisional medical equipment and drugs, chances are that many of the communicable and infectious ailments that distress the poor and school age pupils would be stemmed easily. The quality of life is bound to pick up as household expenditures on health diminish and savings made could easily be transferred to pressing demands such as provision of quality food.

Secondly, for tertiary and higher education, college-university linkages can be an option with benefits accruing in maximal utilization of faculty and infrastructure. Moreover, part-time faculty would be a more workable settlement in the occasion of a freeze on recruitment. For tougher options, there may be need to merge some programs and freeze non-essential ones altogether. Other mechanisms of adjustments have been suggested by the World Bank (2009) whereby institutions will engage in “outsourcing non-academic services...income generation and diversification” (p. 89) as methods of going beyond financial survivalism. Finances from these strategies could be utilized in beefing up distance learning and partial bursary allocation through scholarship and grants to students and research faculty.

The third hands-on policy intervention strategy is the structure and administration of the prevailing tax systems. Fiscal measures are required to boost revenues from taxes while at the same time mitigate economic damage to small and medium enterprises. Local tax mechanisms enable luxury and upper class consumptions to attract sufficient duty, while tax cuts are administered on imports, household incomes and monetary proceeds come from diaspora populations. Such inequitable fiscal measures, most probably, would revitalize the meager earnings of middle class and low class laborers who happen to house considerable constituents of the disenfranchised.

Finally, long-term strategies are needed by Sub-Saharan economies and institutions as ways of warding off future unpreparedness especially in terms of human resources development and in technological investments. The World Bank (2009) argues that massive responsibilities are required for nurturing human resource development in Sub-Saharan Africa and for “ensuring that investments in tertiary education make a strategic and durable contribution to the growth and competitiveness of Africa’s economies” (p.5). Quite in line with Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), countries such as Burkina Faso and Burundi have objectives to promote rural development and food security and enhance national capacities in information and communication technologies. This has broad human resource development implications in the form of investing in agricultural researchers, topographers, electrical engineers and telecommunications experts. In the same vein, sufficient investment is required in robust monitoring and quality assurance mechanisms plus staff with administrative and management capabilities required to play leadership/management roles at all levels.

Conclusion

The challenges posed by the global economic crisis demonstrate the fragility of educational agenda for the marginalized in Sub-Saharan Africa. Vulnerable groups have previously not enjoyed the full benefits of education programs due to socio-economic restrictions. This article has attempted to specify that educational dilemmas facing vulnerable groups can grow worse when the situations are linked to the global economic crisis. Exclusivities that threaten educational achievement among minorities need not broaden the existing knowledge disparities. Refugees, children in war zones, women from ethnic minorities and children in pastoral and nomadic communities face the risk of being excluded from the benefits that come with educational expansion. This is why, by all means, we cannot understate the role played by interventions such as distance education, loans and bursaries. These interventions mitigate the harsh realities of educational exclusivities in Sub-Saharan Africa.

From a much wider perspective, comparative standards linked to global economic crisis can be established between Sub-Saharan Africa and similar developing nations in Latin America and Asia. Baseline studies in these regions (mostly at risk of significantly missing out on EFA goals due to the global economic crisis) have the opportunity of informing policy and legislation on educational issues of the marginalized. Finally, and in connection to this research, ideas on disenfranchised groups should be reconstructed to invent new identities regarding the value of education to such groups.

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