

# Getting inclusive education back on track after the financial crisis

More resources are essential to meet the educational needs of the poor and disadvantaged, and more innovative forms of financing – at both the domestic and the international level – must be found if Education for All is to become a reality

**Nicholas Burnett**

The first eight years of this century witnessed an unprecedented advance in educational enrolments. According to UNESCO's Education for All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report 2010, across the world, between 1999 and 2007, the net enrolment ratio in primary education rose from 82 to 87 per cent (80 to 86 per cent in developing countries), the number of primary school age children out of school fell from 105 million to 72 million, the gross enrolment ratio in secondary education went up from 60 to 66 per cent (52 to 61 per cent in developing countries) and in higher education it increased from 18 to 26 per cent (11 to 18 per cent in developing countries).

At the time of UNESCO's 48th International Conference on Education (ICE48) in Geneva in November 2008, there was widespread optimism that everyone could indeed be included in quality education – as suggested by the conference title: "Inclusive Education: The Way of the Future". But the way things are going now in terms of financing, inclusive education as an "unrealised dream of the future" is a far more likely outcome.

The prospects of education for all have been damaged by the global economic crisis, by continuing financial obstacles to enrolment, by the huge inequalities that result from private spending on tutoring, by inefficiencies in public spending, by the disappointing performance of donors, and by a strange lack of innovative finance.

Inclusive education has, of course, many interpretations. Following ICE48, I take it to mean a basic education of quality for all, where students have equal access to learning and not just enrolment, coupled with opportunities for study at the post-basic level open equally to all – regardless of family income, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, geographical location, or a country's conflict situation. The world is currently far from achieving this. Some 25 million of the 72 million children not in primary school are in conflict-affected states and most of those out of school suffer from multiple disadvantages. Plus, there are still some 759 million young people and adults who are not literate, two-thirds of whom are women.

In 22 countries, 30 per cent or more of those aged 17 to 22 have fewer than four years of education (50 per cent or more in 11 sub-Saharan African countries); in 26 countries, 20 per cent or more of these young adults have fewer than two years of schooling. And the differences within countries are as dramatic as those between them: 97 per cent of poor Hausa-speaking Nigerian girls have fewer than



Vocational training is a vital part of the very concept of inclusive education – which essentially demands equality, both at basic and post-basic levels

two years of education compared to a national average for young adults of about seven years.

The global economic crisis has further reduced the prospects for inclusive education. The progress of 2000-2008 was made feasible largely because of sustained economic growth in developing countries, including in Africa. Even with some signs of a global recovery, such high levels of growth may be difficult to resume. True, many countries, such as China, Korea, Thailand and the USA, have increased public spending on education as part of their crisis response, but many others have no scope to do so and have had to cut education as a share of public spending, including Benin, Ghana, Lesotho, Rwanda and Tanzania. The impact on poor households is likely to have been most dramatic – reduced economic activity and sharply higher food prices together would limit household spending, especially on education, and increase the probability of child labour.

Around the year 2000, household costs were recognised as a major obstacle to inclusive education and significant efforts have since been made to reduce them. Fourteen countries, most of them in Africa, abolished school fees between 1999 and 2007. Unfortunately, simple fee abolition is not necessarily sufficient – particularly when household budgets are being squeezed. Worse, fees are sometimes still charged even when officially illegal, as in Cambodia. In Malawi and Uganda, cost is still cited as the main reason for children being out of school or dropping out of school. Whereas in Nigeria, books and uniforms now cost more than fees did before they were abolished.

According to Mark Bray of UNESCO's International Institute for Education Planning, one of the major reasons for the lack of inclusion in education is access to private tutoring which gives an advantage to those who receive it. Tutoring is widespread, covering, for example, 74 per cent of primary students in China, 52 per cent of rural Egyptian primary students and 65 per cent of junior secondary students in Japan. It has become a major business in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia – over 90 per cent of university students in Azerbaijan were tutored in the last grade of secondary

► school. Total expenditures on tutoring are huge, estimated at a staggering 2.4 per cent of the national income in Korea, 1.6 per cent in Egypt and 1 per cent in Turkey.

As tutoring is expensive, only the better-off families can afford it, reinforcing current patterns of exclusion and working heavily against inclusion at all education levels. In Bangladesh, India and Kenya, more boys than girls have access to tutoring; everywhere, rural children have less access to it than urban ones, and ethnic minorities less access than majorities – in Vietnam, for instance, 37 per cent of ethnic majority primary students were tutored compared to 7 per cent of minority ones. Moreover, tutoring is often done by school teachers out of school hours, producing perverse incentives around what they do during school time.

Some countries face major financing challenges – places for those currently out of school will likely have higher unit costs than

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for those currently in school, and increased numbers of teachers are needed to accommodate new enrolments (1.9 million more at primary level alone by 2015). In all too many countries, however, education spending could be made much more efficient, thereby increasing resources available to promote inclusion. Over the last 50 years, Korea has spent about 4 per cent of its GDP on education, compared to about 5 per cent in Mexico. In 1960 Korea's per capita income was only about 60 per cent of Mexico's, yet now, due to its careful spending on education, Korea's per capita income is twice that of Mexico. Finland and Korea spend much less per pupil than does the USA, yet score much better on international comparisons. Repetition and dropout rates in the poorest developing countries are staggering; in Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, the Grade 4 repetition rate is 13 per cent compared to 1.4 per cent in East Asia



Much bilateral aid goes to higher, rather than basic, education

and only 0.1 per cent in North America and Western Europe.

Most public spending on education has been and must be by governments, but donors can make a significant difference, especially in poor countries. Donors have increased their disbursements for basic education, from \$2.1 billion in 2002 to \$4.1 billion in 2007, but new commitments have not increased since 2004 and in fact have declined in real terms by 22 per cent between 2006 and 2007. From an inclusive education point of view, one positive trend has been the increase in aid for basic education going to conflict-affected countries, up to 24 per cent in 2007 compared to 15 per cent in 2001, though still well below the 41 per cent that the EFA Global Monitoring Report estimates is needed. Overall, however, there is still a massive EFA financing gap of \$16 billion per year.

Not only is the overall level of aid for basic education disappointing, there is almost none for interventions that are key to achieving inclusive education – especially early childhood care and education and youth and adult literacy – or for exchanging information and experience about inclusive education among countries. Moreover, education is still not widely recognised as a priority in post-conflict situations, representing at best perhaps 2 per cent of all humanitarian aid. The greatest problem however, is the distribution of aid – most bilateral education aid remains largely historically determined in terms of where it goes (meaning that large and needy countries like Ethiopia do not get enough) and is mainly for higher rather than basic education (38 per cent of all aid for education is for post-secondary education compared to only 25 per cent for basic education).

There is a massive untapped scope to innovate in education finance, both domestic and international, and hence increase resources. Domestically, for example, the huge potential resources of pension funds (over \$1 trillion in the developing world) have yet to be tapped for development purposes. The resources spent on tutoring could be shaped in a more inclusive direction through appropriate policies, and higher education loan schemes with incentives for the poor and disadvantaged are still few and far between. Internationally, there are many new players (including foundations, emerging donors like China and Korea, private actors like Dubai Cares) which could provide a push for innovative finance, and there is much scope also to innovate, especially to use international finance to leverage effective and inclusive domestic finance.

Inclusive education need not be an unrealised dream but can indeed hold its promise of being the way of the future. To get there, however, education financing has to change. There must be everywhere a focus on the poor and disadvantaged – a pro-inclusion pro-equity bias, probably spending more per disadvantaged pupil than per average pupil and certainly focusing on the enrolment and achievement of the least advantaged.

To finance this positive spending bias, more resources must be raised. A key first step should be to establish a high level international task force on education finance, following the successful example of the health sector, to raise the profile of education and education finance and to consider alternative ways of funding inclusive education. ©

Nicholas Burnett, Managing Director, Results for Development Institute, Washington DC, USA, and formerly UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Education, 2007-09 (nburnett@resultsfordevelopment.org)