

Universal Primary Education: A Moving Target

Millennium Development Goal 2: Achieve Universal Primary Education. Target: Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.

In 2000, the international community agreed to focus their efforts for the next fifteen years on the Millennium Development Goals. The MDGs address issues of health, equity, global partnership, the environment, and poverty. One of the eight specific goals is to achieve universal primary education (UPE) by 2015. Although 83 countries are on track to achieve UPE, 71 are not.

How Severe is the Problem?

Without attending primary school, most children will not learn to read, write, or perform simple arithmetic calculations. Lacking these skills severely cripples their ability to obtain paid employment later on. Consequently, no country has ever experienced large scale economic growth without first achieving near-universal primary school enrollment.

There are at least 75 million children of primary school age in the developing world who do not attend school. More than half of them (55%) are girls. Sub-Saharan Africa contains 38 million out-of-school youth and South Asia is home to 18 million, making up three quarters of the total out-of-school population. (UN, 2008)

Kids are kept home for a variety of reasons. They may not have a school within walking distance of their village, the school fees may be too expensive for their parents to afford, or the children may be needed at home to do chores. Usually, when parents cannot afford to send all of their children to school, the girls are kept home to help with cooking, cleaning, and the care of younger siblings.

Lack of primary education for girls is highly predictive of early marriage, high fertility, and a life of poverty and dependence on men. The merits of educating girls, from a development standpoint, are well-documented in both research and policy circles.

Intermediate Successes

Although the number of school-aged children has grown in the last decade, the number of out-of-school youth has decreased from 103 million in 1999 to 75 million in 2006. During the same period, the portion of children in developing countries who completed primary education rose from 79 percent to 85 percent. In all but two regions, primary school enrollment is now at least 90 percent.

In Southern Asia, the proportion of girls enrolled in primary school in relation to boys jumped from 84 to 95. In Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, girls attending secondary school now outnumber boys. In Latin America and the Caribbean, girls have outnumbered boys in secondary school since at least 1991.

In Ghana, enrollment has increased so drastically that many classrooms hold 100 or more students and there is a shortage of teachers, furniture, and sanitation facilities. UNICEF estimates that each year a deficit of 1,048 classrooms will be added to the current shortage in Ghana.

Challenges to Achieving UPE

In sub-Saharan Africa, population growth and an increase in the proportion of the population which is very young and economically dependent, set a daunting demographic challenge. Governments are faced with the problem of educating an ever-growing school population within tightly constrained budgets. To achieve [universal primary education] will require major and sustained increases in enrollment, year on year, akin in some countries to the rapid expansion that took place in the post-independence years of the 1960s. Maintaining progress will be a major task, unless fertility rates, in part a consequence of a failure to retain girls in school, fall substantially in the early years of the new millennium.

—Department for International Development, UK

Meeting the goal of UPE would be challenging even if population were standing still. But the rapid growth of the student-aged population in many countries is outpacing even the modest progress that has been made. Western Asia and sub-Saharan Africa lag behind



Out-of-school children in Accra, Ghana. Photo: Marian Starkey



School children in La Blanca, Guatemala. This one-room school teaches 72 students of all ages the same material with one teacher. Photo: Marian Starkey

other regions in their progress at 71 percent and 88 percent enrollment, respectively. Unsurprisingly, these are the two regions with the highest population growth rates.

To achieve universal primary education, an additional 15-35 million teachers will be needed over the next decade. (Saswati Paik, 2005) Identifying, training, and paying that many professionals will require vast resources that most developing countries do not have.

Wolfgang Lutz, a prominent Austrian demographer who focuses his research on human capital, said recently in a presentation to other demographers, “High fertility is an obstacle to increasing school enrollment. A rapidly increasing school age population makes it more difficult to increase or even maintain school enrollment rates—lower average schooling in turn leads to higher fertility.” He continued, “Efforts to increase school enrollment rates are greatly helped by reducing the growth in the school age population.”

In essence, stabilizing the number of school-aged children wishing to enter the educational system each year would allow governments a chance to “catch up” with the children who are already left out.

The Department for International

Development in the United Kingdom summarizes, “Strategies to give access to reproductive health care tend to stabilize population growth, which has positive implications for sustaining education, and for individual families’ ability to feed and educate their children.”

Looking Ahead

David Bloom, economist and demographer at Harvard University, warns that “even if education continues to expand at the pace that it did between 1990 and the early part of this century, our estimates indicate that 114 million primary school age children will not be enrolled in school by 2015, about one in six.”

The global community has made massive strides in getting kids into schools. But as long as the number of six-year-olds continues growing at 3% a year in some countries, universal enrollment will remain out of reach.

Millions of women around the world want to have smaller families. Giving them the means to do so will help improve quality of life at the individual level and also at the national level. An educated population can change the trajectory of a country in a single generation.

Facts & Figuresⁱ

- Assuming class sizes of 40, an extra 2 million school teachers per year are required just to keep enrollment rates steady.
- Almost 30% of the world population is under the age of 15 [and still has their childbearing years ahead of them].
- In Africa, average class size increased from 40 in 1990 to 47 in 2001.
- Countries in sub-Saharan Africa have low primary school completion rates, many under 50%.

ⁱ All Party Parliamentary Group on Population, Development and Reproductive Health, “Return of the Population Growth Factor” January 2007.

Sources

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Population Connection is America's largest grassroots group advocating for progressive action to stabilize world population at a level that can be sustained by the Earth's resources.