

PCF5

The Role of Open and Distance Education in Providing Access to Learning for Children and Young People

This Conference comes just a month or so from what is for millions of children, back-to-school month. For millions of others, it is just business as usual. While their peers around the world are looking forward to their first day of class, children out of school will be waking up to yet another day of house chores, caring for their siblings and fetching water or firewood.

Some will be working to help support their families. Others will be taking part in an armed conflict. Others still will be too scared by the violence raging on around them to venture out. Many will be too poor to afford school. And for many, there are no teachers.

Education is a basic human right, vital to personal and societal development and well-being. Education enhances lives. It ends generational cycles of poverty and disease and provides the means for sustainable development. A quality basic education will better equip girls and boys with knowledge and skills needed to adopt healthy lifestyles, to protect themselves from HIV/AIDS and to take an active role in social, economic and political decision-making as they transition to adolescence and adulthood. As educated adults, they are more likely to have fewer children, be informed about appropriate child rearing practices and to ensure their children start school on time and are ready to learn.

While countries around the world have committed themselves, through the Millennium and Dakar Declarations, to the international goals of universal primary education (and the elimination of gender disparities in all levels of education), by 2015, quality education remains a distant dream for far too many children across the globe.

To achieve the 2015 target of universal primary education, countries must step up their efforts to enroll children and have them complete the required years of schooling. The latest figures on enrollment from the 2008 EFA (Education for All) Global Monitoring Report suggest that 72 million children were out of school in 2005 compared to 96

million in 1999. Yet when attendance figures are factored in, the actual number of children out of school may be as high as 93 million. This reflects children who may be enrolled by are not attending class.

Millions of children drop out of school before finishing primary education because of unaffordable school fees, lack of access, child labor and emergency situations like conflicts and natural disasters, to name a few.

The teacher brain drain is yet another complicating factor as it has yet to be stemmed and thus continues to deprive developing countries and those in transition of the high level expertise necessary to accelerate their socio-economic progress.

While there is no shortage of innovative programmes and initiatives in education to improve access and retention, it might be worth considering whether adequate attention has been paid to open (flexibility in the learning environment) and distance learning (techniques and technology to facilitate learning and teaching between learners and teachers who are separated by time or place) in achieving these global goals.