

The Gambia and Education: A Success Story

Crispin Grey-Johnson

Situated at the western bulge of Africa, The Gambia is 11,000 square kilometres in area and bordered on three sides by Senegal and on the west by the Atlantic Ocean. With a population of 1.4 million, its growth rate stands at 4.2 per cent and is among the highest in the world. Forty five per cent of the population are under 15 years old and over 65 per cent comprise young people for whom education and training services have to be provided. With a per capita income of only \$320, it is classified among the least developed countries, a status which presents special challenges for the country's development.

In 1996, articulating its development strategy in a document entitled "Vision 2020: The Gambia Incorporated", the Government summarized its mission statement as follows:

"To transform The Gambia into a financial centre, tourist paradise, trading, export-oriented manufacturing nation, thriving on free market policies and a vibrant private sector, sustained by a well-educated, trained, skilled, healthy, self-reliant and enterprising population, and guaranteeing a well-balanced ecosystem and a decent standard of living for one and all ..."



UNICEF photos/Giacomo Pirozzi

The Gambian Government acknowledged that without a "coherent and consistent" education and training policy and strategy, the objectives of Vision 2020 would not be attained unless supported by a deliberate policy of investing in those human capital resources required to produce, organize, mobilize and manage the development processes that will be indispensable in the twenty-first century. The education and health sectors therefore have a central place in Vision 2020.

Government education policies and programmes since then have been anchored in the Vision 2020 goals. The new education policy and action plan was formulated and laid great stress on: basic education (first 9 years); increasing access and quality; expansion of senior secondary education (years 10 to 12) to significantly improve transition rates; closing the gender gap; skills training; development of scientific and technological competencies; improvement of literacy and numeracy; and strengthening of higher education through the creation of a national university.

The provision of basic education is an important strategy for the attainment of the Jomtien goals (Third World Congress of Education International, Jomtien, Thailand, July 2001)—and indeed the Millennium Development Goals—of education for all by 2015. In this, The Gambia's objective is to provide at least nine years of progressive formal schooling of good quality to all Gambian children by the target year. Since that objective was set some five years ago, the gross enrolment ratio was

taken up from 44 to 87 per cent, placing The Gambia above the average sub-Saharan African country, whose ratio currently stands at 69 per cent. If this pace is maintained, a 100-per-cent ratio could be reached in only a few years time, well before the target year of 2015.

The Policy and Action Plan had also targeted a transition rate from lower to upper basic education of 82 per cent by 2001, from less than 40 per cent in 1994. But by the target date, the rate had surpassed 90 per cent, with the elimination of the six-year primary cycle and the coming into force of the nine-year basic education cycle.

Attaining the Jomtien goal of Education For All will depend to a large extent on how fast The Gambia can increase female enrolment, retention and performance. In 1996, girls constituted only 42 per cent of enrolment in grades 1 to 9, nearly 35 per cent in grades 10 to 12 and only 30 per cent in teacher training. With the new policy, innovative measures were put in place to close the gender gap, leading to an increase in the gross enrolment ratio to 67 per cent in 1999, rising to 73 per cent in 2001 and 82 per cent in 2003. Increases at the senior secondary level were correspondingly high.

In a bid to ensure standards of quality, curricula have been significantly revised, and greater emphasis placed on a school-based system of assessment so as to make learning more relevant to the needs of children. Teacher training was also targeted for improvement and expansion to enhance teaching quality and improve the pupil-teacher ratio. The Standards and Quality Assurance Directorate was also set up to monitor compliance with government policy, standards and regulations, teacher quality and performance, and learning achievement benchmarks.

The Policy and Action Plan also sought to bring about a substantial expansion of senior secondary education. While the Government did its part to build scores of new senior secondary schools, non-State actors were equally encouraged to strike out on their own. The result has been a much-improved rate of transition into senior secondary education from 12 per cent in 1994 to about 65 per cent today. In 1994, there were only 16,000 students enrolled in secondary schools throughout the country. Today, that figure is close to 40,000. Efforts were also made to improve on adult literacy. An Adult and Non-Formal Education Unit was created within the Department of State for Education. The principal objective of this Unit is to reduce and eventually eradicate adult illiteracy by 2015. It targets 4,000 adults every year.

The government policy for higher education led to the development of a comprehensive programme for a training authority to create the human resources base needed to supply the scientific, technological and vocational skills required in the new growth nodes of the economy. It placed emphasis on consolidating and expanding vocational and technical training facilities, paying special attention to information technology, commerce and management training. The policy also created the first-ever university in the country—the University of The Gambia—granting degrees in education, nursing and health sciences, medicine, engineering, technology, hotel and tourism management, and the arts.

The Gambia's achievements in the education sector in such a short period of time have been hailed by many. One of only four African countries considered by the World Bank to be "on track" in moving towards universal primary education by 2015, it is also classified among the "best performers" in providing access. In fact, with the present trends, The Gambia should have attained the universal primary education objective by 2008 at the latest.

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How was such a resource-poor country able to achieve this much in such a short period of time? The first prerequisite for success in meeting the goals set in the education sectors for any developing country is a committed leadership. This is important because in a situation of scarce resources, each sector assigns itself top priority status. Therefore, only a committed leadership will ensure that the necessary attention and resources are allocated to education as the priority of all priorities. Fortunately, in The Gambia, the President himself, His Excellency Dr. Alhaji Yahya A.J.J. Jammeh, is personally committed and involved in the development of education in the country. On many occasions, he has declared that the future is in the hands of the country's youth who must be adequately prepared to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. For him therefore, as far as the provision of education for young Gambians is concerned, "the sky is the limit". This personal commitment is what has permeated the entire government machinery, to make it work more smoothly towards the attainment of the education targets. Over one fourth of the national budget is allocated to education.

More importantly, the Department of Education, which is the Ministry responsible for policy and programmes on education in The Gambia, is staffed with highly qualified and, above all, very committed professionals, and thanks to these executors of policy, implementation has stayed on track. Also, because of their sense of purpose and self-confidence, they are able to ensure that even with the multitude of partners who have come in to contribute to advancing the national effort, the programme has not been derailed to fit the needs of others, and ownership has remained in Gambian hands.

It would not have been so easy to reach the targets quickly if there had not been a framework for action. Vision 2020 provided the overall context from which the education Policy and Action Plan was derived which, in turn, sets out the parameters and requisite benchmarks that guided programme implementation. Together, they gave expression to the nation's aspirations and identified the milestones for the development of education. They also provided a context within which partnerships could more easily be rationalized. Within the education sector itself, strategy does matter. The Government of a least developed country like The Gambia cannot possibly be expected to have provided the wherewithal that have brought about these massive changes in education all by itself. Government pursued implementation policies that actively encouraged partnerships, particularly from the private sector.

Early childhood care and development, for example, are left entirely in the hands of the private sector, which also provides some 50 per cent of senior secondary education. Community-based efforts are also strongly supported, as are those of non-governmental organizations. Religious groups pre-date the Government in the provision of education in The Gambia. They still play a prominent role in the sector and have partnered well with the Government to contribute to these impressive gains in the development of education in the country.



Young students work on a school garden project, funded with UNICEF assistance, in a primary school in the rural suburb of Banjul, The Gambia. UNICEF photos/Giacomo Pirozzi

Above all, the international community provided tremendous support to the efforts of the Government. The Bretton Woods institutions, and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in particular, have been at the

forefront in assisting The Gambia meet the financial requirements for the implementation of the programmes. The Gambia is one of only 18 countries worldwide that have been selected to participate in the World Bank's Education-For-All Fast-Track Initiative, which sets out to provide increased development support to countries that have demonstrated that they are serious about attaining the Education-For-All targets in a determined and cost-effective manner. The aim is to help these countries reach the goal of universal primary education much faster.

Innovative approaches to seemingly intractable problems have borne fruit; one example is how the gender gap was tackled. In most African countries, cultural factors militate against the education of girls. If resources permit for a family to send their children to school, the boys will go first. And if a lack of resources demand that children be withdrawn from school, the girls will be the first victims. To address this problem, The Gambian Government set up the Scholarship Trust Fund for Girls. Through this scheme, the education of girls who would otherwise not be in a position to meet the costs is assured, thus eliminating any excuses for not sending them to school.

Also, a girl-friendly school initiative was started in 2001. With this, schools are made to organize themselves in such a way that girls are made to feel more comfortable there. The initiative makes provision inter alia for the installation of toilets and the availability of water in every school, so that girls can more easily see to their personal hygiene. In addition, in areas where girls' enrolment rates have been too low, intensive sensitization campaigns have been mounted to address the cultural factors, such as early marriage and teenage pregnancy, that contribute to keeping them away from school.

The massive increase in enrolment across the country called for the creation of many classrooms and the training of many new teachers. The enrolment targets could not wait for the physical structures to be erected. Consequently, schools operated in double shifts: the first, running from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. and the second from 2 to 6 p.m, Mondays to Fridays, and 8 a.m. to 12 p.m. on Saturdays. In this way, the available space was put to full use throughout the day and could cater to the needs of twice as many children. It takes time to train teachers. Their shortage could have frustrated the national effort. Fortunately for The Gambia, at the time the expansion was in full gear, there was a massive influx of people from countries in conflict in the sub-region, Sierra Leone in particular. Many happened to have been trained and experienced teachers at all levels. The Government did not hesitate to use them in the system to meet the shortfall. But in addition to this, as the remuneration levels for teachers in The Gambia is very attractive by West African standards, there has generally been no difficulty in attracting very good teachers from Ghana, Nigeria and elsewhere in the subregion. In this way, The Gambia has been able to meet its requirements for manning the schools.

The objective of eradicating illiteracy will eventually be met over time, with the gross enrolment rate reaching 100 per cent and retention through grade 9 approximating that figure. However, there is currently a backlog among the adult population, which needs to be addressed. In addition to the existing non-formal education programmes that target the adult population, the Government has embarked on a community skills improvement project, with funding from the African Development Bank, whose objective is to provide functional literacy and numeracy skills to 40,000 women and out-of-school youths in 230 rural communities over a six-year period. A similar initiative run by the Government is already under way in the urban areas.

It was through these strategies and approaches that The Gambia was able to achieve high rates of success in implementing its education policy and programmes, and in significantly broadening access, closing the gender gap, reducing illiteracy, increasing relevance and quality, as well as improving the gross enrolment ratio and transition rates.

Point of Fact: Educating girls educates nations, and is one of the best investments a society can make. The incomes of families increase as educated women are more productive at home and better paid in the work place. Wages increase by approximately 15% for each additional year of schooling.

Biography

Crispin Grey-Johnson is the Permanent Representative of The Gambia to the United Nations. Previously Ambassador to the United States, he also served in Africa as Ambassador to Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire. Ambassador Grey-Johnson is Vice-President of the 57th General Assembly and has completed a term as Vice-President of the UNICEF Executive Board.



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