

STUDY ON THE SITUATION OF EDUCATION IN MAURITANIA

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1 GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1.1 A Succinct Account of Mauritania

The Islamic Republic of Mauritania, in the Western Sahara, stretches over 1.030.000Km² of largely desert terrain except on the southern borders. Some 2.500.000 inhabitants make up the population, which is increasing at an average annual rate of 2.6%. For subsistence, the country relies chiefly on agriculture and livestock. About 52.4% of the population live in the towns.

MAURITANIA

Figure 1

For just over a decade, Mauritania has been committed to introducing ambitious policies of reform which encompass the entire political, economic and social life of the country. On the political level, the decentralization begun in 1986 led to the founding of 208 communes administered as autonomous entities. In 1991, the constitution adopted by the new pluralist democracy guaranteed fundamental freedoms and the separation of powers for the executive, the legislative and the judiciary. The constitution also enshrined the principle of universal suffrage for the election of the President of the Republic and the people's representatives in the National Assembly.

Concurrently, the programme of economic reform under way since 1992 has helped to redress the financial position of the State, setting the principal public sector companies on a sound basis. The measures introduced stabilized the macro-economic framework and liberalized markets and prices. Progress was also achieved in enhancing the legal and judicial environment of commerce, stimulating the development of the private sector, adding to the supply of infrastructure and allowing the Government once again to focus on its primary tasks, namely, regulation, allocation of resources and development of basic social services.

Thanks to these policies and reforms, Mauritania has achieved some highly positive economic results. For example, the average annual growth rate remained at 4.4% during the last decade while inflation was held in check at an average annual rate of 6.2% over the same period. Again, the budget moved from a deficit of 9.8% of GDP in 1993 to a surplus of 1.5% of GDP in 1998.

As early as 1986, the Government set up a vast programme of social welfare for the benefit of the most disadvantaged sectors. This included school enrolment for early childhood, adult literacy courses, better access to primary health care and to drinking water.

1.2. Context of the Study

UNESCO contributes actively to furthering Education for All in accordance with the commitments made by the international community in Jomtien in 1990 and renewed in Dakar (Senegal) in April 2000 within the framework of the World Education Forum for Education For All. In order to implement the recommendations which emerged at the Forum, Mauritania has evolved a ten-year strategy to establish an EFA action plan.

With a view to preparing the 2003 - 2004 monitoring report on the progress of Education for All, UNESCO has recruited the services of a national consultant who will draw up a document to assess the current situation in education. The report will also determine appropriate methods of guaranteeing the continuity of the policies undertaken and defining the constraints which might weigh upon the development of the sector.

Obeying the terms of reference for the study, the present paper will examine the aspects outlined above, analysing three main elements: (i) monitoring of the progress achieved under the Mauritanian system of education, (ii) reforms and strategies (iii) conditions for continuity.

2. Assessment and Progress of EFA under the Mauritanian System of Education:

Over the last fifteen years, the Mauritanian Government has attached considerable importance to developing the educational sector. Each strategy implemented within this framework has given priority to extending access to basic education as a means of ensuring universal primary education by about 2000. Control of flows in respect of other types of education and improvement of the quality of the system as a whole form the main goals of the policies followed. Results over the last ten years, together with recent studies have highlighted the gains made under the system and identified the chief problems which still weigh negatively on performance..

2.1. Basic Education:

2.1.1. Access to Education:

Mauritania has accomplished great strides in school enrolment in quantitative terms. In ten years, the rate for basic education moved from a figure in the region of 53.4% in 1991 - 1992 to about 89% in 2001 - 2002. The figure for girls rose from 47.2% to 88.4% over the same period. Thus the total number of those attending school moved from 187.502 in 1991 - 1992 to 375.695 in 2001 - 2002 with 80.629 and 183.220 girls respectively. The rate of access in the first year AF rose from 78.4% to 117% overall and that of girls from 71.6% to 117.1% between 91/92 and 2001/2002.

During the same period, the number of schools increased from 1.309 to 3.266 while the number of teachers moved from 3.967 to 9.604. The recruitment ratio passed from 47.2 to 39.1 pupils/teachers.

However, these high percentages were marred by a fairly weak retention rate (proportion of pupils in the cycle who reach the sixth form AF).. Retention even dropped from 55% in 1998/99 to 45% in 2001/02. It should be noted that a large number of schools have few or no facilities for educational continuity (82%). In addition, the poor quality of the instruction dispensed and to a less extent problems of demand, especially in education for girls in rural areas may help to explain why so many fail to stay on at school.

Retention 2001-02 per percentage of incomplete schools per region

Retention

Percentage of incomplete schools

(Source: Report, Revue of the NDPES, April 2003)

On balance, disparity between boys and girls is comparatively slight, with boys attaining somewhat higher figures than girls..Thus. 55% of boys reach the final year of basic education as compared with 50% of girls. Conversely, disparity between urban and rural environments is appreciably more marked. All in all, by the end of basic education, the gaps in the proportions of young people who reach this level are wide, with 64% of girls in the towns and only **38% of girls who live in the countryside.**

Rate of access to the different classes (%) Girls urban Boys urban
Boys (as a whole) Girls (as a whole) Boys rural Girls rural
Boys Girls
Basic Secondary

Graph 1: Profile of enrolment of boys and girls in an urban and a rural environment, 1998.

(Source: Sector Study, Mauritania, 2000)

2.1.2 Quality of Education

The significant progress achieved in basic education in recent years in a quantitative sense is often found side by side with a sharp degradation in overall learning conditions. This has engendered a worrying drop in standards of quality. Several studies have pointed to notable inadequacies in the provision of syllabuses, text-books and guidelines as well as to shortcomings in teacher qualifications and recruitment of staff.

2.1.2.1 Syllabuses and Text-books

Where syllabuses are concerned, it appears, from a monitoring study carried out by the NPI in 1998 with the support of the IREDU, that an average of 30% in all subjects assessed (Arabic, French, Mathematics, Environment) were covered at the last four levels of basic education

With regard to text-books and guide-lines, the inquiry undertaken within the framework of the NPI/IREDU study showed that coverage in this area was weak on the whole and that books were distributed in an inegalitarian fashion among the different schools in the sample chosen. Globally, all years and subjects taken together, the proportion of pupils without text-books is high. The overall average value is estimated at a figure lying between 70% and 81%

Proportion of pupils without books

All subjects

Mathematics

Environment

Language 1

Language 2

Source:

However it must be noted that, in the last two years, the Government has embarked upon a policy of free distribution of text-books on essential subjects. An assessment is currently under way to determine the rate of coverage since the policy was introduced.

2.1.2.2 Teachers

Working along similar lines, the same study identified evidence of teacher shortcomings, with an estimated 'explained variance' of 24% , in terms of a lack of ability to convey knowledge to pupils. This may, be due, in particular, to a failure to adapt beyond initial training. The study also drew attention to the poor level of didactic support, inefficiency in staff recruitment procedures and low motivation among teachers.

2.1.2. Educational Recruitment

Staff recruitment and management does not perform well. Indeed, there are few signs of proper programming for the **recruitment and appointment** of teachers in order to cope with wastage, the needs of demographic growth and the new language requirements introduced under the reform of the system adopted in 1999 and designed to provide bilingual education (Arabic-French)

Thus it is vital that recruitment policies at the teacher-training level should guarantee a quota of teachers proficient in both languages. Similarly, the Government has also approved a policy for the reconversion of unilingual teachers.

Number of teachers per number of pupils in each public institution

Number of teachers per institution

Number of pupils per institution

(Source: Report, of the Revue of the NDPES, April 2003)

2.2. Other Aspects of the System of Education

2.2.1. Early Childhood

By the year 2000, the number of children of pre-school age (between 3 and 6) was estimated at over 330/000 or 13.2% of the total population. The principal childcare institutions in the country are public kindergartens, private kindergartens and community nurseries. In 1999, there were 12 public kindergartens with facilities for 1.116 children. The number of private kindergartens was estimated at 135, with coverage for about 4.200 children. In some regions of the country, community nurseries were also found. The total number of such structures was thought to be 67 with facilities for some 7.050 children. Even so, only about 4.5% of children of pre-school age were able to benefit from this type of care in 2000.

The reduction in the number of private and community early childhood structures observed in the last few years is precisely in response to ever pressing needs, but the growth in quotas in this area has not yet been matched by the qualitative development indispensable for the global fulfilment of the young child.

.....2.2..2 Literacy

On the whole, the present system has some strong points. In the first place, there has been a growing awareness of the need to build **a new literacy strategy** which will allow **every effort to be mobilized** in order to reduce illiteracy. Secondly, there is the **priority** granted to the fight against illiteracy at all levels of the Mauritanian State.

Thus, the campaigns led by the Secretary of State for the Fight against Illiteracy and for Original Education have succeeded in teaching 2.570 persons in 1992 and 75 000 in 2002. Of the beneficiaries recognized as having qualified, 62% were women; This

confirms a worldwide trend and gives an indication of the interest women demonstrate with regard to education.

The number of classrooms open annually during the campaigns rose from about 100 in 1990 to 2.050 in 1998/99, admitting 26 000 persons during the same year or an average of 13 persons per class.

2.2.Lifelong Learning

This concern is being steadily taken into account in so far as the positive aspects of social change, globalization and the revolution in the field of communications may be outweighed by perverse effects for society as a whole. It is now more urgent than ever for society to be forewarned so as to be able to make best use of the opportunities offered by the advent of a new world with its many facets and to be equipped durably and efficiently so as to tackle the many challenges that may lie ahead. In 1999, the President of the Republic himself initiated and launched a national campaign round the theme 'Knowledge for All', declaring: 'Control by a people of its destiny resides in its level of knowledge of modern skills and techniques and its abilities for creation and innovation. The campaign seeks to arouse awareness among populations throughout the country of the need to appreciate the changes linked to globalization and the benefits afforded by a command of science and technology. Such knowledge makes up the common heritage of mankind which lies within reach of any society inspired by the will to place that heritage at its service.

The President then called upon the country to root out illiteracy, to fight the great endemic scourges and to disseminate learning and know-how.

Mobile vocational training teams furrow towns and villages across Mauritania, setting up local support structures for apprenticeship and, as a result of the socio-economic changes brought about by the new investment programmes, which require a different type of behaviour, focusing on the needs of the populations. Likewise, Vocational Training Centres have been created in all the *Willayas* (regions) of the country and dispense

instruction to children who have abandoned school, to those who are in their final year and wish to join the labour force and to workers eager to gain a qualification.

A support fund for books was created within the framework of the 2002 Finance Bill with a view to founding public libraries in the different communes (208) in the country and to attract the attention of the population to the importance of reading and its impact on the improvement of their living conditions. Thus 53 reading centres are under construction in the different *moughataa* (departments) where library stocks are already available and graduates have been engaged to take charge the administration.

Civil society, the media and the Imams of the mosques play an active part in the campaigns to fight AIDS, the use of Drugs and the handicaps of illiteracy. They are also active in upholding human rights, child protection, schooling for girls and the promotion of women and reading.

School syllabuses include many approaches linked to education for a better life such as instruction in family living, population problems, the environment, health, nutrition, citizenship. etc.

All these activities reflect the growing understanding that aspiring to a better life is more and more demanding and that major mobilization is required if such aspirations are to be satisfied.

3. Policies, Strategies and Reforms

Within the framework of the 1986 national plan for economic, social and cultural development, the Government designated education as a key area for the future prosperity of the country. On the basis of that plan, short-term action programmes, which generally lasted about two years, provided the guidelines for the development and growth of the sector. Little progress was reported before 1990.

In the wake of the Jomtien Conference, the Mauritanian Government embarked upon a policy designed to improve both access to education and the quality of the education offered.. -

Bearing these goals in mind, the Government has implemented several development plans since. These intentions were confirmed in 1992 in the course of the Prime Minister's address to Parliament: *'The system of education will be assigned the twofold mission of achieving social integration and extending the acquisition of learning and know-how. We must work in the first place to speed up school enrolment and secondly to improve the content of our general scientific and technical education so as to match international standards of quality.'*

For the period from 1995 - 2000, the educational priorities of the country were set out in a letter on sector policy which stressed the importance attached to basic education. As outlined in the letter, the specific goal was to increase facilities with a view to being able to admit all children aged between 6 and 11 by about 2000 while at the same time providing better educational services (syllabuses, materials teachers) Within that framework, the strategies targeted (a) the pursuit of a school building programme co-financed by the communities with the aim of enlisting greater parent involvement This should permit an enlargement of the infrastructure by a participation in the region of 30% of construction costs and full accountability (choice of foreman, purchase of materials), with the Government acting in an advisory capacity on technical matters (b) greater control of unit costs, especially at the higher level, by better allocation of resources (c), improvement of school syllabuses (d) implementation of a training policy to raise the level of teacher training qualifications and staff recruitment) (e) pursuit of a system of distribution of school text-books by strengthening the sales network of the NPI (National Pedagogical Institute) and (f) better planning and management of human and physical resources.

Before the end of this programme, bearing in mind the Millennium Goals and the issues at stake, as well as the requirements of globalization, the Government agreed to put in place a wide-ranging reform of the system of education.

The reform, voted at a special parliamentary session in 1999, maintained the emphasis laid on Arabic and national culture but sought to steer the system along a path of

modernization and openness, placing school at the heart of development. The modifications introduced were part of a policy to improve quality overall.

. Unification of the system. by suppressing the language network created under the 1979 reform;

Extension of the teaching period in the first cycle of secondary education from 3 to 4 years;

.Strengthening science teaching and introduction of physics and informatics in the first cycle of secondary education;

.Strengthening foreign language teaching (French, English)

The reform was bolstered by a National Development Programme for the Education Sector (NDPES), which covers the period 2001 - 2010 and includes early childhood and literacy for the first time. The preparatory stage lasted for almost a year, keeping the most diverse actors in the system of education fully engaged.; among them were multidisciplinary teams of professionals, parents' associations, civil society, partners in development, decision-makers, etc. Throughout the process there was frank and fruitful discussion on all the matters linked to the general problems of schooling. This gave rise to copious documentation on the entire sector from early childhood to higher education and covered all orders and types of teaching and training in Mauritania. The NDPES is the synthesis of this unprecedented undertaking in the country as far as this sector is concerned.

The programme was evolved to take account of the following factors:

. Firm guidelines for applying the system, based on the development of forecasting skills, the creation of a central administration,, a continuing assessment of the system and planned recruitment;

. Improvement in the educational supply, which would involve , among others the introduction of a school. card and the reorganization of the university and technical and vocational training;

Strengthening the quality of education ,which would rest largely on the renovation of syllabuses, the availability of teaching materials, , enhanced vocational training and

structuring of initial and continuing education, as well as on an improvement in performance in the area of educational management and recruitment.

- . Better use of human resources by means of career monitoring linked to an appreciation of merit and achievements as well as rationalization of staff appointments;

- . Re-absorption of regional disparities underpinned by a planned approach for the allocation of resources;

- . Strengthening education for girls;

- . Growth of the role of the private sector in matters of educational supply, which would be sought in accordance with a suitable policy of promotion.

The principal strategies to be implemented within the framework of the programme take account of the following aspects:

3.1. Policy on basic education

The development of policy in matters of basic education will hinge on three main lines of approach:

3.1.1. Access and Retention

In this respect, the aim is to improve access and retention at the level of basic education by means of: Generalization of schools with a full cycle by about 2010:

- .Rationalization of management and staff appointments;

- Re-absorption of regional disparities;

- .Construction of about 530 classrooms per year.;

- Growth in teaching staff by about 650 per year;

- Attendance of about 30 000 pupils at private schools.

Where regional disparities are concerned, the strategy is designed gradually to carry the proportion of schools with a full cycle from the present value (17.6%) to 100% in 2010, It will also encourage education for girls in the 7 deficient regions, so that their share in the numbers of those attending school may reach 48%, Further, it plans to build 530

classrooms per year until 2005 and 610 classrooms per year from 2005 to 2010, as well as to ensure greater provision of school canteens.

Where the private sector is concerned, the strategy seeks to strengthen public support for development in this area along lines adapted to the goals of the reform. Firstly, greater flexibility will be allowed in the wording of the regulations in force (recreational measures, control procedures). A support fund for private education will be created to enable the sector to progress efficiently during the decade. Further, by means of an account book, private education will undertake, to respect national standards and programmes and to attain the goals assigned for basic education (increase in the share of the private sector from 3% in 2000 to 4% in 2005 and to 5.5% in 2010).

3.1.2. Quality of Education

Improvement in the quality of education by means of:

- . Initial formal and continuing training for teachers and headmasters;
- . Introduction of incentive schemes for teachers appointed in disadvantaged zones;
- . Gradual reduction of the pupil/teacher ratio from the current 48 to 40 by 2010;
- . Implementation of revised syllabuses;;
- . Availability of educational materials (text-books, guidelines, teaching materials, etc.);

Introduction of a policy for the purpose of supplying books to educational institutions and preparation for the liberalizing of printing and the dissemination of text-books by about 2005;

- . Development of educational assessment exercises in the classroom.

Where teaching materials are concerned, Government policy seeks to make them available to all schools by means of a dissemination circuit which will involve regional authorities and parents' associations. Accordingly, in 2003, text-books were supplied free of charge to all schools and at a discount to headmasters and parents' associations, together with geometry kits. With a view to improving the scheme, regional and departmental institutions have been provided with vehicles.

3.1.3. Education for Girls

It is essential to improve the school environment for girls by:

- . Evolving special procedures to encourage enrolment and to persuade girls to stay on in education by reducing the handicaps they have to face in their studies and at examinations;

- . Strengthening the enrolment of girls in basic education in regions where there is marked gender disparity;

- . Introducing incentive schemes in order to increase attendance at secondary and higher institutions.

.The disparities which affect girls, will be tackled as a special category and will require in-depth studies on their origin. Within that framework, a study on the reasons why so many girls leave early would permit a better grasp of the kind of support needed at each institution concerned by the phenomenon. While awaiting the results of this study, intensive training courses will be organized as well as awareness campaigns (IAC) and assistance for communities with the aim of lifting barriers to education for girls such as distance from school and incidental costs.

3.2. Policy on Early Childhood

The development of the policy on early childhood explores four main approaches;

- .Support for the encouragement of community initiatives in this field;

- . Introduction of a training scheme for the development of early childhood

- . Strengthening resource centres for early childhood;

- . Development of institutional skills in the management of early childhood structures.

In addition, the Government is committed to a policy designed to develop early childhood throughout the country. Consequently, increased facilities for care have been planned for renovated community nurseries at a rate of 15% annually over 5 years and 20% annually over 10 years. A National Training Centre for Early Childhood is under construction for this purpose and should be operational by 2003

3.3. Policy on Literacy

Policy development in this area seeks to:

.Identify the populations by consulting the results of the general census

.Mobilize all participants in the fight against illiteracy;

. Diversify the means of action (involvement of the *mahadras*, experimentation with mobile literacy units, consolidation of literacy campaigns and improvement in the productivity of the permanent literacy centres);

Encourage greater command and development of literacy skills;

.Improve assistance in communication

4 Continuity Strategies

The risks most likely to undermine the attainment of the EFA goals are closely linked to the performance of the NDPES. In order to put into practice a programme on that scale, which betrays a long-term view and a global sector approach inspired by the socio-economic realities of the country, it seems indispensable that a number of conditions should be filled as far as possible if maximum efficiency is to be guaranteed.

Bearing this in mind, the present paper describes the chief conditions which, at one moment of another may weigh positively or negatively on the conduct of the enterprise and on its results as well as on the contingency strategies it would be advisable to envisage.

One decisive condition is unquestionably the degree of commitment of the public authorities on behalf of education. The presence of a strong political will has been a precious asset in defining choices, mobilizing actors and means, and validating technical proposals on time..**The implementation of this far-reaching programme requires steady application of that will.**

A second condition lies in **greater involvement of different agencies in introducing the reform and the support programmed. Similarly, important efforts should be initiated and pursued to guarantee the active participation**

of parents' associations and civil society in respecting the goals of the NDPES.

A third condition for the attainment of these goals should be to guarantee availability of appropriate reliable data on the evolution of the sector, so as to allow for possible adjustments. **It would be advisable to note that while the goals the Government has set itself within the framework of the NDPES are undeniably ambitious, they are also constraining and would require a regulatory mechanism to assess overall performance. This would draw the attention of decision-makers to eventual discrepancies with a view to making the necessary amendments. Again, the abilities of the educational staff must be strengthened further to ensure the continuity of the system of monitoring and assessment.**

These conditions are outlined here as a reminder although the Government has taken them into account in the NDPES and administrative and financial measures are already in force. By that token, with regard to management and the appointment of teachers a joint decree issued by the Minister of Education and the Minister of the Interior sets the criteria for openness exclusion and recruitment ? Specific incentives (indemnities for teachers in remote areas) are made available, especially for those appointed to difficult zones. With regard to reliable data, the Ministry has embarked upon a vast programme of improvement by means of a study on the system of information and educational management and provision of better data bases. Likewise, regional budgets have been set aside to allow institutions to offer continuing training on special topics and to improve the educational environment and the maintenance of school buildings.

In addition, it should be borne in mind that Mauritania has been selected together with other countries as being in a position to benefit from the first phase of the First Track Initiative for Education for All. The programme derives inspiration from the goals adopted in the NDPES which have since been reviewed in the light of the resources that will become available within the framework of the Initiative.

Even so, it must also be noted that the Government's efforts to attain EFA goals in 2015 **will require cast-iron support from the international community if complementary funding is to be forthcoming, particularly over the period 2006 - 2015. Financial donors, nevertheless, must also ensure that their involvement answers a real and concerted need.**

The framework for expenditure used during the first phase of implementation of the NDPES should be pursued for the second phase. This should secure ongoing overall coherence in the contributions made by the different actors and partners in the sector of Mauritanian education.

5 Conclusion:

How far and how quickly can one control the dysfunctioning which has often characterized educational policy in Mauritania? Even if it appears, unequivocally, that significant strides have been made in terms of coverage and access as compared with the last decade, the ten-year programme cannot but fail to make its mark unless substantial progress is made in the roles of management and guidance which are the guarantors of any improvement in quality in the educational sector.

That will depend, moreover, on whether the educational sector possesses the ability to apply and preserve the gains generated by the NPDES in improving the quality of basic education. Such are the challenges which face the actors in the system of education at a decisive turning point for the future of schooling in Mauritania.