

Education for all in Niger

Rich countries continue to neglect Africa's children

On 25 March senior aid officials will meet in Paris to take decisions that will dramatically affect the lives of millions of children around the world in countries like Niger. The government of Niger is committed to tackling the education crisis in a country where 1.3 million children have never been to school. But rich countries have so far failed to deliver on their promised increase in financial support to Niger and the other countries that have qualified for the *Education For All* Fast Track Initiative. A failure by donors to act decisively now will be a disaster for Niger and for efforts to meet the Millennium Development Goal of universal primary education by 2015.

Summary

When senior aid officials meet in Paris on 25th March their decisions will dramatically affect the lives of millions of children in a number of countries, including Niger.

Niger is the poorest peaceful country in the world. Life for the country's children is brutal. 1.3 million children of primary school age are out of school in Niger. This is an astonishing figure given that the country's population is just 11 million.

The government of Niger knows that tackling this crisis is critical to the country's future. Providing education for all will help strengthen Niger's very young democracy. Education also boosts the productivity of families, and leads to healthier communities.

Over the past 5 years the government has made clear progress. The enrolment rate in primary schools has risen from 34.1% to 41.7%. But Niger has far too few resources to complete the task.

Because of Niger's chronic need for international support and the Government's clear commitment to providing a quality basic education for all its children, Niger was invited along with 17 other countries in June 2002 to participate in the Education For All (EFA) Fast Track initiative. The aim of Fast Track is to accelerate progress towards education for all by providing a strong and coordinated donor response to countries that are committed to educating all their children.

Niger took this invitation at face value, and developed a national Fast Track strategy, which was widely praised by donor representatives in the country who agreed to coordinate their efforts in support of the strategy. At the EFA donor consortium meeting in November 2002 donors agreed to fully finance Niger's strategy, but no specific information was given about who would provide how much funding and when.

Just days before the March meeting of the EFA Donor Consortium, there is no agreement about how Niger's strategy will be financed. The chronic indifference of rich countries to the plight of Niger's children is largely explained by the lack of strategic importance of Niger to the international community. Niger has few donors, and even for most of those donors that are represented in the country, Niger is not a priority.

If donors fail to fully finance Niger's Fast Track strategy, it will be a disaster for the country. Such a failure would also send a very negative message to other countries that are considering implementing the kind of tough reforms needed to deliver education for all.

Recommendations

At the 25 March EFA Donor Consortium meeting in Paris, donor countries must agree to:

- Immediately release the financing required to implement the first year of Niger's Fast Track strategy, and give a specific guarantee of financing for the following two years with details of how much will be provided by which donor and when
- Finance new elements of the education sector especially recurrent costs such as teachers' salaries
- Adapt their existing projects to support the government's Fast Track strategy
- Immediately release the financing required to implement the first year of the Fast Track strategies of the other 6 countries that have qualified (and any further countries that have developed a credible strategy), and give a specific guarantee of financing for the following two years with details of how much will be provided by which donor and when
- Provide a detailed timetable explaining how the Fast Track initiative will be expanded to include other countries that on current trends will fail to meet the Millennium Development Goal of universal primary education by 2015, and whose governments demonstrate that they are seriously committed to meeting the goal.

Introduction

Since the democratic elections of 1999 Niger has enjoyed a new political stability. But ranked second from last on the UNDP Human Development Index (172nd out of 173), Niger is the poorest peaceful country in the World. Landlocked in the Sahara Desert and blessed with few natural resources, its people face a daily struggle with unforgiving elements and desperate poverty.

Life for Niger's children is unimaginably hard. About 16 out of every 100 children die at birth¹. 1.3 million children of primary school age in Niger never go to school², an extraordinary figure for a country with a total population of 11 million.

This paper documents the terrible state of Niger's education system, the impressive efforts being made by the government of Niger to deliver education for all, the response of donors in Niger, and the continuing neglect of Niger's children by donors at the international level.

The paper is based on intensive research carried out in March 2003. The research consisted of interviews with children, parents, teachers, local officials and discussions with senior politicians, government officials and donor representatives in Niger. Oxfam would like to thank all those who participated and whose time and energy made this research possible.

The state of education in Niger

Attending primary school is the exception rather than the rule in Niger. Many of those who start their primary education drop out long before they learn to read or write. Girls are much more likely to drop out than boys. When it comes to the terrible state of the education system, the figures speak for themselves:

- 42 % of children of primary age are enrolled in school³
- 1.3 million primary aged children are out of school⁴
- 24% of children complete their primary education⁵
- 8.5% of women can read⁶

Those who do not go to school usually spend their days working for their families. The girls pound millet, fetch water, collect firewood, cook, and clean. Sometimes they will spend a whole day trying to make a few hundred CFA francs selling vegetables. Girls reported earnings between 100 and 300 CFA francs – US 15 to 45 cents per day. Boys are more likely to do farm work. In the capital, Niamey, boys tend to grow a few vegetables or try to find work as mechanics.

Box 1. Pounding millet day after day: Adiatou Issaka's story

Adiatou Issaka lives just 500 meters from Farekaina primary school, but she does not go there. The school is full. There is only one classroom built from straw and one teacher for 59 children. Adiatou is 12 years old, and she has never been taught to read or write. Neither of her two older brothers went to school, but her younger brother enrolled two years ago. In the morning, when her brother walks the short distance to school, Adiatou is already hard at work. She spends most of her time, about 6 hours a day, pounding millet.

“Sometimes the work is very very hard because often I don't have water. Pounding millet is really hard. You need a lot of strength.”

Adiatou carries out numerous other tasks. She sweeps the mud hut and compound where the family lives, she goes to the well for water, she fetches firewood, and collects gandafoye leaves which are used to make the sauce the family eats with their meals. Sometimes she sells kopto leaves (a kind of cabbage) that her older brothers bring from Dosso. She can make up to 300 francs a day (about US 45 cents).

Adiatou says she feels sad when her brother goes to school in the morning. They are close friends, and he has taught her a few words of French.

“Sometimes my little brother asks me to go to school with him but I have to say no. My brother wants to be a teacher so he can share knowledge with everyone. I want to learn to read and write too.”

Adiatou thinks her mother and father would allow her to go to the school if there was space. But she wonders who would pound the millet.

“It would be easy if the village had a mill.”

Those lucky enough to go to school still face huge challenges to learning. Providing education in a country as large as Niger and with a very dispersed population is a major challenge, and many have to walk long distances to get to the nearest school. Many are

sent to school with empty stomachs. The school system has suffered from years of under-investment. A chronic lack of trained teachers means that class sizes are huge and that children are often taught in shifts or in multi-grade classes. It is not unusual to find 5 year olds and 11 year olds in the same class.

In an attempt to rapidly recruit more teachers, a new cadre of teachers has been recruited under a “contractual system”. The lack of resources available to the government means that these new teachers are paid a very low salary – about \$600 per year. Local NGOs fear that this low level of pay is inadequate to attract and motivate good quality candidates.

A further problem is the difficulty of recruiting teachers for schools in rural areas. Teachers from towns often do not want to move to rural areas, and yet in many rural communities it is impossible to find a single person with a secondary school education.

Another concern is the relevance of the curriculum to the children, especially in the poorest rural communities. Most state schools still follow a formal French curriculum, with little focus on how lessons can be applied to the needs of local communities.

**“It would be good if the children learned something more useful at school. I am a tailor. I would like the children to learn to make clothes.”
Bibata, parent from Nordire School.**

All schools have an inadequate supply of basic materials. Books, desks, and benches are in short supply. As box 2 below illustrates, school buildings are nothing like those in rich countries.

Box 2. Dust, snakes, rain and fire...the challenges of teaching in a school made of straw

Farekaina state school serves a rural community 7km from the town of Dosso. Only one third of the children of primary school age in Farekaina go to the school because there is only one classroom and it is packed with 59 children. No children have been admitted for the past two years. The teacher at the school, Zainabou Moussa, describes the conditions that make it so hard for the children to learn:

“The classroom is awful. When dust sweeps in we have to stop the lesson. In the cold season the children are shivering. Snakes sometimes come into the classroom and the children flee.”

Supplies of equipment and teaching materials are inadequate:

“The children sit on sacks on the dirt floor.” Zainabou says “They need tables and desks. It takes them ages just to write things because they have no desks. There is only one book for every five children. There is no latrine”.

Even in the capital city, Niamey, it is common to find classrooms made from straw. Nordire state school is in the southern part of the capital. Four of the school’s nine classrooms are made from straw. In October two classrooms were destroyed by fire, and for nearly three months the children took lessons sitting outside in the dust under the burning sun while the community raised the money to rebuild the classrooms themselves. In a few months they will have to be rebuilt again. The headmaster, Amadou Soumana, explains why

“When it rains the straw classrooms are ruined and we have to rebuild them. So much time is lost for the children in these straw classrooms.”

Why is education so important for Niger?

At the community level the demand for education is strong, despite the short-term opportunity costs to families due to the loss of their children’s labor.

Perhaps the most valuable things children learn in school are the basic lessons of health and hygiene. When a new school is set up in a village, the lessons the children learn can help to transform the health

of a whole community. In a country where shocking statistics are easy to find, one of the most horrific is that 16 out of every one hundred children die at birth⁷. The power of basic education is revealed by the fact that in poor countries every additional year of a woman's schooling is associated with a 5 to 10% decline in child deaths⁸.

“If your children have studied they can read to you the letters you are sent” - parent, Aguiwane school

When children are educated they can understand the instructions on a bottle of pills. Literate adults can read the instructions on a packet of seeds or fertilizer. Even for the poorest farmer, having an education helps to improve their returns and make them more effective traders. Research from other African countries shows that just four years of primary education raises farm outputs by 7%.⁹

“Through education there can be unity” - village head, Farekaina

Education can play a vital role in strengthening a young democracy. At the national level the government is trying to build bridges. The President and Prime Minister come from different groups which historically battled between each other for control of the country- the Hausa and Djerma peoples. At the community level, educated people can understand the working of a democracy, they can read newspapers, they are aware of their rights, and they are able to demand that those rights are upheld.

Box 3. Second in class and dreaming of being a teacher: Moussa Boureima's story

Moussa is 12 years old; he is second in his class at Aguiwane community school in Tilabery province which was established in 2001. Of Moussa's four brothers and three sisters, only one brother is in school. His three sisters never went to school, and are all married. When Moussa was 10 he told his parents he wanted to go to the new school, and they agreed. Before that the nearest school was a seven km walk away, so Moussa would spend the day doing errands like collecting firewood. His brother Yaye now does this work; he is 14 years old and has never been to school.

"I wish all my brothers and sisters could go to school" Moussa says. "In my village there are lots of children who don't go to school. The girls pound millet and the boys farm. It makes me sad. Sometimes I tell them to come with me but they always say 'maybe tomorrow'. They would like to come but they are busy working for their parents."

"When I grow up I want to be a teacher. My teacher is very good and I want to be like him."

Moussa puts in a lot of effort to make his dream a reality. He has to walk for one hour to get to school. When he goes home he continues to do school work. There is no electricity, so he studies by lamplight.

Moussa's mother, Habsou, says she also benefits from her son's education:

"Every night we learn from our children. At school they teach the children to be clean and to wash their clothes. If a child has a dirty hand and puts it in their eye they will get a disease. Now we wash the children every day. Before I didn't know how a watch works. Now the children have shown us. The children have taught us some French which helps us when we visit other towns."

Niger's commitment to education for all

Providing universal primary education is one of the Government's highest priorities. Evidence of this is the real progress that has been made in the past few years. The primary education enrolment rate increased from 34.1% in 1998 to 41.7% in 2002¹⁰.

In 2001 the government announced its 10 year strategy for the development of education as a central plank of Niger's PRSP (Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper). The plan lays out a comprehensive strategy for delivering major improvements in basic education. Donors in Niger warmly welcomed the plan.

In June 2002, as a result of its commitment to basic education and its track record of achievement, Niger was one of 18 countries invited by the international community to participate in the *Education For All* Fast Track initiative. The initiative aims to accelerate progress towards education for all by providing significantly increased and well coordinated aid for primary education to those countries that demonstrate their clear commitment to achieving universal primary education.

In response to this invitation, Niger developed a detailed strategy for meeting the Millennium Development Goal of universal primary education by 2015. The core elements of the strategy are as follows¹¹:

1. Recruitment and training of teachers
 - Recruitment of 9213 teachers
 - Target of one teacher for 40 children
 - Expansion of teacher training capacity

2. More relevant and higher quality learning
 - Reformulation of curriculum
 - Integration of concepts of health, hygiene and the fight against HIV/AIDs into the curriculum
 - Investment in teaching materials

3. Improvements in school infrastructure
 - Construction of 8774 new classrooms
 - Replacement of 3987 straw classrooms with solid structures and the rehabilitation of a further 3500 classrooms

4. Specific targeted interventions to support
 - Girls education
 - Disabled children's education
 - Education for children in nomadic zones or areas with dispersed populations

5. Implementation of the strategy
 - Decentralization of administrative responsibility within the basic education sector including recruitment of teachers
 - Involvement of communities in the management of schools
 - Strengthening of management capacity to guarantee effective implementation
 - A steering committee at the national level bringing together the government, civil society groups, and donors
 - Improved collection of statistics at the regional level

6. Niger will significantly increase its own financing of basic education
 - 4% of GNP will be devoted to education from now to 2015
 - 40% of the funds freed up through debt relief will go towards financing universal primary education

The Government's strategy provides an honest assessment of the weakness of management capacity in the education sector and proposes how these weaknesses can be overcome through a new partnership between the government, civil society and donors.

On November 27 at the first meeting of the Education For All donor consortium in Paris, the international donor community endorsed Niger's Fast Track strategy and agreed to fully finance the strategy along with the strategies of six other countries. There was no indication, however, of which donor countries would finance the strategies in each country.

Rich countries continue to neglect Niger's children

The representatives of donor countries in Niger all agree that Niger's Fast Track strategy is of a very high standard and provides a firm basis around which to coordinate future assistance.

One of the most positive aspects of the fast track for Niger, at least in principle, is that it is driving improvements in donor coordination. All donors have committed to deliver their future aid to the

education sector in a way that directly supports the Fast Track proposal. This new donor coordination will hopefully:

- Allow donors to decide which of them is best able to provide support to which element of the government's plan and thus to eliminate competition amongst donors in certain areas (class construction, curriculum design etc)
- Allow donors to identify gaps in the overall package of support the international community gives to basic education in Niger
- Cut down on the number of reports donors request the Ministry of Basic Education to produce, thus freeing up capacity within the Ministry. The Ministry should in future provide a single report against a shared set of targets to the whole donor community
- The existence of shared reporting, monitoring, and evaluation mechanisms should enhance the capacity of donors to monitor the effective use of resources and introduce more clarity into budget processes.

“Tell everyone that in Niger donors are coordinated. Let everyone know that this is a strong guarantee and should give confidence. Let everyone know that the objectives [of Niger's Fast Track strategy] are reasonable” – Representative of major bilateral donor in Niger

Donor coordination in Niger is led by the Canadian International Development Agency. The improved coordination is a positive step, but little will be achieved unless three further conditions are met:

- Donors must adapt their existing projects, instead of continuing with business as usual whilst saying their project is in support of Fast Track
- Donors must agree to finance new elements of the education sector
- Donors must fully finance Niger's Fast Track strategy

If donors are not prepared to adapt their projects to support Niger's strategy, competition between donors will not be eliminated. There is no point in knowing where unnecessary competition exists if nothing is done to remedy the situation. Even if donors coordinate

effectively to avoid competition, there will still be major gaps in the financing of the education sector. For example, if Canada agrees to take responsibility for curriculum reform and Germany agrees to finance construction but nobody is prepared to provide budget support for teacher salaries, Niger will end up with no teachers to teach the new curriculum in the new classrooms. There is a danger the overall package of donor support to Niger will continue to be inefficiently distributed between different elements of the education sector.

Of course, the solution to all these problems is for donors to fully finance Niger's Fast Track strategy in line with the pledge made at the Dakar World Education Forum that "no countries seriously committed to education for all will be thwarted in their achievement of this goal by a lack of resources", and the more specific promise made to Niger and six other countries in November 2002 that their Fast Track proposals would be financed.

But rich countries continue to display a stunning ability to break their promises to the children of Africa. Just days before the next meeting of the Education For All Donor Consortium on March 25th, donors have not agreed how the finances they have promised will be provided. The gap between the existing resources already committed for basic education for the period 2003-2005 (73,453 million CFA from the government of Niger and 31,725 million CFA from the international community) and the financing needed to implement the Fast Track proposal is 41, 730 million CFA (US\$67 million). The French and Belgian Governments may provide some further financing, but a major gap seems likely to remain, condemning hundreds of thousands of children to a life of illiteracy and poverty.

This chronic indifference of the donor community to the plight of Niger's children is partly explained by the lack of strategic importance of Niger to the international community. Niger has few donors, and even for most of those donors that are represented in the country, Niger is not a "country of concentration". This explains why Canada, nominally the lead donor in the basic education sector in Niger, is not planning to provide any additional support to the Fast Track strategy.

The failure of the international community to provide adequate support to a country like Niger would send a negative message to other countries that are considering implementing the kind of tough reforms needed to deliver education for all. Niger is a desperately poor country with an overwhelming need for international support. Niger has clearly demonstrated the political will to provide a quality basic education for 1.3 million children currently out of school. The

government has a track record of success in getting children into school, but has too few resources to complete the task. It would be a disaster for Niger if rich countries do not act decisively to provide major additional financial support.

Recommendations

At the 25 March EFA Donor Consortium meeting in Paris, donor countries must agree to:

- **Immediately release the financing required to implement the first year of Niger's Fast Track strategy, and give a specific guarantee of financing for the following two years with details of how much will be provided by which donor and when**
- **Finance new elements of the education sector especially recurrent costs such as teachers' salaries**
- **Adapt their existing projects to support the government's Fast Track strategy**
- **Immediately release the financing required to implement the first year of the Fast Track strategies of the other 6 countries that have qualified (and any further countries that have developed a credible strategy), and give a specific guarantee of financing for the following two years with details of how much will be provided by which donor and when**
- **Provide a detailed timetable explaining how the Fast Track initiative will be expanded to include other countries that on current trends will fail to meet the Millennium Development Goal of universal primary education by 2015, and whose governments demonstrate that they are seriously committed to meeting the goal.**

Notes

- ¹ UNDP Human Development Index, 2000 figures
- ² EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2002
- ³ Government of Niger, 2002
- ⁴ EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2002
- ⁵ Government of Niger, 2002
- ⁶ EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2002
- ⁷ UNDP Human development Index, 2000 figures
- ⁸ UNFPA 1998
- ⁹ A. Appleton et al: "Education and agricultural productivity: evidence from Uganda." Journal of International Development, 8,3, 1996
- ¹⁰ Government of Niger, 2002
- ¹¹ Initiative EPT-PA Résumé de la requête du Niger

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