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Seminar on Adapting Curricula

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Cotonou-Benin

Context

1. Sub-Saharan Africa faces a great many socio-economic problems. Among the phenomena afflicting Africa today are growing poverty, the ravages of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and malaria, disasters caused by civil conflict, and the marginalization of Africa in the process of economic and technological globalization. At the same time, these are problems of concern to education, as an essential factor in and condition *sine qua non* for economic and social development, peace and tolerance, and scientific and technological competitiveness.

2. Five years ago, at the World Education Forum in Dakar, all the countries of sub-Saharan Africa reaffirmed their commitment to the provision and completion of basic education for all. Today, however, the majority of the region's education systems are far from achieving these goals, and the challenges implicit in this commitment have become acute. The most critical of these is the challenge of quality: the notion of an education system of good quality implies that learners acquire the knowledge and skills provided for in the curricula, but in Africa more than two-thirds of school-age children do not acquire such knowledge and skills. Indeed, if 9 children out of 10 enter school, only 60% of them complete primary education while half of them acquire basic school competences.

3. This failure can be attributed to the misalignment between the school system and society, and first and foremost to the use of a foreign language as the sole medium of instruction. In this context, it may be recalled that, in their current form, African school systems are not the fruit of the internal development of African societies. The model for schools was imposed from outside by colonization. The ideology of colonial education denied or minimized the value of local cultures and languages, relegating them to the level of “folklore” and “dialects”. As a result, it excluded them from the scope of academic education and objective knowledge. Its role, exercised through the exclusive use of the colonial language in schools and of study programs designed in accordance with a Eurocentric vision, was to extend and complete the colonial conquest through the training, assimilation and co-option of an elite allied to the colonial power. In addition to ideologically oriented subjects such as history, literature and even geography, the scientific disciplines themselves were subordinated to this purpose. The other component was driven by the need for future auxiliary workers for the colonial government: administrative clerks, African nurses and physicians, instructors etc. The perspective provided by history allows us to see that colonial school systems, and hence curricula, were far from meeting the self-actualization needs of African societies and individuals because they were part of a non-African development plan.

4. Shortly before the era of independence, African education systems made some attempt to satisfy these needs, in particular by undertaking large-scale reforms. Concerning the curricula, it was a question of reconsidering the contents of the programs by purging them of their more shocking elements and by Africanizing the contents. Subjects such as literature, history and geography were then reoriented from this point of view without calling into question the final objectives of the education systems. Since then, many African countries have begun to experiment with adapting curricula, with diversified objectives and strategies.

5. These experiences generally take the form of appropriate responses to local or national needs that were not, or not sufficiently, taken into consideration by the existing educational model. The soundness of these curricular reforms, underlying the differences in their formulation, is connected with needs relating to: (i) developing the endogenous potential for local and national economic development through acquisition of skills related to the actual conditions and/or the possibilities for productive work in the local or national context; (ii) affirmation of cultural identity through the introduction of local and national languages, values, knowledge and heritage in the education system; (iii) the promotion of values and behavior related to hygiene, health, nutrition, the environment, family life, social cohesion and democratic citizenship, with due consideration for factors specific to the local or national context; and (iv) improvement of learning outcomes and enhancing the internal and external efficiency of education systems through reliance on a strategy of bilingualism and (v) equity in relation to specific needs and situations of underprivileged groups such as girls and others.

6. The definitions of “relevant” curricula were therefore based on (i) making curricula subject to the real conditions obtaining in learners’ socio-cultural and economic environment; (ii) establishing a continuum between experience of the local environment and school-based learning; (iii) ensuring the utility and the use of learning outcomes for and by learners in resolving basic social problems and (iv) taking into consideration the specific conditions of the learners.

7. It is necessary to promote the exchange of experiences and sharing of knowledge between the African countries in order to enrich the visions and to reinforce the actors’ capacities. This is one... Among the major challenges faced are: the use of the African languages as a medium of instruction, the skills-based approach, and taking into consideration the needs for learning of underprivileged groups as well as the integration of the gender dimension.

a. Languages of instruction: place and statute of the African languages

8. As was mentioned above, the language question is of particular importance in the African context. In addition to problems of cultural identity and value, this issue is connected with at least two other problems: that of educational efficiency and that of the use and utility of African languages.

9. Although research has demonstrated that the use of African languages is a vital factor in optimizing scholastic achievement, there remains the problem of convincing African decision-makers to incorporate them into education systems, which will be far from easy in view of the skepticism expressed by most such decision-makers.

10. The operational aspect of learning also needs to be considered, since learners have a restricted field of opportunity to turn their educational accomplishments to account. Whereas in the past a rift formed between the school system and society, reflection along these lines should make it possible to bring schools closer to their social, cultural and economic environment.

b. Learning strategies: the skills-based approach (SBA)

11. It must be recalled, first and foremost, that the history of school curricula in sub-Saharan Africa has, with few exceptions, followed the same path as that of Northern countries, and notably the former colonial powers. In most countries, school programs focused on teaching encyclopedic content, i.e. various subjects juxtaposed with no obvious linkages among them, have gradually given way to an approach focused on educational goals. More recently, since the 1990s, we have been seeing fairly broad acceptance of the SBA in both North and South.

12. The SBA is often regarded as the keystone of most current efforts to reform education. According to the prevailing view, the effectiveness of pre-existing programs was compromised by the fact that teachers “fragmented” the knowledge transmitted to pupils, to the extent that children are not capable today of integrating what they know into significant aggregates of knowledge. The blame has been put on the fragmentation of goals, or, more precisely, on a certain goals-based approach recommended in previous official programs.

13. To try to get programs back on the right track, education specialists and governments have turned to the SBA, a new approach still in the experimental stage in a number of countries. This approach is widely judged to be the best working hypothesis available for inducing pupils to integrate what they are taught and to turn their resources to account to resolve problem situations presented by the teacher, and subsequently to resolve complex situations relating to their daily and working lives. Skills thus become the basis for the organization and integration of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values in educational programs.

c. The gender dimension

14. Approximately 80% of girls in school experience learning difficulties. The reasons for this are varied, but in most cases are related to the poor quality of service provided by public schools, which offer a grossly inadequate number of hours of instruction. Moreover, many girls, even at a very young age, are obliged to help at home or to go to work, often in situations that exploit paid child labor as servants or street sellers. These girls not only do not have time to attend school but are

also exposed to the risks that such activities may entail for their physical and moral integrity. Parents sometimes find it difficult to see the point of schooling for their daughters, and hesitate or refuse to send them to school.

15. The deadline for achieving gender parity in primary and secondary education has been reached (EFA goal 5 and MDG 3), but hardly any countries in sub-Saharan Africa have met these goals. This reflects a crucial omission in education sector programs and national EFA action plans: they do not give sufficient consideration to the gender dimension. A study conducted in 2003 of a sample of 11 such documents concluded that, although the gender issue was taken into account in legislative and regulatory instruments, sectoral programs displayed serious shortcomings because they gave absolutely no consideration to gender, neither in their diagnoses nor in the expected results and indicators, and that in most cases they included no meaningful and operational reform measures.

16. Five years after the Dakar Forum, the report produced by BREDA and the Dakar Node of the NESIS network, entitled “EFA in Africa: Paving the Way for Action”, indicates that the region has made fairly substantial but uneven improvement in indicators of access and parity over the last ten years. The primary school completion rate also shows a net positive trend, with an average rate of 0.8, although this indicator has regressed in five countries in the region. The same is true of the parity index at the primary level. However, this overall reduction in gender disparities is occurring in a context marked by sharper spatial disparities and disparities between the rich and poor.

17. Countries that are still far from achieving this goal need to make a considerable effort. This mainly concerns the French-speaking countries, where the average annual increase in this parity indicator is often low. Mali, for instance, will need 22 years to achieve gender parity in primary education if the current trend continues.

18. At the level of human and teaching resources, African countries have instituted a process aimed at making curricula and textbooks gender-sensitive. The experience of the English-speaking countries could be of great help to the French-speaking countries in this respect. Training teachers in gender issues has also begun in a good many countries. Although experiments with peer education are under way, very often on a small scale, the posting of women teachers to serve as role models has been slow to get under way in many countries, owing to barriers of various kinds.

Issues

19. What should one do to ensure that curricula are at once relevant and effective, flexible and equitable, feasible and affordable? In other words, for which pupils should the curriculum be adapted? What indicators should be used to ensure and to measure the impact and the results of the reform? How to conceive curricula for a continuous adaptation to the evolution of contexts while avoiding the diversification that leads to inequality? And how can one ensure that curricula are economically feasible while taking into account not only available resources and existing capacities but also their effective use?

20. First, regardless of the direction taken, research shows that one of the vital conditions for the effectiveness of a curriculum is that the program of study be in phase with the other components. The reason is that the goals and objectives of a curriculum are more likely to be achieved if all of its components (fields of content, teaching methods, learning activities and evaluation system) contribute to this end. Second, in a world where a country’s economic growth is increasingly linked to its ability to operate in a competitive world market and where production processes change very

rapidly, basic education curricula will have to prepare pupils to meet the needs of the economy and labor markets in the coming years, and to provide them, in addition to the skills in demand today, with the ability to adapt to the skills of tomorrow.

How can these two requirements be met?

21. Moreover, what lessons can be derived from the implementation of the SBA? This approach, which calls neither the objectives nor the content of scholastic disciplines into question, has the virtue of promoting the decompartmentalization of academic subjects and a refocusing of learning on praxis. It must be recognized, however, that the practical implementation of this approach raises many obstacles that must be overcome: the concepts need to be clarified and made operational; problem situations suited to the various cultural contexts need to be devised; evaluation methods need to be overhauled. A great deal of research and experimentation needs to be done if we are to get past the talking stage and develop programs of study based on the SBA.

22. Obviously, this option has major implications for the other main components of the education system, namely: (i) school and classroom organization; (ii) textbooks, teachers' guides and supplementary learning materials; (iii) the system and procedures for evaluation and certification of learning; and (iv) initial and in-service teacher training. In the African context, this list should also include the choice of the languages used for teaching and learning. Curricular reform is thus a huge undertaking whose complexity must not be underestimated. Indeed, as this process takes years (10 to 15 years), it requires considerable financial and human resources.

Objectives of the seminar

23. The overall objective of the workshop is to stimulate discussion concerning the development of curricula suitable for African contexts.

24. The specific objectives are:

- to identify and analyze the challenges raised by the adapting curricula processes in different countries;
- to identify and analyze successful experiences and good practices in curriculum development that can be promoted;
- to identify precisely the subjects and key experiences that can be used for analysis and document production in order to share them;
- to elaborate concepts, or adapt methodologies and tools which could be used as effective supports for curricula developers;
- to form a network for exchange of experience and sharing of knowledge among the countries involved in the process;
- to define the methodologies, procedures and work plans that should guide and structure the work of the network.

Date and venue:

25. In order to make it possible to the participants to conduct in-depth discussions, the seminar will take place over four days from the 12 to December 15 included. It will be held in Cotonou, Benin.

Participating Countries

26. In addition to Benin, the host country, the following will take part in this seminar:

- ADEA's inter-country quality node ; i.e., Djibouti, Guinea, Niger and Congo (Brazzaville)
- Burkina Faso, Mali and Senegal
- Namibia and Zambia could be invited in order to associate the Anglophone perspective to the reflection on the curricula.

Other countries could be invited provided that they satisfy the criterion of participation, namely, being engaged in the process of curriculum development.