

Background paper prepared for the
Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2003/4
Gender and Education for All: The Leap to Equality

A study on the status of education in Mauritania

Ould Boubout Houssein Mahfoud
2003

This paper was commissioned by the *Education for All Global Monitoring Report* as background information to assist in drafting the 2003/4 report. It has not been edited by the team. The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and should not be attributed to the *EFA Global Monitoring Report* or to UNESCO. The papers can be cited with the following reference: "Paper commissioned for the *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2003/4, The Leap to Equality*". For further information, please contact efareport@unesco.org

CONTENTS

I-	Introduction.....	3
II-	Analysis and assessment of progress.....	3
	II-1- EFA 1999 Assessment	3
	II-1-1 Early childhood education.....	3
	II- 1- 2 Basic education.....	3
	II- 1- 3 Literacy.....	3
	II-2- EFA Assessment after the Dakar Forum.....	4
	II-2-1 Early childhood education.....	4
	II-2-2: Basic education.....	5
	II-2-3: Literacy.....	6
	II-3: Lifelong learning.....	6
III-	Policies, strategies and reforms	7
IV-	Critical strategies for sustainability.....	11
V-	Conclusion.....	13

I Introduction

In the past decade, the Mauritanian authorities have espoused the goal of universal enrolment by the year 2000, which the international community adopted in 1990 at Jomtien (Thailand). They have made basic education central to all development programmes and have implemented an education policy since 1990 with the aid of funding agencies.

As a prelude to the Dakar Forum in April 2000, an assessment was made of progress in achieving the Jomtien goals. The assessment revealed that, in spite of the quantitative progress made, there are still quality and management problems.

On that occasion, the international community, comprised of politicians, funding agencies and civil society representatives, reaffirmed its commitment to quality education for all. It recommended drawing up action plans and undertook to ensure that any country capable of presenting a coherent and credible programme for reforming and improving its education system should not be handicapped by its financial situation.

Mauritania, which participated in the Dakar Forum on Education for All, has therefore introduced a ten-year education strategy for meeting the forum's recommendations, consolidating the achievements made over the decade and correcting the malfunctions in the education sector.

II Analysis and assessment of progress achieved:

II-1 EFA 1999 Assessment

II-1-1 Early childhood education

The pre-school enrolment ratio in kindergartens supervised by the SECF [Office of the Secretary of State for Women's Affairs] is still very low. The eleven government-run kindergartens cater for only 962 children in the 3-5 age group, divided into 36 classes, or 0.3% of children (Source: SECF 1996).

In order to ascertain the activities of the informal child-care structures now opening up, particularly in large towns, a recent survey was carried out in Nouakchott among 25 organizations catering for children aged 3-7. The survey is currently being processed and initial results will be available by the end of November 1999.

II-1-2 Basic education

The EFA assessment confirmed that Mauritania has made very substantial progress in quantitative enrolment. The gross basic education enrolment ratio rose from 53.4% in 1991-92 to 86.2% in 1998-99. During the same period, the gross female enrolment ratio increased from 47.2% to 83.5%. The rapid growth in pupil numbers, due largely to the mass enrolment of pupils in the first year of basic education, boosted the gross admission

rate from 78.4% in 1991-92 to 86.4% in 1998-99, and the gross female admission rate from 71.6% to 86.0%. During the same period, the number of schools increased from 1,309 to 2,676, the number of classrooms from 3,598 to 7,576, and the number of teachers from 3,967 to 7,366. Female enrolment, which was lagging behind in the early 1990s, has improved, and the female participation rate rose from 43% to 48%. However, the relatively high enrolment ratio is being undermined by the poor school retention rate, estimated to be 55%.

II-1-3 Literacy

In the field of literacy, measures are being undertaken to fight illiteracy on every front:

- Social mobilization and raising awareness of the damaging effects of illiteracy;
- Diversifying and continuing literacy campaigns;
- Producing educational aids;
- Training literacy workers;
- Opening permanent literacy centres;
- Creating functional literacy centres.

Further measures have been added to help the literacy policy to succeed:

- Production and simultaneous broadcasting of radio and television programmes at peak listening/viewing hours;
- Organization of advertising poster and sticker campaigns;
- Production and placement of advertising hoardings in the country's main population centres;
- Organization of information and awareness-raising meetings about the usefulness and importance of education.

This led to an increase in the number of enrolments during Ministry-run campaigns from 31,578 in 1987 to 185,194 in 1995 (of whom 108,779 were women).

The number of classes opened every year during the campaigns rose from around one hundred in 1990 to 2,040 in 1998/99, catering for 26,000 pupils in 1998/99, that is to say, an average of 13 pupils per class.

II-2 EFA Assessment after the Dakar Forum:

In order, firstly, to consolidate prior achievements and correct the malfunctions identified, and, secondly, to attain the Dakar goals, the Government has drawn up a ten-year development strategy for the sector which constitutes Mauritania's EFA strategy.

Significant results have been obtained regarding the following aspects:

II-2-1 Early childhood education

There are an estimated 330,000 plus pre-school age children (aged from 3 to 6 years), or 13.2% of Mauritania's total population. The main structured child-care institutions are public kindergartens, private kindergartens and community day nurseries. There are 12 public kindergartens catering for 1,116 children. There are an estimated 135 private kindergartens catering for 4,200 children. In addition, community day nurseries exist in some regions of Mauritania. There are an estimated 67 community day nurseries catering for 7,050 children. However, these structures cater for only around 4.5% of pre-school age children.

Although the proliferation in the number of private and community-run child-care structures in recent years has come in response to ever more pressing needs, this increase in numbers has not yet been accompanied by the requisite qualitative development, without which it is impossible for children to develop to the full.

The Department for Family and Child Affairs [Direction de la Famille et de l'Enfance] has few resources for implementing the EFA early childhood policy and its staff are in need of training in programming, planning and computing.

II-2-2 Basic education

a) Improving access

Pupil numbers rose from 346,222 in 1999-2000 to a total of 375,695 in 2001-2002, of whom 183,220 were girls, corresponding to a female participation rate of 48.7%. Over the same period, the access rate into year one of basic education grew from 90.0% to 117.3% and the female access rate rose from 89.1% to 117.5%. The gross enrolment ratio increased from 86.4% to 88.7% and the gross female enrolment ratio rose from 86.1% to 89.0 during the same period. Although the number of full-cycle schools increased in absolute terms from 537 out of a total of 2,933, to 574 out of a total of 3,204, the proportion remained stable at around 18%. During the same period, the number of schools increased from 2,798 to 3,204, the number of classrooms from 8,002 to 9,209, and the number of teachers from 7,909 to 9,604.

b) Improving quality

A decree by the minister of education defining the criteria for the assignment of teachers was adopted in October 2002. Incentive measures for teachers working in disadvantaged areas were formulated and endorsed during regional awareness-raising seminars on the National Programme for Developing the Education Sector [PNDSE] and are currently under adoption. A first application test for the teachers concerned was carried out in the final term of the 2001/2002 school year. Distance criteria were defined and applied, and a commensurate distance allowance was allocated to teachers who had been assigned to difficult areas. A review of allowances for teachers with multigrade classes is also under way.

Good progress is being made in restructuring initial training in national teaching colleges for pre-primary and primary/basic school teachers (ENIs) and in making it more vocationally-oriented. The training reference framework has been drawn up and will be endorsed in September; the decree governing teacher training and extending the duration of the training was promulgated.

The in-service training system has begun to be established with the creation of an in-service training unit for the basic studies diploma (DEF), conferring powers for in-service training to the ENIs (Decree No. 2002-O61) and allocating funding for in-service training to the wilayas [regions].

Teachers of the first and fourth years of basic education have been trained in the new programmes. In-service training for ENI trainers, inspectors and school heads has been boosted. This involved instructing ENI trainers and inspectors in Nouakchott and Aioun in the new programmes (October 2002);

A training course was held for inspectors on needs for reform and the school map.

II-2-3 Literacy

On the whole, the existing literacy system boasts a number of strengths. Firstly, there has been a general recognition of the need to build **a new literacy strategy** that is able to **harness all efforts** to reduce illiteracy and, secondly, the fight against illiteracy has been made **a priority** at all levels of the Mauritanian State.

Indeed, an estimated 141,140 adults have been taught how to read and write, 76,372 of whom were women, with 70.2% of women having been taught basic literacy.

NB: Little information is available concerning the early childhood education and literacy sectors. The only information comes from the 1999 EFA report. Although updates are often made when preparing development programmes, these are neither exhaustive nor readily available.

II-2-4 Lifelong learning

There are several forms of lifelong learning in Mauritania aimed at improving people's living conditions. These activities benefit from a sustained political will under the auspices of the high authorities.

Indeed, the Head of State himself instigated and launched a nationwide campaign on the theme "knowledge for all". The aim of the campaign is to raise people's awareness of the need to recognize the changes arising from globalization and the opportunities offered by mastering science and technology, which are a shared heritage of humanity available to all societies with the will to take advantage of it.

Mobile vocational training teams travel between towns and villages the length and breadth of Mauritania. The teams set up local support structures for developing skills to match people's needs in connection with the social and economic changes arising from new investment programmes that require changes in behaviour.

Vocational training centres have been created throughout Mauritania and provide many different types of training to pupils in the final years of the 1st and 2nd cycles, to people excluded from the education system and to workers seeking qualifications.

Mahadras training centres have been created in three Mauritanian towns and provide specialized training to pupils coming out of the Mahadras [Koranic schools], chiefly in mechanics, computing, joinery and so on.

Civil society, the media and the Mosque imams are mobilizing behind campaigns against AIDS, drugs and the damaging effects of illiteracy, and in defence of human rights, child protection, female enrolment and the advancement of women.

School curricula include numerous aspects of education for a better life, such as family life education, education in population problems, the environment, health, nutrition, civic instruction, and so on.

III Policies, strategies and reforms

In the wake of the Jomtien conference, the Government embarked on a policy to improve access to and the relevance of the education system. As a result, several development plans have been implemented since Jomtien. The Education III project, funded by the World Bank, embodied the Jomtien goals and significant results have been achieved, including building classrooms, recruiting teachers and improving the management of the education system.

The Education V project was started up in 1995-2000, following on from previous projects. The aim was to consolidate and develop the results and achievements of these programmes with the support of the International Development Agency, "the main thrust of which is to continue to establish an education system that promotes strong cultural roots, guarantees social emancipation and allows top level national expertise to emerge, whilst at the same time meeting Mauritania's specific requirements." The development of basic education is still the top priority. The specific aim is to increase the ability to cater for all six to eleven year-olds by the year 2000, whilst at the same time improving education services (curricula, aids and teachers). The strategies developed within this framework aim to: for basic education, continue a school building programme co-funded by the public authorities, (b) control of unit costs more effectively; (c) improve school curricula; (d) implement a policy of initial and further training for teachers and managers; (e) continue the system of distributing school textbooks; and (f) improve the planning and management of human and material resources.

While the progress achieved over the decade has been significant in quantitative terms, the quality of education, which is an important factor in the system, is diminishing. To improve this situation, the Government has introduced a sweeping reform of the education system - the fourth since independence. The previous reforms (1967, 1973, 1979) focused mainly on adapting the system to its socio-cultural environment, in response to the heated debate on languages. This course of action reached its climax with the 1979 reform creating two separate branches, one Arabic and the other French-speaking. This resulted in declining standards in the sciences and second languages, especially French, as borne out by various assessments (1989, 1990, 1998), as well as higher unit costs.

While the 1999 reform maintains the importance of Arabic and the national culture, it steers the system along the path of modernization and openness, to put schools at the service of development. The changes were introduced as part of a policy for improving quality:

- Unification of the system by abolishing the linguistic branches created by the 1979 reform;
- Extension of the first cycle of secondary education from three to four years;
- Strengthening of science teaching and an introduction to physics and computing in the first cycle of secondary education;
- Strengthening of foreign language teaching (French, English).

This reform is underpinned by the National Programme for Developing the Education Sector (PNDSE), covering the 2001-2010 period, which includes early childhood education and literacy for the first time.

- Improving education provision and promoting retention in the system;
- Boosting the quality of teaching and learning;
- Rationalizing resource management;
- Consolidating the management of the system at all administrative echelons;
- Reducing disparities between the sexes and between regions and areas;
- Matching training to individual aspirations and the needs of society and the economy.

I Basic education policy

The basic education policy is covered by the PNDSE and will hinge upon three key activities:

I-1 Access and retention

The aim is to improve access and retention in basic education by:

- Generalizing full-cycle schools by the year 2010;
- Rationalizing staff management and assignment;
- Reducing regional disparities;
- Building around 530 classrooms per year;
- Increasing teacher numbers by around 650 per year;
- Catering for around 30,000 pupils in private schools.

I-2 Educational quality

The aim is to improve teaching quality by:

- Introducing vocationally-oriented initial and in-service training for teachers and school heads;
- Setting up incentive mechanisms for teachers assigned to disadvantaged areas;
- Gradually reducing the pupil/teacher ratio from the current 48 to 40 by the year 2010;
- Implementing curricular reforms;
- Making available educational tools (handbooks, guides, teaching aids, etc.);
- Establishing a school textbook policy to make textbooks available to schools and planning to deregulate textbook publishing and distribution by the year 2005;
- Developing teaching assessment practices in the classroom.

I-3 Female enrolment

The aim is to improve the environment for female enrolment by:

- Developing special measures to encourage the enrolment of girls and keep them in the education system by reducing the handicaps which they face in both schooling and examinations;
- Increasing female enrolment in basic education in regions where there are marked gender gaps;
- Introducing incentive policies in order to increase the number of girls in secondary and higher education.

II Early childhood education policy

The policy for early childhood education is covered by the PNDSE and will hinge upon the following key activities:

- Supporting the development of community initiatives for early childhood education;
- Setting up a training system for developing early childhood education;
- Reinforcing early childhood resource centres;
- Developing institutional expertise in managing early childhood education structures.

III Literacy policy

The literacy policy is covered by the PNDSE and will hinge upon the following key activities:

- Identifying the people concerned based on the general population census;
- Mobilizing all operators in fighting illiteracy;
- Diversifying support instruments (by involving the mahadras, experimenting with mobile literacy units, consolidating literacy campaigns and improving the performance of permanent literacy centres);
- Mastering and developing literacy engineering;
- Improving communication support.

IV Critical strategies for sustainability

It is important to look beyond prior achievements to strategies for sustainability. This means devising strategies to predict threats that could jeopardize the attainment of the EFA goals.

These strategies were identified under the National Programme for Developing the Education Sector [PNDSE].

The strategies include:

- A continuing commitment by the public authorities and the international community to Education for All, essentially in aid of poor countries;

- Developing integrated programmes like the PNDSE that take into account the full range of EFA sectors. This avoids taking a sectarian view that might stand in the way of attaining the EFA goals;
- Heavily involving the beneficiary structures in implementing the planned measures. This means focusing special attention on decentralization, since it could increase the involvement of beneficiaries;
- Creating a framework of consultation between the sectors concerned, funding agencies and communities through parents' associations, which play a decisive role in sustaining progress, by enrolling and keeping pupils in school, maintaining schools and participating in school management;
- Making decision-makers and politicians keenly aware of EFA goals and compulsory schooling legislation.
- Ensuring that those responsible for implementation take ownership of the approach;
- Setting up a mechanism for monitoring and assessing EFA in order to gauge progress and correct any imbalances.

V Conclusion

The Jomtien conference has clearly acted as a strong catalyst for education in Mauritania. It has led to significant progress in quantitative terms, thanks to efforts by the public authorities and to strong community support for education over the past decade.

The main goals for education in the next decade will be to consolidate prior achievements and to improve the quality of education in Mauritania.

The only means for achieving these goals are a declared political resolve, as well as the willingness of funding agencies to support implementation of the PNDSE.

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