

# Education and poverty reduction strategies:

## Issues of policy coherence

Is there a link between education and poverty reduction? SIMEON MAILE discusses the debate, introduced at a recent HSRC colloquium on *Education and poverty reduction strategies – Issues of policy coherence*.



MOST RESEARCHERS and development practitioners agree that education leads to accelerated human development, poverty reduction and sustained economic growth. This group claims that education improves health and nutrition, benefits personal health and empowers girl children in particular. This has spin-offs for better reproductive health, lower child mortality rates and improved welfare through better nutrition and higher immunisation rates. Education may be the single most effective preventative weapon against HIV/AIDS.

The argument is that education increases productivity and earnings. Research has established that, worldwide, every year of schooling translates into increased individual income of about 10%. In poor countries, the gains are even greater.

Researchers also claim that education reduces inequality as the great 'leveller' against illiteracy – which is one of the strongest predictors of poverty. Primary education plays a catalytic role for those most likely to be poor, including girls, ethnic minorities, orphans, disabled people and rural families. By enabling larger numbers to share in the growth process, education can be the powerful tide that lifts all boats.

In contrast, there are scholars who argue that education alone does not necessarily solve development problems – poverty in particular. They point out that it persists in states rolling out education for all. Leaders who have committed themselves to meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with better educated children, equal opportunities for women and a healthier environment, have not eradicated poverty in spite of their vision for a world without poverty, hunger and disease. In many countries who record high scores on net enrolment in primary and secondary education, poverty remains a challenge.

This debate raises an important reality: the reduction of poverty is complex and needs to be approached from multiple perspectives. Yes, education can help to reduce poverty, but countries need a holistic approach to take this further. The lack of consensus among development practitioners, policy-makers and researchers may even be exacerbating the problems of poverty.

The colloquium set out to build on recent national and international conferences on poverty reduction strategies. The main argument emerging from the discussions was that human deprivations can be radically

reduced, but to harness and benefit from educational endeavours requires a coherent and concerted effort. As policy-makers, development practitioners and researchers become aware of the limitations of narrow approaches to poverty reduction, they are realising the importance of a coordinated and coherent policy.

The purpose of the colloquium was to answer the following questions:

- What impact has there been in recent years on education levels and outcomes in the general population and in specific demographic groupings?
- Where are the key gaps and areas that need strengthening in terms of the impact of education in poverty reduction?
- Which specific areas require coherence?

A case study, developed from the rich data provided by extensive literature on orphans and vulnerable children (OVC), might provide some answers to these questions from the perspective of people who live in abject poverty, and who are sliding deeper into the quagmire, posing a serious challenge to the fight against poverty.





*A primary school in Alexandra, Johannesburg.*

Yes, education can help to reduce poverty, but countries need a holistic approach to take this further.”

in approach within and across government departments.

International research and experience reveal that where governments adopt ‘whole-government’ or ‘joined-up government’ approaches and where policies among policy-makers, civil society and concerned communities converge, governments can address the plight of the poor more consistently. A break in any part of the chain that connects the whole will result in failure.

In practice, achieving full coherence in policies has proven an unrealistic goal. Yet, my plea for coherence does not mean that there is no current solution to Nthabiseng’s problems. A more modest, realistic approach that accepts a certain level of inconsistency seems to be required.

The current policy trajectory is such that different government departments will probably be able to address some of Nthabiseng’s problems. For example, the Department of Education has put policies in place that are specifically designed to address such children’s learning needs; many schools run feeding programmes; and an equity policy framework has been introduced to help overcome school-fees and uniform difficulties. These policies now need to be communicated clearly to school managers and learners, so that children will not continue to suffer even when policies in fact exist to help them.

In conclusion, the world does not come neatly packaged in issue areas, ripe for policy intervention. Policies designed to address one issue are bound to have an impact on other issues. Policy coherence takes this into account. It can be achieved and can address development problems when policies across a range of issues support, or at the very least do not undermine, the attainment of development objectives.

*Professor Simeon Maile is a research director in the Policy Analysis Unit.*

#### Case study

Nthabiseng lives 12 kilometres from her primary school and has to walk to school and back on a narrow path stretching between thick bushes. She also has to get a sibling ready for school.

There are days when she is absent from school because she has to beg from neighbours or work on farms for food. Her only decent meal is two slices of bread, which she gets from the school’s feeding scheme. Her parents have died and she now lives with her poor grandparents.

She cannot access other sources of income since she does not have a birth certificate.

To make things worse, Nthabiseng has not been able to pay school fees and for that reason her teachers refused to give her a school report. As a result, she was not promoted. Sometimes she is refused entrance to the classroom because she has no uniform.

These circumstances make her a candidate for dropping out or even falling pregnant. Recently she has begun coughing badly and is unlikely to finish primary school.

Nthabiseng’s problem is multi-dimensional. For her problems to be adequately addressed, an inter-departmental approach is needed. The Department of Education deals with problems related to schooling, such as school fees or the feeding scheme. The Department of Home Affairs do registrations for birth certificates, which will help Nthabiseng to gain access to a social welfare grant scheme. The Department of Social Development will have to help her get a grant to supplement her grandparents’ grant. The Department of Health needs to roll out health programmes for Nthabiseng to get help for her worrying cough. The Department of Transport should help overcome transport problems and the Department of Public Works should invest in infrastructure development in Nthabiseng’s village. Finally, the Department of Labour should protect children from being utilised for cheap labour.

Nthabiseng’s problems will require all these departments to work together. To align the work of different departments, priorities (as reflected in strategies, policies and budgets) and systems of the government and those of local communities should be synchronised. For an effectual answer to Nthabiseng’s needs, coherence would require consistency



# HSRC review

[www.hsrc.ac.za](http://www.hsrc.ac.za)

VOLUME 5  
No. 02 | JUN 2007

**SOUTH AFRICAN COMPANIES  
SURPRISE WITH INNOVATIONS**

