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Challenges in the primary
education in Namibia

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Sammendrag: Utdanning og utvikling blir gjerne sett som to sider av samme sak. I denne rapporten blir rasjonale bak denne sammenhengen diskutert. Rapporten tar videre opp ulike utfordringer ved grunnutdanningen i Namibia.			



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CHALLENGES IN THE PRIMARY EDUCATION IN NAMIBIA

After more than 40 years of independence for most developing countries and education being high on the political agenda both nationally and internationally, the figures are still too low when it comes to enrolment and literacy rates. Worldwide, some 104-121 million children of primary school age are not in school (Birdsall, Levine & Ibrahim 2005). Enrolment has increased: the big problem is drop-out and low performance. In Africa only 51 % of the children complete primary school according to Birdsall et. al 2005. For instance in Malawi out of 1,2 million pupils who registered for grade 1 only 300 000 finished primary education at grade 8 (Gama 2002). There are, however, still countries like some of the West African countries where non-enrolment also is a major problem.

Namibia is no exception. Despite being a signatory of the «World Declaration on Education for All» and despite legislation making primary education compulsory, the enrolment rate in Namibian schools is only 82 %, with some regional and gender differences. In addition, there is the problem of drop-out at all levels in all regions. In each grade the drop-out rate varies between 10 % and 1 %. There is an especially high drop-out rate in grades 1, 5 and 10. Thus, even though Namibia manages to keep up a high level of children starting in school, it has a problem with school leavers. In addition, results are not good. For example, it was found that at the overall national level only

25,9 % of learners reached the minimum level of mastery in reading literacy and a meagre 7,6 % reached the desirable level (SACMEQ 2004).

The aim of this article is to describe the situation in the Namibian school system and discuss school internal and external reasons for school non-participation and low results. By school non-participation is meant both non-enrolment and drop-out.

Why education for all?

Why education is important for development is a question not very often asked. It is taken for granted that it is a good thing, for the individual and for the country. Few have criticized education; the obvious value both to the individual and the society have been taken for granted. Firstly, it has been seen as a way to civilize the individual and therefore an aim in itself (Dale 1982). In classical sociological thoughts it is needed to shift values from particularism, ascription and diffuseness, to universalism, achievement and specificity. That is, a change from a traditional man to an economic man. Education was seen as fundamental in reaching these goals. In modern argumentation it is seen as part of the universal human rights as demonstrated in the UN Declaration of Human Rights. It is also seen as a means for the individual to reach other goals. The importance of this was underlined in the Jomtien declaration of 1991 which stated the aim of Basic Education for All (Närman 1998). Furthermore, achieving universal primary education is also part of the UN's Millennium Goals (UNDP 2003). Target 3 says: Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.

Secondly, universal education has been seen as an important and necessary means to the development process in any developing country (Dale 1982). The identification of lack of education as a bottleneck to development goes back to early modernization theory. The catching up process, in other words, achieving economic growth, needed an educated population. Today we find this argument in all World Bank documents on education. Education is high on all agendas because human capital is seen as important for sustainable economic growth. Dale (1982) calls this the «technical-functional theory of education». This theory argues that because economic growth is dependent

on implementation of new technology, education is a necessary means to achieve the aims. Third World countries are dependent on international aid to build up an education system. This gives the World Bank and other Western donors' great influence on their priorities.

Thus, education the population also is the Third World is an aim which all parities agreed upon, whether or not one is arguing along a human rights lane or an economic lane. The universal agreement is shown in the declarations for education for all, the millennium goals and in the priority of education in all the major donor agencies. However, empirical facts show that this aim is very hard to reach.

Some explanations

Why is it so difficult to reach the aim of education for all? This is a very simple and straightforward question: the answers, however, are very complex. Most researchers today claim that the explanations of why all children do not get through primary school in Third World countries must be sought at household level, school level and society level (Colclough et al. 2003, Eie 2003).

At the household level the main explanation is commonly the poverty explanation. The common discourse is that the reason for non-participation is mainly found in the socio-economic character of the potential pupil's household. Hungry children are more likely to drop out of school because they cannot concentrate or because they have to work instead (Avila & Gasperini 2005). The cost of school participation includes the direct cost of schooling – such as expenditure on books and uniforms – as well as opportunity cost of the child's time. One common argument is that poor households do not send their children to school because they either need their labour or that the direct cost of sending them to school is too high (Colclough et al. 2003, Arunatilake 2004). A study in Dhaka concluded that poor families did not send their children to school because they could not afford the direct costs (Jensen 2000). In Malawi enrolment figures increased when school fees were dropped in 1994 (Al-Amarrai & Zaman 2002). This is an indicator that poverty at household level is a factor hampering school attendance. Winger (2003) in addition points to findings that for poor families have opportunity

costs placed on the children. She finds that all the households in the area were dependent on their children's labour in order to survive. Late school entry prevails in many developing countries and Wils (2004) claims that this is positively correlated with early drop out.

An alternative explanation for low fulfilment rates is lack of quality and relevance of the school system in Third World countries (Dale 1982). The main reason for parents to either not send their children to school or take them out of school is because the quality of the school or the relevance of the curriculum is too low. For instance, if the child does not learn to read and write in school, why send it there? The attitude of the teachers to children from poor households might add to the decision not to send or to drop out from schools (Eie 2003). Another problem which Winger (2003) points to is the lack of relevance of the curriculum offered to Hmong children in northern Vietnam. She claims that this might be one factor affecting parents' attitude towards education. Other researchers support this by claiming that poor countries need to simultaneously increase access and improve quality in order to reach the aim of universal primary education (Birdsall, Levine & Ibrahim 2005). The two factors reinforce each other, since if schools cannot offer a quality education; parents are less likely to send their children to school.

The lack of quality in the schools (lack of school books, other learning materials and unqualified teachers) and also an insufficiency of school places are of course due to the fact that the problem is a problem in poor countries. Thus the most important remedy must be to get these countries out of poverty: then the school system will improve and the children will both come to schools and stay in schools.

Colclough et al. (2003) see all these factors as interlinked and that must all be taken into consideration to explain why children do not fulfil basic education. Low income at both household and state levels means that there are of course poor states and poor households. For poor households the direct and indirect costs mean that they do not send all their children to school. A poor state will provide insufficient school places and low school quality. That means that the motivation to send children to school will go further down.

There is a gender inequality in school enrolment, which must be explained in terms of a combination of the opportunity cost of girls' labour in the household which is higher than that of boys and the possible return in the labour market less (Colclough et al. 2003). In most African countries girls work harder in the household than boys. Their labour is needed both for household work like cooking, fetching water, firewood and in the fields (Wikan 1982). In addition, according to many writers, the labour market is male-biased in the gender and development field (Stromquist 1995). Hence, when households have to make a decision as to which children they should send to school they choose boys.

The Namibian school system

Namibia inherited an education system based on apartheid. Thus they had to make total changes in the whole educational system. All curricula have been rewritten and the medium of instruction changed to English from Afrikaans. In addition they have focused on highly progressive, learner-centred methodologies of teaching. According to several sources there has been increasing concern about the quality of education (SACMEQ 2004).

The Namibian school system has 12 Grades divided into four phases: Lower Primary (Grades 1-4), Upper Primary (Grades 5-7), Junior Secondary (Grades 8-10) and Senior Secondary (Grades 11-12). The total number of schools in Namibia increased from 1435 in 1996 to 1584 in 2002 (EMIS 2005). This is an average annual growth of 1,4 %. Omaheke had the highest growth, 4,6 %. Namibia is divided into 8 education regions (table 1).

Table 1 Numbers of schools, learners, teachers and support staff

Region	Schools		Learners		Teachers	
	Numbers	Numbers	% female	Numbers	% female	
National	1 584	544 550	50,8%	18 782	60,6%	
<i>Education regions</i>						
Katima Mulilo	95	24 410	49,0%	1 031	46,2%	
Rundu	330	64 688	48,8%	2 272	38,6%	
Ondangwa East	373	135 716	51,8%	4 141	62,0%	
Ondangwa West	391	143 438	51,4%	4 719	66,7%	
Khorixas	109	37 633	50,6%	1 407	60,1%	
Windhoek	172	101 076	50,6%	3 650	66,3%	
Keetmanshoop	106	36 308	50,6%	1 408	65,8%	
Head Office	8	1 281	42,2%	154	75,3%	

Source: Emis 2005

Access to good quality education has top priority in the Education Policy in Namibia. Figures for increase in number of schools, number of qualified teachers and number of pupils are impressive. However, there are several problems and a long way to fulfil the political aim which is good quality education for all Namibian children. There are children who never enrol in school, there are problems with dropouts and there are problems with the quality of the education given.

Non-fulfilments of primary education

Official figures claim a gross enrolment rate of 98 %, there were no significant differences between male and female enrolment (EMIS 2005). Other sources say that 5 % never enrol (Mutorwa 2004). The figures obviously are hard to find, but one can conclude that Namibia differs from many other countries in this region which have a big problem with non-enrolment. In addition, it is important to remember that with widespread over-age enrolment implies that many school-aged children do not enrol.

According to Namibia's Constitution, everyone should be in school until they complete Grade 7 or reach the age of 16. However, this aim is not completely reached as dropout is a problem in all grades (table 2). About 4 % drop out before they reach upper primary. The highest number in fact drop out during grade 1. The Grade 7 promotion rate is the transition rate from primary to secondary education. This transition rate was 77 % between 2001 and 2002. It should be noted that the school-leaving rates in grades 8 and 9 were higher than that in Grade 7, indicating that a higher percentage of learners made the transition from primary to secondary than between the first grades of secondary education. A large number of learners left school after the Junior Secondary Certificate examination at the end of Grade 10. The Grade 10 promotion rate was thus much lower than the promotion rates in other grades, and the school-leaving rate was 43 %.

Table 2 School leaving rates, grades 1-11 2001 - 2002

Grade	Total	Females	Males
Grade 1	2,3 %	2,2 %	2,4 %
Grade 2	1,0 %	0,4 %	1,5 %
Grade 3	0,8 %	0,4 %	1,1 %
Grade 4	0,1 %	0,0 %	0,3 %
Grade 5	4,6 %	3,5 %	5,6 %
Grade 6	4,4 %	3,8 %	5,0 %
Grade 7	6,5 %	5,7 %	7,3 %
Grade 8	8,2 %	8,1 %	8,3 %
Grade 9	9,3 %	9,7 %	8,8 %
Grade 10	43,4 %	44,7 %	42,0 %
Grade 11	2,3 %	3,1 %	1,4 %

Source: EMIS
2002

An extraordinary feature of Namibia's schools is that the survival rate, that is the percentages of learners expected to stay in school until they reach a particular grade, is higher for females than males. Early school leaving is a greater problem for male learners than for female learners. The survival rate to Grade 5, for instance, is 97 % for females and 94 % for males. The comparative figures for grade 8 are 83 % and 77 %, respectively.

Females had higher promotion rates and lower repetition rates than males up to Grade 6. The opposite was true for higher grades. Up to Grade 7, a higher percentage of males left school than females. The substantially higher repetition rates of male learners resulted in the differences in female and male age distribution (EMIS 2005).

There are regional differences in fulfilment percent. Regional figures might be somewhat incorrect because they do not take into account the migration flow between regions. When it comes to the percentage of children who have started in school, the Caprivi regions have the lowest rate completing lower primary, which is grade 4. Rundu Education Region has the lowest rate starting lower secondary and is also the educational region which has the lowest percentage of children fulfilling primary education. In Rundu only 40 % of those starting grade 1 fulfil grade 7 (table 3). Table 2 however, must be read just as an indicator of the real situation because there are many statistical problems connected with educational statistics in poor countries such as Namibia. The number of children in each grade, for instance, includes several cohorts, and children are dropping out and beginning again. Therefore table 2 will not give a correct picture of the chance of a child starting in grade 1 fulfilling grade 7.

This brief statistical analysis of the state of primary education in Namibia has shown several problems, problems which Namibia shares with most poor countries. Most children seem to start school; the main problem seems to be dropout. Dropout is a problem in all grades, but is especially large after grades 1, 5 and 10. In lower grades boys have a higher tendency to drop out than girls. The opposite is true for higher grades. This is the same as is found in many other poor countries. There are large regional differences in fulfilment rates among the education regions which need to be explained.

Table 3. Fulfilled school phases by education region.

	Grade 4	Grade 7	Grade 8
Katima M	63 %	73%	60%
Rundu	67 %	40%	41%
Ondangwa E	88 %	81%	71%
Ondangwa W	94 %	83%	79%
Khorixas	76 %	60%	64%
Windhoek	87 %	70%	69%
Keetmanshoop	83 %	70%	67%

Source: EMIS 2005

Quality of the education system

In the present debate quality of education has become a complex concept (Ross & Genevois 2006). It means more than that the learners should reach a certain level of competence in reading, writing, mathematics and other subjects. In the present debate skills like becoming a democratically minded individual and relevance of the education content for the society at large are also discussed. However, in this article I will concentrate on the performance level related to the subjects and aims of the Namibian schools.

According to official policy statements, Namibia should be moving towards a knowledge-based economy, and in order to reach this goal the quality of education in Namibia will need to be improved. The Ministry of Education has expressed concern regarding the general low performance of learners in Namibian schools. Many learners in Namibia struggle to master reading, writing and mathematical skills. Research results from a survey conducted by the Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) clearly demonstrated that there are serious gaps in the reading competencies of learners in upper primary phases. This survey included several countries, amongst others Namibia, Swaziland, Malawi, Zambia and Mozambique. For Namibia, all educational regions were included and it was

found that the majority of learners did not reach the minimum mastery in reading English based on the criteria as determined by the Namibian reading specialists. For example, it was found that at the overall national level only 16,9 % of learners reached the minimum level of mastery in reading literacy and a meagre 6,7 % reached the desirable level. By minimum level is meant that the pupil barely will survive the next year of schooling; by desirable that he/she will definitely succeed. These results are worse than in 1995, when the figures were 22,7 % and 7,8 % respectively (SACMEQ 2004).

The reading competence of learners from «low» socio-economic groups was also much lower than that of learners from high socio-economic groups (SACMEQ 2004). These findings are in accordance with Mbenzi's (1997) who finds that pupils from poor families, with illiterate parents and with poor command of English have greater difficulties in learning to read and write than pupils from a more resourceful background. He furthermore claims that the policy of automatic promotion and the great preference for English above the mother tongue among many parents add to the problem of pupils reaching higher grades without being able to read and write. The official policy in Namibia is that teachers are teaching in the pupils' mother tongue up till grade 4 and English being thought as a second language. Namibia has 8 national languages which are thought in lower primary. From grade 5 onwards, all instruction will be in English, which is the official language. However, as Mbenzi emphasises, there are many pupils who are not taught in their mother tongue. The reasons are diverse: the parents prefer English, migration means that there are several mother tongues in one class or the teacher is not able to speak the language in question.

Namibian pupils grade 6 scored relatively poorly compared to pupils from other countries in the region (table 4). The study tested the pupils in reading and mathematics competence.

In reading Namibian pupils were third from the bottom, in mathematics at the very bottom. In a study of the teacher competence the same study found that their skills were very poor compared to teachers in most of the neighbouring countries. So, low quality of teacher education or lack of qualified teachers might be one reason behind the poor learning outcome. There was also a decline in reading scores between 1995 and 2000 (SACMEQ 2004).

Table 4 Reading and mathematics results, Regional figures,

	Reading	Mathematics
Seychelles	582,0	554,3
Kenya	546,5	563,3
Tanzania	545,9	522,4
Mauritius	536,4	584,6
Swaziland	529,6	516,5
Botswana	521,1	512,9
Mozambique	516,7	530,0
South Africa	492,3	486,1
Uganda	482,4	506,3
Zanzibar	478,2	478,1
Lesotho	451,2	447,2
Namibia	448,8	430,9
Zambia	440,1	435,2
Malawi	428,9	432,9

SACMEQ 2004

There were extremely large variations between regions (table 5), with the northern regions of the country showing the lowest scores. The poorest results were measured in Ohangwena, Caprivi and Omusati, where 4,3 % reached the minimum level and only 1,1 % and 0,5 % reached the desirable level of mastery. Other northern regions were almost as bad as these. The pupils in the capital region of Khomas on the other hand, have the highest scores with as many as 63,7 % of the pupils reaching the minimum level and 35,3 % desirable level of mastery. The largest number of pupils is in the north; about 2/3 of the population in Namibia live in the Northern provinces. Surprisingly, in these northern regions not all the teachers reached the desirable level of reading competence and in Omaheke more than 20 % did not reach the minimum level.

Table 5 Percentage of pupils reaching minimum and desirable reading levels of mastery. Regions in Namibia.

	Reaching minimum level	Reaching desirable level
Caprivi	4.2	1.1
Erongo	52.3	25.1
Hardap	49.4	23.4
Karas	45.9	16.2
Kavango	7.5	0.5
Khomas	63.7	35.3
Kunene	16.2	3.5
Ohangwena	3.4	0.2
Omahake	11.6	1.1
Omusati	4.4	0.2
Oshikoto	10.0	5.6
Otjozondjupa	26.7	12.1
Oshana	11.0	1.2

SACMEQ 2004

A test of performance in English and Mathematics among grade 4 learners in Tsumeb, Oshikoto region confirmed the general results from table 5. The test was taken in three different schools and the average result was 30 % correct answerers in the mathematics test. However, an interesting result was the variation among schools. The children in one school scored 25 % and in the best school 42 %. There were major differences between these three schools when it came to factors such as school fees, number of educated teachers and learning material. However, none of the learners scored more than 52 % in a math test that was originally meant for grade 3. An English test given to grade 7 gave the same results. Generally the performance was below the desirable level and the learners in the best equipped school did significantly better than the learners from the poorest school.

Location of the school is another factor interlinked with the bad results for the Northern provinces. Pupils attending isolated rural schools had a

significantly lower score than pupils from urban schools. The figures were 4,5 % and 53,1 % reaching minimum level of reading and 0,2 % and 27,1 % desirable level. It would have been interesting to investigate the reasons for these major differences between rural and urban pupils' performance in general and the isolated rural schools more specifically. One factor to be looked further into would be how the scattered settlement pattern and lack of transportation facilities might influence the learners' time to study compared to learners which live in urban areas in relatively close vicinity to the school.

CONCLUSION

Namibia has an ambitious education policy. Keywords are access and equity and good quality. At Independence in 1990 the new government inherited an apartheid education system which meant that the majority of blacks had inferior education in general and poor command of English in particular. In addition the education authorities had to take into consideration that the country had a very complex language situation with many different Bantu and other languages. Given this context it is not surprising that there are several problems in the education system. Non-enrolment seems not to be a substantial problem, even though the official figures might be on the positive side. Dropout on the other hand, is a big problem. On the national level about 17-20 % of the pupils enrolled in grade 1 do not fulfil primary education. In addition, there are severe regional differences, with the Rundu province showing results in the range of only 40 %. It is the same province which also shows the lowest scores in the national test of reading and writing performance. In general national scores are low with the lowest ones in the Northern provinces.

Quality education for all is far from fulfilled in Namibia. There is a major problem with low quality and hence low performance in the Namibian education system. There seems to be a number of reasons for this, the language situation being one, low quality of education in general another, and lack of qualified teachers and reading material a third. In addition to this one should also look into the socioeconomic background of the learners in order to be able to explain the huge differences in performance between rural and urban areas and among regions in the country.

The findings from Namibia are typical for the situation in Africa where school quality is generally low. Non-enrolment, dropout and low quality of education are interlinked factors. Studies shows that low quality leads to more people dropping out. High rates of drop out are a major problem in Africa South of Sahara (Colclough et al. 2003). In about half the countries in the region less than three quarters reach grade 5 (ibid). So the problem of low grade 1 enrolments is compounded by high rates of dropout and low performance of those who stay in school. Studies show that low quality of education is one reason for parents not sending their children to school (Colclough et al. 2003). Other reasons are low household income, direct cost and opportunity costs of the children's labour.

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