

Educational reconstruction in Rwanda

by Anna Obura

Before the genocidal events of 1994, Rwanda's education system mirrored and reinforced the country's destructive trends. Has post-war education policy succeeded in promoting national unity, reconciliation and tolerance?

History is all important in Rwanda. To interpret education in Rwanda without considering history is to fail to describe the experience of Rwandan childhood. Since the introduction of modern schooling there has been disequilibrium as large social groups have at one time or another felt excluded from schools and been deprived of education on grounds of social group or regional identity. The experience of exclusion from education has been a critical factor in fuelling conflict.

Pre-genocide Rwanda used a discriminatory quota system for entry into schools - based on social group and regional criteria rather than on scholastic performance. The education system was particularly targeted during the conflict. Teachers and other educated people were singled out for assassination and pupils and teachers were both victims and perpetrators of the genocide in state and church schools. Schools were ransacked and destroyed as was the Ministry of Education. Few teachers survived. Little documentation or

school supplies remained. Hundreds of thousands of households were left headed by children.

Repatriated children remember the poor quality of teaching in the refugee camps and the lack of materials. Those who were in exile in the Congo regret that schooling was not authorised for most of their stay. The exiles were acutely aware of being unlike their hosts, of their disadvantaged status and of the need to hide their identities and their difference. They were overjoyed to return home, relieved to be free to be Rwandans again, to speak their own language openly and able to stop having to pretend not to be Rwandan. They were thus ready to put up with some of the shortcomings of the Rwandan school system

that they found on their return. Post-war education policy has promoted national unity and reconciliation, prioritising equity of provision and access and encouraging a humanitarian culture of inclusion and mutual respect. Discrimination has been outlawed and the classification of learners and teachers by Hutu, Tutsi or Twa affiliation has been abandoned.

Under strong state leadership, supported by parental and pupil determination to restore education, noteworthy achievements have been made in primary-school enrolment in a comparatively short time. Secondary enrolments have also increased significantly, mainly owing to the rapid expansion of private schools. Central budgetary allocations for education have increased, reducing the burden on communities and parents. Education planners have recognised the need to reduce drop-out and repetition rates. The major shortfall is the continuing challenge to provide accessible, relevant education for the poorest and particularly for child-headed households. One in four children of primary school age remains out of school.

The Rwandan curriculum has been the subject of much debate. Rwandan history is still not taught in schools today despite official encouragement to teach those elements of history which are not in dispute. Rwanda is simply not yet ready to tackle the revision of the history curriculum, although national and international historians continue to produce new and exciting findings on Rwanda's social history. Since 1994 no history textbooks have been written.

Rwanda is showing that Education for All has a unique role to play in a country which has been torn apart by discrimination and exclusion and where the education system was used as an instrument of social destruction. The lesson to be learned is that the time for EFA is now: the state needs to reach out to every child, in every circumstance, with something that she or he can call school and to demonstrate to all children that they

are, each one of them, the concern of the state.

Globally applicable lessons from Rwanda's experience suggest the importance of:

- analysing the shortcomings and/or crimes of the previous education system, declaring a new policy and immediately providing visible and tangible evidence of a changed school experience
- first restarting familiar school programmes - trimmed to essentials - rather than innovative inputs
- lightening curricula so as to concentrate on fundamentals first and to 'clear space' for subsequent curriculum innovation
- clear definition of the roles and tasks of different ministries and agencies
- mobilising local resources through coordination with religious organisations and local authorities
- flexible exceptions to rules: one-off kick-start payments and food rations to teachers in 1994 were crucial
- creating new smaller schools to reach out to isolated homesteads
- recognising that physical rehabilitation of schools takes time: by 2002, eight years after recovery began, only half of Rwanda's classrooms were constructed of permanent materials
- prioritising delivery of essential low-cost, locally-available supplies: blackboards, chalk and slates must come first
- follow-up mechanisms at community level to ensure children most

in need do not drop out

- sharing information with non-governmental educationalists in religious and private schools
- making timely decisions on textbook revision and delivery: without teaching materials, syllabuses will not be taught and teachers will avoid difficult or sensitive topics
- realising that the structure of the education system is as much a source of learning as syllabus topics: if the aim is to teach equity, schools must practise it through transparent entrance mechanisms, abolition of corporal punishment and relationships of respect within the school
- training teachers to deal with traumatised adolescents
- early commencement of discussions on how to teach history.

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Adult literacy training for returnees, Rwanda.

