

# Education crisis in south Sudan

by Tim Brown

*Education flourished in refugee camps but young people repatriating to south Sudan are frustrated by a serious shortage of educational opportunities, particularly in secondary education.*

John Garang spoke of his ambition to ensure universal primary education in south Sudan within six years. However, the legacy of 21 years of conflict and underfunding is daunting. Fewer than 200 of the 1,600 schools in southern Sudan have permanent buildings.<sup>1</sup> Most classrooms have only a board and chalk. According to UNICEF just one in five children of primary school age is enrolled,<sup>2</sup> dropout rates are high – especially for girls – and only one schoolchild in eight continues past grade four. Half of the region's teachers have received no professional training and most have themselves completed only about four years of primary education. According to the USAID-funded Sudan Basic Education Programme,<sup>3</sup> a mere 2,500 children – in a region larger than most countries in the world and with a population estimated to be 7.5 million – complete primary school each year. Only 1% of girls complete primary education and only one schoolchild in four is a girl. The lack of female teachers – just 6% of the teaching force – reinforces this gender imbalance. Ninety per cent of women are estimated to be illiterate.

Since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, the town of Juba – former and new capital of the south – has become a magnet for returning students at both primary and secondary levels. Students coming back from asylum countries and from SPLM-controlled areas of Sudan are desperate to receive free education in a government school.

The vast majority of returnee students are English-speaking. Before the war most secondary schools in Juba used English as the medium of instruction but now there is only one 'English pattern' government secondary school in the whole of the south – Juba Day school. As all returnee secondary students are sent to enrol there, Juba Day has doubled in student numbers and is at saturation point. The school operates in

two shifts. The teachers – who have not been paid for two months – have taken on an extra afternoon shift without extra pay and in late July went on strike for adequate compensation. As the authorities have stopped further enrolment there is a growing mass of frustrated returnee students. There are similar problems at the only English-pattern government primary school in Juba, Buluk 'A' Basic, where some classes now have 180 pupils.

Despite the desperate situation, there are seeds of hope. Students are moving freely between SPLM areas and former Khartoum-controlled areas in search of better education. Returning students and teachers can bring much needed skills, attitudes and positive female role models. Returning refugees have generally received a better education than those who stayed behind. Returnee students are said to be better behaved and both returnee teachers and students speak better English, while the stayees speak better Arabic. They have much to learn from each other.

The education system in south Sudan needs enormous help. It is recommended that:

- 'returnee' schools be given immediate assistance, according to the priorities set by school managements and education authorities
- agencies support schools outside Juba to relieve the congestion in Juba town and provide boarding facilities to attract female students
- agencies work with education authorities to establish policies to address quality and huge gender gaps in enrolment and attainment
- assistance be given to provide south Sudan with much needed teachers and teacher training
- support be provided to develop and procure English-language textbooks and provide intensive language training
- non-formal education programmes be developed to

address issues such as HIV/AIDS awareness, life skills and peace education, particularly for out-of-school youth

- donors support the re-establishment of the university in Juba, to attract diaspora southern Sudanese and help develop a skilled workforce
- literacy programmes be targeted at adults who missed out on education to make them aware of its value and why they should send their children, including girls, to school
- girls and women be given priority for further education and teaching opportunities.

Secondary education (including technical and vocational education) is of paramount importance. It enhances protection, provides opportunities for girls, discourages early marriage, keeps youth out of trouble and produces skilled workers. Donors must not neglect secondary and other forms of post-primary education in this critical transitional period.

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1. The south Sudan statistics quoted in this paragraph do not cover the garrison towns formerly controlled by Khartoum.

2. [www.womenwarpeace.org/sudan/docs/base-line.pdf](http://www.womenwarpeace.org/sudan/docs/base-line.pdf)

3. [www.careusa.org/careswork/projects/SDN093.asp](http://www.careusa.org/careswork/projects/SDN093.asp)



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