Severely handicapped by 40 years of institutional instability, the education system in Guinea-Bissau is in a critical situation. Almost half of children of compulsory school attendance age are absent from school. This negligence is often due to the scarcity of schools offering the full curriculum, which leads to extensive dropout. In the face of huge challenges, the financial resources at the country's disposal seem pitiful. Out of the meagre state budget, the portion earmarked for education is one of the lowest in Africa, forcing households themselves to meet the greater share of the country's educational expenditure, even though 70% of the population live below the poverty line. Unfortunately and not surprisingly, the quality of education is also substandard, especially in mathematics, a subject in which children's school attainment is one of the lowest among countries in similar circumstances. And a particularly disturbing feature as regards the future is that teachers themselves have an inadequate knowledge of their subjects: they are able to answer only half of the questions in mathematics arising from the syllabus of their pupils in the fifth year of primary education. This low school attainment level combined with low enrolment ratios pegs back the knowledge of a big proportion of the population to such a limited level that the country's prospects of economic take-off are bleak. Indeed, the school sector in Guinea-Bissau is in need of so much reform that one might well ask whether the education system is not simply due for a radical overhaul. It is now vital to seize the opportunity arising from the recent return to political stability to introduce priority reforms.

Schools in Guinea-Bissau are chronically vulnerable. Instability has been a constant feature of the country since it gained independence 40 years ago. Power at the top has successively changed hands with the regular renewal of management staff in ministries, including the Ministry of Education. This political instability has deeply undermined the public administration of a country with almost incalculable needs: life expectancy is 50 years, 70% of the population live below the poverty line, and 50% of adults can neither read nor write. The social and health situation is so critical as to place the country close to the bottom of the human development index ranking of the United Nations Development Programme (176th out of 187 countries).

Schools in particular are affected by this generally precarious situation. With the education system facing strong pressure from the 40% of the population aged under 17, it is also up against a very high level of food insecurity, frequent strike threats on the part of teachers and a high risk of flooding in many schools.

Households bear the brunt of financial support for education

On top of this alarming state of affairs comes a glaring lack of financial support for education. In a poor country in which GDP per capita is around $700, internal state resources account for only 7% of GDP, a very low level and one third of the average for the African continent. And with regard to these scant resources, education is not a priority, since the share of the budget earmarked for it (13% in 2013) is half that of countries with comparable assets.

In 2013, the state spent on average 18,000 CFA francs (under $40) for each child able to attend school, which is not enough to provide all children with a sound quality teacher of basic education. Under these circumstances, families have to draw on their own resources to pay for the education of their children. On average this household contribution is greater than the state one, accounting for 63% of total educational expenditure, a proportion well above that pertaining elsewhere in Africa (24%).
School education held back by lack of a proper infrastructure

Guinea-Bissau has an abnormally low level of full school provision. With 60% of children completing the six years of primary school, the country is far from achieving the goal of education for all, which is nevertheless regarded as the minimum for achieving sustainable literacy. Dropout from school is attributable to three factors in particular: belated school entrance (children in Guinea-Bissau enter school on average four years later than the officially specified age); excessive repetition of school years by pupils (over 20% of those in primary school); and the very few schools offering the full six-year primary curriculum (just 25% of schools). This last factor perfectly illustrates the country’s lack of infrastructure: half of the children in Guinea-Bissau study in schools not offering those six years. In other words, one out of every two children who enter school will not complete their primary education at the institution concerned.

Dropout also peaks at the entrance to secondary education, since the number of collèges (lower secondary schools) is largely inadequate, particularly outside the main urban centres. In Guinea-Bissau almost 45%, in all, of children of school attendance age remain absent from school.

The general lack of schools is compounded by failings in terms of standards and reliable textbooks, which are commonplace shortcomings in Guinea-Bissau. For example, there are no recognized standards for school buildings, no criteria for the establishment of teaching groups, and no vocational training qualifications frameworks. These inadequacies are detrimental to daily management of the education system. What educational or training standards should apply to secondary school provision when there is no official curriculum at this level? How can the quality of a vocational training programme be officially recognized if the Ministry has no formal quality assurance arrangements? The general lack of norms and standards thwarts development of the system.

Teachers are not fully competent in the subjects they teach

The quality of learning is also in a critical situation. While the second-year primary school attainment of children in Guinea-Bissau, whether in language competence or mathematics, is – according to national evaluations – broadly similar to that of comparable countries, they obtain one of the lowest scores on completion of five years of primary school. This means that in the space of three years, these pupils have fallen behind their counterparts in neighbouring countries. In all likelihood, schools in Guinea-Bissau do not enable them to learn as fast.

A further very disturbing matter partly accounting for the poor quality of education is that teachers themselves lack competence in their subjects. At a level corresponding to the fifth year of primary education, teachers fail to answer a quarter of the questions on Portuguese and under a half of those in mathematics arising from the syllabus for their pupils.

It should be remembered that the situation of teachers is insecure and that the teaching profession is struggling to find qualified candidate teachers. For example, new entrants who are state employees were paid for only six months in 2013, while contract teachers taught for only 7 months instead of 10. In addition, where teachers are paid, this is at a very low level compared to that of countries of similar wealth, and in conditions in which they cannot work to full effect, mainly because of a lack of teaching equipment and materials.

Low enrolment levels and weak attainment combined hold out little hope for the economic take-off of the country or for alleviating poverty. According to existing studies, a person actively engaged in the labour market has an educational level lower than that reached on completing the fourth year of primary school... This situation is undesirable both for individuals and the country’s economy as it fails to provide for any improvement in forms of productivity conducive to economic take-off. At the top end of the education system, the situation is also tough for the most educated students who struggle to find employment in line with their wishes. Despite very low unemployment, 30% of higher education graduates have difficulty finding a job (25% in the case of those successfully completing secondary education).

In terms of so many aspects, so much remains to be done that just tinkering with the education system will very definitely not be enough to improve the situation of schools in Guinea-Bissau. It is vital to take advantage of the restored political stability apparent since 2014 to implement in-depth reform of the system and the priority actions required. Fully aware of the situation, the national authorities supported by national and international players in education have activated a process whose eventual goal is overall reform of the system, through the adoption of a ten-year strategy to develop the education sector.

This note contains a selection of the main messages from the Diagnosis of the Guinea-Bissau Education System, with a view to redeveloping schools in line with new principles. This report which was published in 2016 and coordinated by a national staff team in the republic of Guinea-Bissau, received technical assistance from GPE, UNICEF and the IIEP: UNESCO Pôle de Dakar.

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