

Madagascar – Achieving Equality in Education

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INTRODUCTION

The new wave of globalisation does not allow Madagascar to stay apart from the World. Situated between the Indian Ocean and the Mozambique Channel, to the east of Africa, Madagascar is ranked as part of the developing world, struggling with poverty and a high illiteracy rate. The country covers 587,000 km² and has a population of 17,000,000.

Madagascar, like most other countries, wishes to offer equality in education to all its children of school going age. In fact, the educational policy indicates that education is the most important factor in the development process, a tool to be used against poverty, and a way to promote real independence, for the country, for the community, and for each citizen. New challenges and strategies for change have been developed and are applied in every field, amongst them equal access to education.

This paper focuses on Madagascar. The first part deals with the attitudes and policies of the Government regarding equality in education. The second on strategies presently applied in the field of education. The last will focus on obstacles that are experienced and strategies to promote further relevant changes.

1. ATTITUDES AND POLICIES

1.1 *Rights and education of children in Madagascar*

When speaking about education and the rights of children, we always refer to the Convention on the Right of Child (1989) and the World Declaration on Education for All (1990). Based on these documents, the Malagasy Government has the objective to

ensure that foundational education is available for every child of school going age and that 97% of the children are in full time education by 2015.

To achieve this goal, the Malagasy Government promulgated laws relevant to the Convention and Declaration.

Madagascar's attitude is to co-operate with the UN, UNESCO and UNICEF, because we cannot work alone to reach this goal.

The Ministry of Education offers a school kit to every pupil in primary schools, whether they are in public or private schools, to provide them with the basic needs. It also pays the school fees of all primary school pupils. This arrangement offers an opportunity to every child of school going age, to attend school and to study. By so doing the goal to achieve equality in education is taken a major step forward.

There is also an effort from the Ministry of Education to provide the same teaching manuals to all primary schools. That allows teachers throughout the country to cover the same curriculum and to use the same teaching material.

1.2 National education policy in Madagascar

The Malagasy Government's efforts to realise equality in education is based on the internationally accepted concept of "education for all". The first priority is primary school education and all relevant quantitative and qualitative aspects. Primary education will be improved by focusing on decentralisation of primary school education raising the number of children in schools.

To reach the goal of education for all, the Ministry recruits and trains teachers and builds classrooms with the cooperation of local communities. They also provide teaching material for every school, to support the curriculum according to each level of child development.

The Ministry of Education uses a management system of improved data collection, defined responsibilities of every structure, and decentralise decision making. This strategy includes community participation with partnership and contracts between the state, the community and people responsible for education in specific the education district.

Because it is important for this topic, we will now focus on the education of children with disabilities.

1.3 Education of children with disabilities in Madagascar

Despite the intention of the national policy and the laws, people with disabilities are not given the same privileges as non-disabled people. However, in the spirit of equality in education, the school programmes for visually disabled children and sighted children are the same.

A positive development is that the number of children with visual impairment who go to school and obtain degrees, are increasing and the number of centres where people with disabilities are accommodated have also increased. A group of students with visual impairment are integrated in schools for sighted learners. During exams they write with their sighted student friends and their papers are transcribed into Braille. That is one way to reach equality in education in Madagascar.

Let us have look more specifically at the education of children with visual impairment.

1.4 School for visually impaired children in Madagascar

Talking about the education for children with visual impairment is rather a delicate subject in a country like Madagascar, even if the official national education policy claims to be “education for all”. In fact, equality of education for the Malagasy Government does not really include those who have special educational needs. Blind children receive exactly the same school kits as sighted children, but unfortunately they do not really provide in their needs.

The education of handicapped children is mainly supported by associations and NGOs. Years ago the Malagasy Lutheran Church, with the help of Christoffel Blind Mission (C.B.M.) and the Norwegian Missionary Society (N.M.S.) have taken care of the education of visually impaired pupils. There are four special schools for blind children in different towns in the country. The first school was built in 1924. These schools offer general education to children between the ages of 6 – 15. They follow the same curriculum as public schools. They aim at taking their children through the official exam which indicates the end of primary school. Those who are successful and obtain the official certificate choose between going to secondary school with sighted students or going for vocational training where they study handicraft and farming, aimed at enabling students to reach independence.

According to the World Health Organisation, 1% of people of all ages in Madagascar are blind which means 170,000 of the population of 17,000,000. There is a large number of children of school going age not attending school, therefore there is a need for a strategy to sensitise parents to send their blind children to school.

At the special schools both blind and low vision children are accommodated. Previously all of them were accommodated in the same schools and classes, and were taught in

the same way as if everybody was completely blind. They all had to read and write Braille. After 2004, that practise has changed and low vision children are now taught separately and encouraged to utilise their remaining vision. Some now attend schools for sighted learners, using optical and non-optical devices, while blind children receive education relevant to their needs. This change in approach is a result of a training workshop organised by CBM and ICEVI in South Africa.

To reach the set goals of Government and organisations concerned about the education of children with visual impairment, we will now focus on strategies which were developed in Madagascar.

2. STRATEGIES

2.1 *Mobilisation of human resources development*

To achieve equality in education and change attitudes, human resources development plays an important role. The positive motivation and development of skills in people are the main factors to guarantee success in this huge task.

As far as teachers are concerned, the Ministry of Education regularly – every three months - organises training for all teachers at district level. All the teachers of the concerned district are invited to attend training with colleagues from public and private schools. They share experiences and up-date their knowledge and share new approaches and new strategies. Such training sessions are important for the development of equality in education, because schools for visually impaired students follow the same curriculum which the Ministry of Education prescribes for all other schools.

Schools for visually impaired learners also organize different trainings opportunities for their staff. Seminars are organised during summer holidays for all the educators of visually impaired people to improve their teaching method, approach, and knowledge regarding the education for visually impaired learners.

The strategy to mobilise human resources is very important to achieve equality in education, because educating visually impaired people need special attention.

However, human resources development does not only concern teachers. We are now also working with Vision 2020. This project sensitises people about eye problems and trains people regarding strategies to avoid blindness.

2.2 *Infrastructure and equipment*

The strategy should not only focus on human resources development, but also on infrastructure and equipment that would enable visually impaired students to advance to appropriate further education.

Looking at the statistics, the four existing schools for visually impaired people are far from being sufficient to address the needs of all the children of school going age in Madagascar. Therefore, Government has made an effort to build a further two schools to provide in the growing need. For the same reason, and to provide further opportunities to visually impaired people, the Malagasy Lutheran Church plans to increase the capacity of their schools to admit more students.

The changed education environment at special schools now encourages children with low vision to use their remaining vision. However, schools for visually impaired learners require infrastructure that is well designed, to avoid accidents. Clearly marked and safe walkways are necessary. Bright colours on for example, the stairs and the veranda and in their bedrooms promote their movement and safety.

Similarly, special needs education does require special equipment. When sighted students use things like an exercise book, a pen, a rubber, blind students need a slate of their own, a Braille typewriter and Braille paper. Low vision children also need enlargement and other equipment.

Equality in education is achieved when disabled and non-disabled children have access to equipment and materials relevant to their needs. Therefore, the needs of children with visual impairment should be addressed. We do not expect that they should get more than non-disabled children, but they need similar provision, even if that costs more than that of sighted children. Then they can learn like every other child and equality is achieved.

3. OBSTACLES AND SUGGESTED STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE.

The implementation of the policy of “education for all” is still at its infancy in Madagascar. The country still faces different obstacles to achieve it in full, especially in the field of special needs education.

Above all, the number of schools and their capacity are far from being sufficient and do not yet cover the whole country. Only 4 towns have schools, therefore the children have to leave their home village to attend the school often far away. It is hard to separate children from their parents at an early age and it is also expensive. Just a few parents can afford that.

As was indicated, the Malagasy Government deals with the principle of education for all. Unfortunately, the project does not effectively reach people with impairment. The Malagasy Lutheran Church attends to the education of visually impaired children as an act of charity. Therefore, the salaries of staff are not competitive, despite the special attention and skills required by the task. The work is very demanding and the teachers are not appropriately motivated.

Special equipment and teaching materials are difficult to find locally or imported from other countries. Therefore, the prices are high and most of the families cannot afford them. Under such circumstances equality in education is difficult to achieve.

Therefore, we would like to suggest the following solutions that may remove the obstacles to achieving equality in education in Madagascar:

- We agree that the ratification of the world declaration is already a very positive step. However, more effective steps should be undertaken and improvements be made through the cooperation with international organisation.
- The Malagasy government should also alleviate taxes on the importation of teaching materials and equipment for special needs education. Besides, we also wish that more equipment and materials would be available on the market, so that every one would have access to purchase them without too much difficulty.
- Training of special needs educators should be introduced. Therefore, those eventual trainers would be able to teach and to train more teachers to be effective in the field, not only for primary schools, but also for secondary schools, universities, vocational trainings centres, and similar institutions.
- And last but not least, more commitment by the Government is urgently awaited as its contribution to the education of visually handicapped people. This kind of education should not be left to the charity of the Church or other associations. Teachers in schools for visually impaired children should be paid by the government and motivated in different ways to fulfil their duties. That will be one of the best conditions to achieve equality and to bring innovation in their education.

CONCLUSION

Equality of access to education is a big challenge for the educators of visually impaired children in Madagascar. In general, the attitudes, the policies and the strategies are all favourable to equality. Unfortunately, visually impaired people are to a large degree still regarded as separate. They do not yet have full access to education opportunities, because it regarded as very expensive. Relevant materials and equipment are not always available. On top of that, there are only a few schools and a few teachers who can educate them.

Our challenge is to prevent people from becoming visually impaired due to preventable conditions, and at the same time increase the number of visually impaired people going to school. In reality, it is hard for us to do it alone, we would like to appeal to the world for help, assistance and suggestions to address this challenge.