

Development for All through Education – 27 February 2014

Utrecht, In de Driehoek

Fighting the education crisis together

The world is suffering from an education crisis. Millions of children do not go to school at all or receive substandard education, and millions of adults cannot read or write. This means that we should take urgent action. This was the message of the symposium Development for all through education which was held in Utrecht on February 27. The event, organized by the Global Campaign for Education, underlined the power of education in a changing world. The central question was how NGO's and other stakeholders can find solutions to end the education crisis. During the symposium, UNESCO's Global Monitoring Report 2013/2014 was presented for the Netherlands.

“The good news is that education enables genuine change, in many different fields. The bad news is that the education goals which were set by the global community for 2015 seem to be far out of reach.” Jan Lock, chairman of the board of directors of Woord en Daad, in his introductory speech thus summarized the two most important themes of the symposium. Both themes were extensively covered by UNESCO's Catherine Jere in her presentation of the Global Monitoring Report. The targets for 2015, set by the world in 2000, will not be achieved. The UNESCO report defines this failure as an education crisis. One of the poignant aspects of this crisis is the fact that millions of children learn next to nothing in school, often they can barely read and write. “The education system is as good as its teachers,” Jere said. The quality of education and teachers often is below standard, particularly in poor countries. This is closely linked to the teachers' training, professional status, career opportunities and salary.

Education can transform lives

The UNESCO report also indicates that education has the power to transform lives. Jere presented a number of examples of the positive impact of good education, ranging from better health for mothers and children and stronger democracy, to economic growth and the chance to escape from poverty. This is why, she said, the education targets for 2015 should have our full attention. This also implies the need for more funding, while governments in poor countries are lagging behind in their education spending. And governments in industrialised countries earmark an ever decreasing part of their budget for development cooperation for education. The Netherlands is an illustration to this point: in the current development budget, education no longer is a focus area. In 2007 the Netherlands was the largest donor for primary education, but now it takes an 11th place in the international ranking. Jere: “Education should be a target in itself, as it can underpin all other development targets.” The UNESCO report calls on policy makers, NGO's and other stakeholders to ensure that education is top of the agenda in terms of funds, energy, attention and time.

Find innovative solutions together

Oley Dibba Wadda, director of Femmes Africa Solidarité, discussed the role governments play in the current education crisis. But she started by stressing the importance of education for women and girls, a group that often least benefits from education. While education offers them a chance to develop themselves, it also allows women and girls to obtain a stronger position in their community. “Half of the world population consists of women. This makes education not only a moral issue, but also an extremely important economic issue.”

Dibba Wadda: “It is disappointing that so many governments have other priorities than education. And it is also incomprehensible: how can a politician, who is also a father, a mother, an uncle, an aunt, not prioritize education?” She said that some governments may feel they have done enough by introducing universal compulsory free education, or by starting special education programs for girls. But: “We have serious unfinished business.” There is a continuing task for governments and for NGO’s. Dibba Wadda: “We need to cooperate in solidarity, find innovative solutions together, turn obstacles into opportunities.”

The far from consistent political line is one of those obstacles, something which is spurred by the desire to see quick results. One moment an issue like education for girls may be a priority, the next moment something else is “flavor of the month”. Dibba Wadda: “But when we are dealing with education, there are no quick fixes. We cannot expect to see a return on investment in ten years’ time. For education is about long-term processes. That is why we should document results, register best practices, do research.” That is the only way policies can be changed.

Partnerships with the corporate sector

Maarten de Jongh, program manager Community Investment for ING, discussed the role which companies can play in realizing education targets. ING partnered with UNICEF in 2001 under the name Chances for Children. Since then, over 800,000 children in various countries have been able to attend school as a result of this program. The partnership has evolved through the years. Initially philanthropy was central, but now it has changed into a cooperation based on equal terms, from which both parties are benefitting. Staff of ING’s international offices are increasingly committed to Chances for Children. They organize fundraising activities and also contribute their own expertise, for instance by teaching in schools.

De Jong: “Business can create impact in various ways: companies can address education challenges through their own human resources, by supporting NGO’s, by advocating for education with the public sector and by entering into partnerships with other parties to take collective action.”

De Jong explained why it is important for companies to invest in education. “The corporate world needs talent, and we are faced with a lack of talent in the market. In Europe and North American the workforce is aging. When companies don’t invest in education, there will be no qualified employees in the future.” In addition, there are other factors, such as the company’s image, externally but also internally. For people like to be employed by a company that has a good track record in corporate social responsibility.

Higher on the political agenda

In the forum discussion Hedwig Bruggeman, director of Agri-ProFocus and Laura Lansance, director of CHOICE, joined Dibba Wadda and De Jong. Chair Kirsten van den Hul asked the forum whether education takes a high enough place on the political agenda. Everybody agreed that this is not the case. Lansance: “43% of the current world population is under 25 years of age, and this percentage

will increase. We need to invest in education, we need to take care of our future.” Dibba Wadda added: “If we don’t, we will be in big trouble in fifty years’ time.”

In a debate about the contribution that large companies can make, De Jongh admitted that NGO’s often display skepticism. “The corporate world and the not-for-profit world are so different that it is of great importance to create trust and to find common ground.” But as a first step, NGO’s should confer the urgency of the education problem to companies, he added. Lasance responded by offering her organization’s experiences. For CHOICE it is difficult to find companies interested in a partnership. This has to do with the sensitive nature of the organization’s projects, but also with the fact that the corporate sector feels that education is not ‘sexy’, as Dibba Wadda observed. Bruggeman highlighted vocational education, which should be more of an issue within public-private partnerships. “The development of skills and talents is very important to companies,” she said. Bruggeman indicated that vocational training is still largely overlooked in many programs. This type of training can also take place in a non-formal setting, such as winter school for adolescents working in agriculture. Bruggeman said that ICT can play a role here, because of the opportunities it creates for education outside of the walls of an ordinary school. Innovative solutions such as E- and M-learning are good examples.

In order to have a real impact, NGO’s should collaborate more extensively, Lasance said. “When we support each other more, we can achieve much more.” This can be done by including education in other (non-educational) programs. Finally, the forum stressed that it is important not to exclude any groups such as disabled children or ethnic, sexual or religious minorities. For everybody has a right to receive quality education.

Report by Annette Zeelenberg