



Educating working children

Can the poor earn a living and receive an education at the same time? **Laila Iskandar*** explains how science and technology support sustainable education and development



When poverty is severe in urban pockets and in rural areas, unemployed and under-employed adults address their vulnerability to macro-economic changes in several ways: they go long periods without income, send their children out to work, pull daughters out of schools, seek assistance from faith-based institutions and lean on patronage relationships if they have maintained or ever had them. Female-headed households are more exposed to forms of deprivation and therefore are more likely to send their children out to work.

Recent studies refer to the need for a multidimensional approach to respond to the particular needs of working children. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates the worldwide number of child labourers between the ages of 5 and 17 to be 256 million. Of these, 171 million work in hazardous occupations while 110 million are below the age of 12 (www.ilo.org/childlabour).

While poverty in the global south is an overarching reason for child labour, other reasons account for the phenomenon as well: the declared and hidden costs of education, as well as income lost from the removal of children from work. Cultures where child labour is accepted and where social protection policies do not exist for families in financial and economic distress demonstrate higher levels of children going out to work.

The debate around working children and their learning needs has centred around the following question: Given the fact that most developing countries do have legislation against child labour and for compulsory basic education, and, at the same time, given the realities of adult poverty and high unemployment rates, as well as poor vocational education and even poorer returns on basic education, what can be done to provide working children with a measure of learning to equip them with market-based vocational skills as well as basic education?

So far we have witnessed only fragmented and partial solutions, which point to the urgent need to learn from concrete actions in community-based experiments based on a reading of the context in which actions are proposed. To educate the millions of young people in Egypt and the non-industrialised world who have missed out on an opportunity for a formal education requires an approach which seeks to empower them through an alternative, non-formal model of education; an approach that focuses on designing working conditions that lead to lifelong learning and earning skills and creating a network of learning communities.

It's a tall order to fill. And yet opportunities to utilise science and technology to address the needs of this category of learners within the context of poverty do exist. Non-formal education is, by definition, dispensed outside any formal system of learning and is adapted to its target group: its culture, its aspirations, its daily realities and its learning needs. Freed of the constraints of time and place, and built on the reality of local communities, this type of learning, upheld by UNESCO, integrates the natural learning processes of young people trying to survive in difficult circumstances. As such it integrates technical, vocational learning within the alphabet, social and environmental literacy of learners.

To succeed, such an approach needs to incorporate science and technology towards the earning

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of income, acquiring of work skills, maintenance of environmental protection, the enrichment of culture and the arts, infusing each with recreation, while meeting basic literacy needs, industrial safety, and personal hygiene requirements. Furthermore, linking science and technology to the reality of exclusion has many advantages, such as the fact that technical tools and materials can be made out of almost anything and the place of learning is by definition people's place of living and work.

UNESCO has pioneered innovative methods of non-formal basic education for children and youths working among Egypt's garbage collectors. The Plastic Recycling School was inaugurated in December 2001. In partnership with the Spirit of Youth Association for Environmental Services it targets the children of garbage collectors in the Mokattam neighbourhood of Cairo. Sixty children and youths joined initially and now 150 benefit from the programme.

The school aims to provide these children with alternative learning opportunities that will facilitate their integration into the new waste management business when they are adults. It is built on the realisation that globalisation has put the Mokattam rubbish collecting community in direct competition with multinational waste management services, against whom they cannot compete. It is designed to incorporate science and technology, basic education, work experience, environmental protection, poverty alleviation and earning, to create a matrix where one project improves an impoverished community on many levels.

The school's programme was devised as an answer to a growing problem facing shampoo corporations. A study on brand name fraud conducted by the Community and Institutional Development (CID) organisation in 1998 ascertained that shampoo-producing companies were experiencing substantial losses from having their empty containers refilled fraudulently. The Mokattam neighbourhood was identified as the primary collecting point for plastic bottles retrieved from affluent residential areas in Cairo. The rubbish collectors were then selling the bottles off to people involved in the trade of fraudulent products.

This situation opened up an opportunity whereby a technical and literacy education programme could be combined with an income generating work experience for the impoverished children of Mokattam. An agreement was negotiated with the multinationals whereby they would pay for the destruction of brand name bottles in order to protect their profits and brand reputation. The boys recover these containers, bring them to their school, and destroy them by granulating them in a machine installed in the school. The boys then fill out a form that shows how many containers they have recovered and granulated. The forms are delivered to the multinationals that produce the shampoo who reimburse the boys for every bottle they collect and destroy. The school then resells the granulated plastic to small and medium recycling enterprises in the neighbourhood. The income generated from this covers the salaries of the teaching staff and makes the project sustainable.

The children relate immediately to the work experience as each receives a small income according to effort. In the process, they are taught many valuable skills that have immediate relevance, such as the technology of recycling plastic bottles and the science of health and safety risks involved.

The work experience is designed with a built-in incentive to learn to read and write. Each boy is given a standard form to fill out to register the number of empty bottles he has brought to the school. They take a copy of this form and are taught to count using the figures in the table. They also have to learn to read and write because they have to sign the form they filled out -- otherwise they cannot get their money. Through these tasks, the boys experience the relevance of literacy to their immediate and future income, hence the success of the literacy programme.

For those who master the first stages, there is the powerful attraction of learning computer skills. To date, 50 boys have graduated from the basic literacy programme and have gone on to computer training on Word & Excel programmes that they use for simple bookkeeping and accounts. This will hopefully lead them to the skills needed to access e-commerce for recyclable materials. Another relevant skill taught is that of map reading and mapmaking for

planning rubbish collection routes, etc.

Additionally, the school is used for recreational activities -- art, theatre, singing -- giving individuals confidence as well as skills in group co- operation and organisation and allowing them to develop their natural creativity. The art programme also integrates teachings from the health and literacy programmes by getting learners to make up illustrated booklets on health hazards, which they then take home to inform their families: new science and technology woven around primary healthcare.

The innovativeness of the "schools" lies in the combination of research and action carried out by the learners themselves. Young people participate directly in needs assessment exercises and in the running of the projects. This approach is further reinforced by the fact that it is the learners who eventually become the teachers of other children and youths.

The main method of teaching is hands-on instruction in which artisans or facilitators work in direct contact with learners. Numeracy, literacy and business accounting skills are transmitted through structured, non-formal learning initiatives involving specific activities. Accounting skills are directed at diversifying learners' knowledge so that rather than becoming purely specialists in one skill, they can learn to calculate and manage a business, whatever and whenever it may be.

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We invite educators, policymakers and the industrial sector to:

ï Revisit the issue of working children and their learning needs within the present reality of informal workshops to experience a paradigm shift in how these workshops are in essence potential vocational education training centres.

ï Revisit the informal and popular economy with an understanding of the way it is organised to respond to markets to meet employment generation needs of a vast majority of the urban poor in ways that the formal economy has been unable to meet for the past few decades in countries of the global south.

ï Encourage the redesigning of national policies towards the issue of working children to combine a dual role for non-formal education in informal workshops and the provision of basic learning needs, health and occupational safety, business skills, etc, for children and youths in that sector.

ï Plan for the design of curriculum in the non-formal sector of education based on a reading of the popular economy and the distribution of working children in specific sectors -- ie agriculture, metal workshops, recycling, leather tanning, etc.

ï Train teachers to be "facilitators of learning" and establish teacher credentialing and the professionalisation of educators in the non-formal vocational sector of education.

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