

The case of Congo – some remarks on education and justice for Africa

One of Robert Fulghum's famous bestsellers is headed: "All I really need to know I learned in Kindergarten". This title kept coming to my mind when I read the documentation of Unicef on the situation of children in the world 2004.¹

I learned that in the question of education you always deal with a snowball effect – whether the education is excellent or deficient. The results always fall back on the whole human development index of a country. There is a clear connection between primary, secondary, and tertiary education which depend on each other. The quality of primary and secondary school education determines the quality of tertiary education. On the other hand, it is on the tertiary level that the school teachers are given their formation. The authors of the book make also clear that pre-school education is very important for primary school attendance, especially for girls who otherwise tend to be taken up by heavy homework.

I learned that the literacy rate in industrial countries is almost at 100 %, the world level is at 84 % for men and 74 % for women, whereas in Africa it is at 69 % for men and only at 53 % for women. The number of internet users in the industrial countries is 37 from hundred, in Africa it is one out of hundred.

In Africa, primary school is attended by 63 % of the boys, and by 58 % of the girls. The rate of secondary school attendance is far lower, at 29 % for boys and 23 % for girls. Africa is the worse off continent of our planet concerning basic education.

I would like to quote Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, from 1948:

"(1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

(2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

(3) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children."

Given the realities of Africa, this is, more than fifty years later, still wishful thinking,. For instance in the Democratic Republic of Congo, it is in obvious contrast to reality, as it is witnessed by Jean Kasereka Lutswamba, the school coordinator of the Baptist Community in Central Africa:

"In the Democratic Republic of Congo, parents have to pay a monthly school fee for their children. If they have not paid by the end of each month, their child will be excluded from class. Children of poor families who are not able to pay regularly, are traumatically suffering

¹ Carol Bellamy, Zur Situation der Kinder in der Welt. Bildung für Mädchen, hrsg. v. Deutschen Komitee für UNICEF, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag (Frankfurt 2004).

before they often have to quit the school for ever. Especially in rural areas there is a desperate lack of schools: in fact, only some 50 % of all children attend school. The situations of war and insecurity have led to a complete impoverishment of the population, to joblessness, internal migration, assassinations (that is why there are so many orphans and street children), closure and destruction of schools, violation of girls, conscription of boys."²

What has happened?

In the first half of the 20th Century, the education system within mission stations, built up mostly by the Catholic Church, was one of the pillars of missionary success (if measured in figures) and in a way also of the colonial system. The reason to become Christian often was the possibility to send children to the Catholic school which made up 90 % of all schools in the country. With the triad church – school – hospital of the mission stations, the Catholic Church built up a strong infrastructure which made it one of the biggest Catholic local churches of the continent.

In the long run, the big shortcoming of this system was the conviction of the colonial administration and, along with it, of most of the missionaries that elementary education was useful but that the black population should not go beyond the elementary level. Thus, the colonial system protected itself by undermining every effort to build up an indigenous, local elite. The first university, Lovanium – again Catholic – started in Kinshasa only in 1954. When Congo gained independence in 1960, it was of all African countries the country with the highest scholarship rate, but counted only 15 black academics!

Dictator Mobutu first continued the politics of collaboration between Church and state in the school system. But as part of his campaign of "authenticité" in the 1970s, he tried to nationalize the Catholic schools as well as the University Lovanium. After some years he had to admit that the state was not able to cope with the administration and running of the whole system. The schools were given back to the churches, and the "écoles conventionnées" were re-established, i.e. the schools belong to the churches or congregations, and the teaching staff is, at least in theory, paid by the state.

Since the 1980s, the economic crisis has had devastating effects on formal education in Congo. The official salary of a teacher went down from some 300 US \$ a month to less than 10 US \$.³ Salaries were not paid any more, teachers went on strike. The year 1991/1992 is renowned as "année blanche" with no classes and no state exams. The national budget of education went down from 24,2 % of all state expenses to 5,2 % and even to 0,7 % in 1997. It is now between 1 and 2 %. Schools can only survive by asking fees from the parents. The state has practically given up responsibility for education.

The University Lovanium is in a lamentable condition. For years, academic chairs used to be given as a reward for political services, Professors open up the jobs in their department for family members without regard to their academic qualifications. A professor would easily improve his pay by selling a compulsory script of his lectures, let's say for one dollar, to his some hundreds students. The Congolese Government has offered to give Lovanium back to the Catholic Church, but the Church is hesitating to accept this "Greek gift". The academic

² Jean Kasereka Lutswamba, Artikel 26, in: Menschenrechte. Jahrbuch Mission 2005, Missionshilfe Verlag (Hamburg 2005) 210f.

³ André Cnockaert s.j., "L'école trahie". Un témoignage et quelques considérations, in: Congo-Afrique No. 393 (Mars 2005) 151-161, 154.

conditions in the Democratic of Republic lead to the ever growing phenomenon of "brain drain".

On the other hand, one has to perceive the big efforts the Congolese are undertaking towards the appropriate education of their children. Parents do everything possible – they would, for instance, save money on their own food – to ensure their children school attendance. Pupils and students work very hard to achieve the state exam (A-level) and, further on, an academic degree.

What needs to be done?

The Congolese Jesuit Martin Ekwa has dedicated his book "L'école trahie"⁴ to all "teachers, professors, administrators who are honestly devoted to the education of the youth, and to the parents who deprive themselves of the necessary in order to meet the school fees of their children". He forwards some suggestions to overcome the crisis of education in his country:⁵

- Reform of the education system in view of the double finality of the school: transmission of knowledge and integral formation of the human. This social function by which girls and boys are enabled to become agents of integral development has to be stressed. This recalls the second part of Article 26, quoted above: "Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality."
- Introduction of modern teaching methods based on creativity and aimed at solving concrete problems to be met within the actual society.
- Sensibilization of the public and promotion of local communities' participation towards funding the school system (for instance special taxes).
- Reform of the curricula especially at secondary schools and universities against the background of today's science and technology.
- Human rights' education must become part and parcel of the curricula in order to overcome hatred, war, violence, injustice.
- The value of cultural and linguistic diversity needs to be stressed as an important factor for development of the country as well as of the planet.
- Economic development of companies and concerns in view of employment: Secondary and tertiary education have to take into account the needs of the national economy as well as of the civil society.

I am just quoting these suggestions of a Congolese expert, as I am convinced that only the Congolese can themselves overcome their crisis which is in fact a crisis of society and even nation-building. We here in Europe can only show a watchful solidarity and try to support those agents of the Congolese society who do not just enrich themselves but struggle for the common good.

If we give money, we will have to keep a watchful eye to assure that this money be not only used for short-term aid, but that the structural level of society be reached and the constructive nation-building forces be fostered. Investing in education is always a long-term strategy on the structural level.

We should further elaborate on an integral understanding of development and widen our vision of development aid beyond mere economic aspects. One crucial point is gender balance.

⁴ Martin Ekwa bis Isal s.j., *L'école trahie*, Éditions Cadicec (Kinshasa 2004).

⁵ Martin Ekwa bis Isal s.j., *La crise du système éducatif: diagnostique et thérapie*, in: CADICAC– Information No. 97/98 (Mai 2003) 41-50, 48f.

The snowball effect of education is even more visible in the case of girls. To learn how to protect oneself and how to protect one's child, especially against the pandemic HIV/AIDS, is of vital importance for girls who are at a far higher risk of HIV-infection than boys. In order to achieve a better education for girls and women, education and gender justice have to become the top priority of our development policy and programmes.

Our encounter here at the World Youth Day may help us to seek together for a world of more justice. We do as we have learnt at Kindergarten: "If you go out in the world, it is better to hold hands and stick together."⁶

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⁶ Robert Fulghum, quoted on www.peace.ca/kindergarten/htm.

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