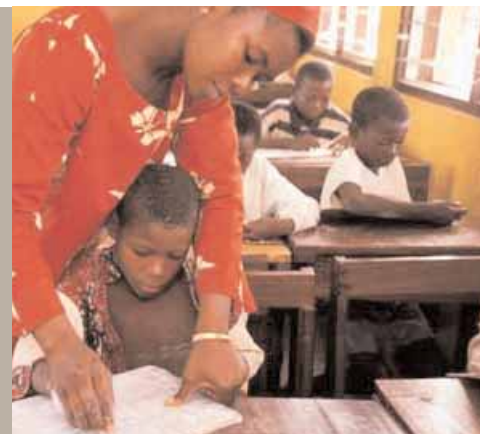


## Education

If you wanted to select the one thing that distinguishes the world's rich from the world's poor, you might well nominate education. We have it as a right. They have it if they're lucky.



Stuart Freedman/Network/ActionAid UK

**Access to education in poor countries is usually a lottery – it depends where you live, how old you are, what sex you are and how much your parents can afford to pay.**

That's why a third of all the world's children fail to complete the five years of schooling needed to achieve basic literacy. Why 113 million children have no access to primary education at all. Why 60% of them are girls. Why the average enrolment rate in secondary

schools in the countries in which ActionAid International works is just 23%.

Another scandal of global inequality then. And perhaps the strangest one of all, for there must be general agreement that education is one of the best long-term solutions to poverty. How can things ever improve in these countries if people lack even basic literacy and numeracy skills? The world's leaders have been good at the rhetoric on this, once declaring that all children should receive a basic education by the year 2000, a target date long past and constantly revised.

**Lessons for us all**

ActionAid International has a lot of history in the educational field. And we have educated ourselves quite dramatically. In our first decade – the seventies – the school was seen as the venue for your support as a child sponsor. We built schools, supplied the equipment, paid the teachers and the fees, bought the school uniforms. Happy schoolchildren beamed regularly over their desks in those old ads, a symbol of simple and decent achievement.

Except that it was a little bit false and just slightly dangerous. For every beaming sponsored child there were an unseen number without sponsorship. For every school supported by ActionAid International there were dozens that weren't.

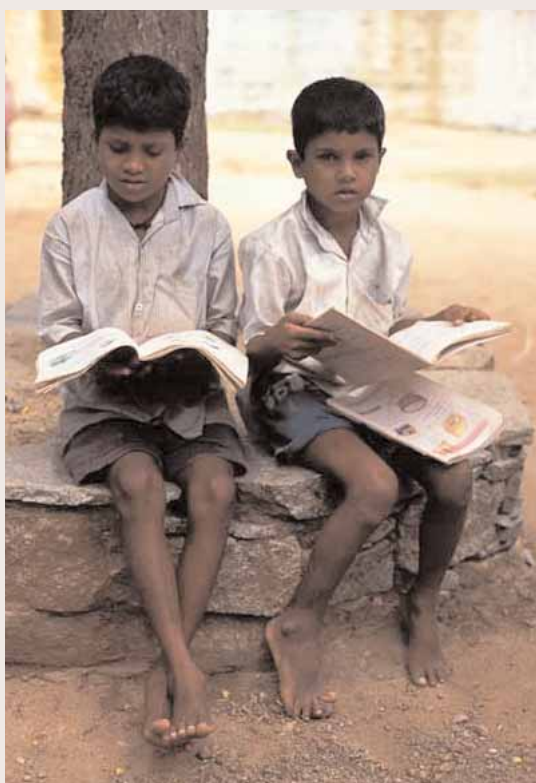
And then there were the hordes of children who never got to school in the first place. ActionAid International was spending our sponsors' money totally honourably, but we were only managing to make a slight adjustment to the rules of the lottery.

Our current educational work is a distant relative of that simplicity. The concept of '*fighting poverty together*' finally emerged in 1999, a radical new manifesto that replaced the old needs-based approach with one that is rights-based. Education was a natural candidate for this broader and more worldly analysis, since it is a universal and well-understood right. But it is a right that must surely be the responsibility of national governments. So ActionAid International had to become political, had to work with Ministries of Education.

**Education is not a luxury**

And so our grassroots work has a new context – pressure on local and national governments to make

Mark Phillips/ActionAid UK



Education in poor countries is usually a lottery

Education

For poor families – and for those many families with a low cash income – primary school is a luxury and secondary school an impossibility.

Stuart Freedman/Network/ActionAid UK



In Africa, education is far from free

education universally available. And then pressure on international bodies to help ease that task by living up to their regularly-made promises. For it is often an economic issue. In Africa, education is far from free. There will be school fees and there will be the other costs – the books, the materials, the equipment.

For poor families – and for those many families with a low cash income – primary school is a luxury and secondary school an impossibility. In Tanzania, a nation that started with high ideals in this area, school fees led to a massive decline in school attendance. ActionAid International worked with other organisations to persuade the Tanzanian government to abolish school fees. The result? A further 500,000

children in education. Fees have also been abolished in Kenya and an extra one million children are now in school.

There is a role, too, in developing educational practice that's relevant to poor countries. Our *Reflect* programme is a highly innovative approach to adult

literacy and social change, where groups construct their own learning materials using drama, story-telling and songs. It was tested as far afield as El Salvador, Bangladesh and Uganda and is now used by 350 different organisations in 60 countries.

Our *Access* programme aims to help the poorest children in the most remote communities.

*Access* centres are non-formal, run by local people, and geared to the needs of children who already have household or farming duties every day. It has proven itself in Ethiopia, Mozambique, Ghana and Malawi.

ActionAid International's educational programme is

diverse, imaginative and vigorous. We don't run schools any more, but we do work at every known level to turn education into that simple universal human right. Our work is informed by passion – anger even – for things have deteriorated rather than improved.

**Quality and quantity**

Sexual inequality continues – girls can expect far less schooling than boys. The quality of schooling is poor even where it is available. The education system in most poor countries is in crisis. And there are one billion adults in the world who can neither read nor write.

Isn't it time that poor countries had the chance to share the dignity that comes with learning? For all these reasons, education is a key part of ActionAid International's work, and that is how it will stay.



Fees have been abolished in Kenya and an extra one million children are now in school

Sven Torfinn/Panos Pictures/ActionAid UK

ActionAid International is a unique partnership of people who are fighting for a better world – a world without poverty.

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