

Still lessons to learn

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Two years ago, eight world leaders at the G8 summit pledged to help Make Poverty History. But have they kept their promise? Glenys Kinnock visited Tanzania with Oxfam Cymru and award-winning Welsh photographer Glenn Edwards to see if the lives of its children have changed for the better.

IN a crowded and hot classroom in Shinyanga, Tanzania, I asked the children what they wanted to be when they grew up. There were enthusiastic future pilots, doctors and lawyers, and then nine-year-old Zulfa put her hand up: “I want to be president,” she said proudly.

Everyone laughed, as if this was an absurd idea. But I believe all children should be ambitious, and even if they live in one of the world’s poorest countries, they can – and should – believe that everything is possible.

Yet the sad fact is that ours is a world where millions of children are starved of possibilities and denied their right to fulfil their potential.

Worldwide, a staggering 80 million children have never been inside a classroom – and this when we know so much depends on gaining the knowledge that provides opportunities and brings confidence and progress to individuals, communities and nations.

In Africa I have seen children sitting under a tree with their teacher using twigs to scribe letters in the dust – their only means of learning how to write.

As a former teacher myself, I can only imagine the teachers’ frustration at such limitations in teaching children who, after all, have the same energy, intelligence and enthusiasms as the youngsters I taught here in Wales.

The task we face in turning this situation around has been starkly summarised by UNICEF, which has reported that nearly a billion people entered the 21st

century unable to read a book or sign their name – much less operate a computer or understand a simple application form.

Last month I travelled to Tanzania with Oxfam Cymru to back their work for the Global Campaign for Education for All. The campaign's aim is to get all children into school by 2015. A tall order perhaps, but one that is achievable and is backed by the promises and pledges of world leaders as part of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

The MDGs are clear global targets that aim to halve world poverty by 2015. Universal primary education is simply our best weapon in that battle.

In Tanzania today, one-third of the population live in absolute poverty, and many of the MDGs are off track. This includes mother and child deaths which are among the highest in the world.

Those I met in Tanzania – as those I have met elsewhere in the developing world – understand that they are being denied the very foundations for development and their place in the global economy. They are well aware that their children are being refused the opportunity to be part of a healthy and literate future – a future that includes the prospect of work and security.

To be part of the modern global economy and to have an opportunity to join knowledge-based systems of production clearly depends on being able to master basic literacy and numeracy at an early age. This is true and understood by us all, wherever we live.

Before Tanzania's unsustainable debt was written off, as a result particularly of the efforts of Gordon Brown, two million children were not in school and the government was spending six times as much on debt than it was able to spend on education.

Debt relief has resulted in the abolition of school fees, so school enrolments in Tanzania have risen by almost half, from 4.4 million in 2000 to 7.5 million 2005. But despite this progress, many challenges remain.

Only a week before I travelled to Tanzania, I visited Millbank Primary School in Cardiff to talk to pupils there about the campaign to put pressure on world leaders, when they meet at the G8 in Germany next week, to ensure that all children have the chance of an education.

All children readily understand injustice. Indeed, the words “it’s not fair” are familiar to all parents and teachers. That is why the children at Millbank and at schools across Wales, Europe and the world have decided to join together in the Global Campaign for Education. They want action now to get all children into school.

Of course, in visiting schools in Wales and in Africa, I also see the stark contrast between what is on offer to youngsters in countries such as Tanzania and to our children at home.

In Tanzania I saw classes of up to 100 children crammed onto desks or sitting on the floor, with the teacher climbing over children to get to the blackboard. In place of bright wall displays, computers, full bookcases and playground equipment, there were bare grey concrete walls and floors, antiquated textbooks and footballs made from waste paper and string.

Whereas in Wales a five-year-old child can, on average, expect to receive between 15 and 17 years of full-time education, in much of Africa those children who do manage to go to school can expect less than five years of full-time education. And very few of them go on to secondary education.

This, combined with teaching by rote and a desperate shortage of trained teachers, undermines any attempt to offer anything like a quality education.

So this situation, in time, leads people to question whether it is all worth it, and many children drop out. That is why in countries such as Tanzania we have to work towards universal school completion as well as universal school enrolment.

Education is crucial to building routes out of poverty and, in particular, educating girls is one of the single best development investments we can make.

Mothers who have an education, healthcare and economic opportunity will have children who survive and thrive. Indeed in Africa, only one extra year of school for a girl reduces the probability of child deaths by 8%, and educated mothers are 50% more likely to immunise their children.

In Swaziland, for example, two-thirds of girls who are in school are HIV-negative while two-thirds of girls who are out of school are HIV-positive. When a woman is literate she can read the instructions on a packet of antibiotics or contraceptives, and the effect on a family's health and productivity is dramatic. Of course, that is quite apart from the impact on economic growth – young women's average earnings can increase by up to 20% with each additional year of education.

Yet two-thirds of the children out of school worldwide are girls, and girls are also far less likely to finish their education. All too often, they are expected to help in the home, are married out at an early age or are kept away from school by parents worried about safety.

In rural areas of Africa, teenage pregnancy is common and girls are routinely expelled from school as a result. And the school curriculum, textbooks and teaching materials are still gender-insensitive.

And while debt relief has achieved a great deal in countries such as Tanzania, which have diverted that money into education, the truth is that even if there are no school fees, the cost of books and uniforms can be prohibitively

expensive. In a family with several children the costs soon add up. And again, it is the girls who are far more likely to be taken out of school.

So there is an urgent need for an improvement in the quality as well as the quantity of education in the developing world.

To ensure this, it is essential that the number of primary school teachers in sub-Saharan Africa grows from 2.4 million to four million by 2015. Indeed, in Tanzania, we learnt that when fees were abolished, such was the shortage of teachers that they had to make do with a paltry four weeks of training before being sent out into the classroom.

When I talked to teachers in Tanzania they were clearly aware of their shortcomings and were pleading for more support. Their salaries are so low and their accommodation so poor that it is surprising how they remain so motivated and enthusiastic.

Education has the power to emancipate, but in dark and hot classrooms where children sit on the floor or old sacks, and are taught by teachers who are often too hungry to stand in front of the class, how emancipating will their experience of education be?

How can we get the children to school if there is no clean water and no toilet? How can we make progress when so many teachers are infected with HIV/AIDS? And how can governments fulfil their promises when they face such serious funding gaps?

Governments like Tanzania's need long-term, predictable funding so that they can tackle these challenges, so that they can plan, pay teachers' salaries, build new classrooms, and buy equipment and books.

And the truth is that the world's rich countries can close the funding gap simply by fulfilling their long-standing commitment to deliver 0.7% of their national income to overseas development aid.

The UK has already led the way in providing a predictable flow of resources by announcing \$15bn worth of funding for universal primary education over the years until 2015. Now we must build on this.

In 2005, the Make Poverty History Campaign ensured that that year was the year for Africa. Three billion people tuned in to the Live 8 concert, and all over the world people demanded action from world leaders at the G8 summit in Gleneagles.

For the first time, the world came together to say that poverty, injustice and inequality are simply not acceptable and that together we must do something about it. They pledged that by 2015 the task should be completed. Subsequently, fundamental binding agreements were struck on aid, trade and debt, and global partnerships were forged.

Yet since 2005 there has been a lot of dragging of feet by the West. Almost two years after the Gleneagles G8 promise that \$50bn of additional funding would be contributed, countries such as the US, Japan, Germany, France and Italy are already falling back on their pledges.

The G8 are badly off track and there is grave concern that the funding in the pipeline for 2007-8 will not be enough. There is currently an overall shortfall of more than \$30bn.

Next week, the G8 countries meet again, this time in Germany, and once more the eyes of the world will be focused on them. And so we must expose their shortcomings and make them live up to their promises and pay their fair share.

Ending global poverty is, I believe, the greatest challenge our generation faces. But if the political will is found, it can be achieved.

If the leaders of the G8 countries find the political will next week, then 38 million more children will go to school, 2.7 million more Africans with HIV/AIDS will have access to treatment, 600,000 children's lives will be saved from malaria every year alone, tens of millions of people will gain access to water and basic sanitation and millions more will be lifted out of extreme poverty.

If the political will can be found in Germany next week, then Zulfa's future – and the future of the many millions of other aspiring children like her – can be bright.

With the right support and opportunities Zulfa and her classmates really can fulfil their dreams. And who knows? Maybe, one day, even become president.

Glenys Kinnock MEP is Labour's European Spokesperson on International Development and Co-President of the Africa, Caribbean and Pacific States – EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly