

# Introduction and Overview



The purpose of the transition in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union is two-fold: to raise the living standards of the more than 400 million people in the region and to develop societies that are more humane and democratic than those that existed previously. The creation of free markets, the liberalization of the region's economies and the reduction in the role of the state are important aspects of the transition process. But it should be remembered that these are merely some of the instruments for reaching the real objectives, rather than the ultimate aims of what is taking place.

The real objectives are sometimes forgotten, or emphasis is placed on just one set of instruments for achieving them. Social aspects of the transition frequently receive insufficient attention, and the public policy required to advance social conditions and human rights is too often treated as if it were secondary to economic aspects of the transition. In reality, social conditions and human rights, and public policy relating to them, are central to the movement from one system of economic and social organization to another.

This year's Regional Monitoring Report focuses on education. This is a subject of huge importance not only to the nearly 115 million children in the region, but to all persons living in the 27 countries concerned. Education is vital for a nation's economic growth. For the individual, it has an enormous effect on the probability of avoiding poverty and of improving material living standards. But the importance of education goes far beyond these aspects. Education should enrich the lives of individuals in many ways. And schools and other institutions of education are vehicles for the creation and transmission of society's values and for the maintenance of social cohesion. This is clearly central to a transition process that aims to develop societies that are fundamentally different from those that went before. In many countries, transition involves the building of new nations – the 27 countries in the region today have been born out of only eight countries that existed at the end of the 1980s. Education has an essential part to play in this change.

Education has, therefore, huge value for the individual, whether in enhancing the "human capital" that he or she brings to the labour market, or in furthering personal development in ways unrelated to economic prospects. Its value for the individual is so high that access to good quality education is recognized as a human *right* in international instruments such as the UN Convention on

the Rights of the Child. Many people are cynical about international law of this type. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, which came into effect in 1990, has been ratified by all but two of the world's sovereign states – an unparalleled degree of international acceptance. But its significance is questioned. Surely, it is asked, the Convention is of little practical relevance, since its provisions are not enforceable by individuals and many states are not serious about its implementation?

This view is mistaken. It underestimates the good intentions of governments. And it also fails to take in the true nature of the Convention. Enhanced by its near universal ratification, the Convention on the Rights of the Child provides a powerful vision of a society that nurtures individual development and respects human rights – a vision that forces attention away from a narrow approach to public policy on many issues. In the case of education, the various provisions of the Convention, both those relating to schooling specifically and those covering child development in general, serve as a striking reminder of what educational systems should be trying to achieve: development of all aspects of the individual and preparation for responsible life in a free society. The Convention also underlines the basis on which this should be done, notably an absence of discrimination linked to any individual or family characteristic and an environment of decision-making in which primary importance is placed on the best interests of the child.

The notion of good quality education as a human right implies that every child should have access to such schooling. The title of this Report is borrowed from the World Conference on Education for All, held in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990, convened by UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank, and attended by participants from 155 countries. The Report asks whether "Education for All" is found in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union? Do all children receive the type of education that is their right, and that is so important in the construction of the new societies and economies in which they live?

One's first thought might be that the communist regimes that used to exist in the region had a comparative advantage in achieving education for all. Surely communism provided support to individuals from "cradle to grave", and surely a high-quality education for all children was an important part of that support? Is not the main issue, therefore, one of preservation of previous achievements, rather than reform?

## Was there education for all?

The communist regimes certainly attained levels of access to education that were far beyond those in many other countries at similar stages of economic development. Enrolment in basic schooling, from age 6 or 7 to age 14 or 15, was more or less universal. And there was broad equality between the genders in terms of access at different levels of education, unlike the case in many other countries. Standards of learning in maths and science have been high in much of the region. An international survey of learning achievement of 13 year olds held in 1995 ranked the Czech Republic 6th in maths out of 41 countries and 2nd in science, compared to ranks of 23rd and 18th for Germany and 28th and 17th for the USA. Several other former communist countries scored well, too (although others, such as Romania, did not).

A closer look at figures on enrolment and at the type and quality of education tells a rather different story. It is a common misconception, for example, that all children went to kindergartens before attending elementary school and therefore benefited from formal programmes of early childhood development. But only in a few Central European countries were enrolment rates really high. Rural children were much less likely to be enrolled in kindergartens than were children living in urban areas. Another misconception is that there was equal access to education beyond the compulsory level. Enrolments in the more academic stream of upper secondary schools, and in university and other tertiary education, showed many of the differences associated with social class background that are found in Western countries.

The requirements of a centrally planned economy had a big impact on the structure of secondary schooling under communism. The situation varied across the region, but, for many young people, very narrowly defined vocational schools provided just the minimum training needed for employment by local state enterprises. This introduced an allocative element into the type of education obtained by children after the basic level, restricting educational opportunities for children in those areas where only certain types of schools were present.

The quality of education left much to be desired, even in the general academic stream of secondary schooling. There was great emphasis on learning facts, and much less on acquiring skills that allow knowledge to be applied in novel situations. This shortcoming is especially significant in the move away from a planned economy to a market economy that requires greater individual responsibility and flexibility. Teaching methods were generally rigid and authoritarian, with insufficient attention paid to the needs of individual children. Schools were far from having the “child-centred” focus envisaged in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In several senses, therefore, there was *not* “education for all” under communism, and much needed to be done at the start of the 1990s. The urgency for reform to

the inherited systems, rather than their mere maintenance, is exemplified in the teaching of history and social sciences. Imagine a school system in which history books need revision overnight and where compulsory courses in the prevailing ideology of society are suddenly obsolete.

## The economic background

Educational reform in the region has had to take place against a backdrop of great economic and social change. The first chapter of the Report lays out the economic background. It also updates analyses in earlier Reports of various important social trends in the region, including those in mortality and family structure. Finally, it provides an introduction to the countries of former Yugoslavia and of Central Asia, new to the MONEE project this year.

The economies of most countries are now growing, but there remain huge shortfalls in measured output from levels at the start of the transition. In half the countries in the region, real GDP in 1997 was still 40 percent or more below that in 1989. This shrinking in size of the national “cake” is the first aspect of economic change that is relevant to the discussion of education. It affects, for example, the ability of governments and households to finance school costs, and the labour market opportunities for graduates and school leavers.

The second aspect is the changes that have occurred in the distribution of income – the way the cake is divided up. Inequality has risen, with the result that an increasing number of households have fared worse than the average. The rise in inequality in several countries of the former Soviet Union, including Russia, has been particularly notable.

The third aspect is the changes in government revenue – the slice of the cake that is taken to finance the activities of the public sector, including the provision of education. In some cases this has shrunk enormously, far beyond what might be considered a normal state of affairs in a country moving away from state socialism, but still concerned to finance basic services. Georgia is an extreme example, with government revenue as a share of GDP down from 34 percent in 1991 to 5 percent in 1995. And the countries where national income has fallen particularly severely are often those where the slice taken by government in revenue has shrunk the most.

Educational reform is therefore happening in countries that are typically poorer and more unequal and where the ability of the state to finance its activities has often fallen even more than has national income.

## Key trends in education

Unquestionably, some educational reforms have been positive. And many people involved in educational provision, in both the teaching profession and in government

and administration, have struggled hard to maintain or improve matters. But numerous changes in educational systems – some unintended – have added to the challenges inherited from the communist period. What are they, and what have been their consequences for educational access?

- The costs to families of educating children have gone up, often sharply. Fees charged for kindergartens have risen; fees have been introduced in some countries for upper secondary schools, and they are becoming more common for tertiary education. Reports abound in some parts of the region of parents paying teachers in state schools for extra lessons, of having to bribe to secure good exam marks, and of having to make contributions to get their children into good schools. Textbooks are now frequently charged for, and they have often become enormously expensive in relation to family incomes. Clothing and shoes – necessary to attend school – are no longer subsidized in the same way as before. Grants for students living away from home have fallen sharply. All these increases in costs come during a period when family incomes have fallen and inequality has risen.
- The quality of schooling has fallen. Huge reductions have taken place in many countries in real public expenditure on education – by almost three-quarters, for example, in Bulgaria. Teacher morale has often declined along with pay, with negative consequences for the quality of instruction. Buildings and equipment have suffered disproportionately from spending cuts, and there are schools in many countries that are in a dire state of disrepair. The heating of schools in winter has become a serious problem in a number of countries, for example, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova and FYR Macedonia.
- Enrolment and attendance have often dropped, especially in the less-developed parts of the region. This has been partly due to rising costs and falling quality, which have depressed demand. But the supply of school places has also declined. For example, over 30,000 pre-schools were closed in the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States between 1991 and 1995. In some countries, near-universal enrolment in basic education appears to have been lost. In the Caucasus and Central Asia, there seem to have been major falls in enrolment at every level of schooling.
- Social support provided by schools is down. The provision of meals and the supervision of children after school have fallen. Health and dental checks are less common; for example, 670,000 basic grade children in Georgia received a health check-up in 1989, but only 250,000 in 1996.
- There is greater selectivity and competition in education, including the development of élite, better-funded upper secondary schools, as well as private schools. This may help more able children and those from better off families, but does little for others (and may take

resources away from provision for them). Some secondary schools in Russia have special agreements with universities, giving their pupils preferential access, which disadvantages other children.

- War due to ethnic strife or other causes has severely disrupted the education of thousands of children in countries such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Tajikistan, and the effects are still being felt by refugees and internally displaced families. Ethnic tensions in other countries have threatened the education of many children. The withdrawal of autonomy in the province of Kosovo in FR Yugoslavia (Serbia-Montenegro) resulted in 300,000 children of ethnic Albanian origin being taken out of the state educational system.
- Many young people face unemployment on leaving school or on finishing tertiary level studies. This is a waste of educational investment and of personal achievement. However, those with better education are more likely to get jobs, and there is evidence that the positive effect of education on earnings has risen.

These developments imply a marked increase in educational disparities. The general level of education has often declined. But not all children have been affected in the same way. Those affected most include children of some ethnic minorities and children in families caught up in war. The children in poorer families unable to meet the rising costs of education have obviously suffered. The same is true of children in many rural areas where school quality has been hit by shrinking local resources. Disparities have increased in richer as well as in poorer countries. For example, learning achievement of children in Hungarian villages has fallen, while that of children in cities has improved.

Disparities between countries have also got worse; the educational systems in the Caucasus and Central Asia have suffered far more than have those in Central Europe. But throughout the region, in countries at all levels of national income, schooling in accordance with the vision of the Convention of the Rights of the Child is frequently absent.

Some commentators have pointed to the results of the 1995 survey of learning achievement in maths and science, referred to earlier, to suggest that concerns may be exaggerated. If Russia can outrank countries such as Canada, Sweden, Germany, and the USA, surely the situation cannot be too bad? This argument overlooks many other aspects of schooling, and it ignores the fact that the results largely reflect the *inherited* attainment of school systems. In some countries, schools are now “running on air”, with the deteriorating buildings and demoralized teachers noted earlier. The future education of a child of the new rich in a large city seems well assured. Either the parents will find a way to send the child to an élite state school, or the family’s income will be sufficient to allow the choice of private schooling to be made. But the out-

look is bleak indeed for a child in a poor rural town that has few resources, where the one school has a leaking roof, and where the next generation of teachers, to replace those close to retirement, is hard to attract.

### Policy towards education for all

What policies are needed to improve this situation? The Report identifies a number of steps to be taken. These would both improve educational systems in general and, in particular, increase the opportunities and the quality of education for less-advantaged children.

These policies can be grouped into six broad areas:

- Financial resources and their distribution.
- Parental and community participation.
- Content and methods of teaching and learning.
- Combating marginalization of groups of children.
- Early childhood care and development.
- Control of methods and standards.

*Financial resources and their distribution.* Governments need to reconsider how much money is being put into public-sector education and how the money is being spent. They also need to assess whether low-income households are effectively excluded from much education and whether poorer areas have sufficient resources to fund local schools.

There is no magic figure for the share of GDP that should go to education. However, in a number of cases this has shrunk to very low levels, typically due to sharp falls in tax revenues, as in Georgia and Armenia. These two countries aside, one of the lowest shares is in Russia; it is a concern that this country, which has so many children, allots a relatively small slice of national income to education (below the average for OECD countries). In much of the region, more money needs to be devoted to buildings and equipment and to teacher pay, not least to reduce “moonlighting” by teachers. This may well mean cutting teacher numbers, but these have actually risen in a range of countries during the transition.

Poor families face huge problems of access, in the widest sense, to good quality education. Schemes to combat this are urgently needed, so as to address all the aspects of the costs of educating children listed earlier. At the same time, the arguments are relatively weak for continued direct public funding for the private schools that have developed during the transition and that are more likely to be used by richer families.

Where local governments have authority over educational provision – a growing phenomenon in the region – central government must institute adequate systems of financial transfers to redistribute funds from richer to poorer areas. Unless this is done, poorer areas with an inadequate local tax base cannot fulfil their responsibilities.

*Parental and community participation.* Parents and other persons in the local community are a key resource

to be mobilized wherever possible. This is part of the move away from an excessive reliance on the state. Mobilization of the community is especially important in an environment of weak state funding and institutional inertia.

First, parents and others in the community may help raise funds for a variety of purposes, as happens in many other industrialized countries. Their role in the organization of after-school activities, and in the restoration of other aspects of schools’ social support, may be vital in a situation where schools lack financial resources. Community mobilization can play a particularly important role in maintaining school quality in rural areas.

Second, the encouragement of parents is essential to the progress of children at school. And a positive approach to parental involvement in school life may help ensure continued enrolment and attendance of children from less-advantaged backgrounds. Parents and others in the community are a key element in the monitoring of school standards, whether through formal channels of local democracy and school accountability or through less formal means.

*Content and methods of teaching and learning.* Many countries still have to make substantial progress in these areas. (One country visited in 1997 by the MONEE project team produced an example of a history book in which the only changes evident from the old curriculum were the blanked out photos and names of former Soviet leaders.) Curriculum reform has an important role to play in promoting ethnic tolerance and civil values.

As far as methods of teaching and learning are concerned, some important changes have been made. But an approach emphasizing the acquisition of facts, labelled by some as “factology”, still too often prevails in many countries. Changes in ways of teaching and learning must be carried forward into examination methods. A well-run national system of school examinations also helps ensure that selection is on the basis of merit rather than any other criterion. (The increasing degree of selectivity in many countries also needs review.) The inheritance from the communist period of examination methods was very weak. Slovenia is an example of a country that has made important reforms of exams, while Poland, Moldova and Romania are examples of countries that are still only at the beginning of the process.

*Combating marginalization of groups of children.* The access to education and the learning achievement of several specific groups of children are a cause for concern and are in need of action. Children from low-income families and poor and rural areas have already been referred to, as have children in refugee and internally displaced families. Children of ethnic minorities are another group for which efforts are required to ensure good access. The language of instruction is one relevant issue that is being addressed in many countries, including large ones like Russia and Ukraine and small ones like FYR Macedonia (although the adequate knowledge of the national language is also

important). Other issues include the involvement of ethnic minorities in the governance of the local school system. Efforts to improve schooling for children from Roma families are needed in many countries.

Children with a mental or physical disability are another group for whom access is often inadequate. The approach to disability in most of the region, “defectology”, has been associated with the education of disabled children in special schools, separated from those for other children. This obviously does not encourage any social integration of the disabled child. And the conditions in large-scale residential institutions, in which children with special educational needs have often been placed, frequently threaten child welfare. Moves towards the integration of disabled children into normal schools – the trend in many countries outside the region – have occurred in some countries, for example, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Latvia, and Lithuania. However, in others, such as Bulgaria and Moldova, there seems little progress. In general, nowhere near enough is known about the education of disabled children in the region.

The education of girls was well protected under communism, compared to the situation in many countries in other regions. It is vital that this continue and that girls enjoy equal rights with boys. Care is needed to ensure that societal change does not mean that girls become a marginalized group in the region’s educational systems. This risk is more apparent in some countries than it is in others.

*Early childhood care and development.* Various aspects of the early development of the pre-school child should be encouraged. Socialization with other children and preparation for compulsory schooling are important. Children’s health and nutrition should also be promoted. Both of these influence mental development and alertness and, hence, learning achievement. Micronutrient deficiencies are common in much of the region; for example, iodine deficiency disorders (IDDs) are prevalent in most countries. The principal method for the elimination of IDD is the iodization of salt, a simple, low-cost technique that has fallen into disuse in many countries. The fact that countries in really difficult economic circumstances, such as Bulgaria and Armenia, can re-introduce iodization shows that progress is possible everywhere.

Public policy must avoid an exclusive focus on formal kindergartens, to which children from rural and low-income families often have lower access. It should include parental education, public health campaigns and the stimulation of local community action for self-help schemes. The mass media, especially television, can be employed to good effect. Examples of innovative schemes of early

childhood development are found in Azerbaijan and in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, all countries with low enrolment in public-sector kindergartens.

*Control of methods and standards.* The transition process involves a reduction in the role of the central state in numerous areas of life. In the case of education, there are many positive aspects of the development of community schemes, decentralization of authority over education to local governments and the development of private schools. But there are pitfalls as well. For example, local resource bases may be insufficient for local governments to fund schools adequately, requiring a well-designed system of transfers from the centre, as noted earlier. Local government units may be too small to undertake the administration of schools effectively. The local governments in Hungary that have been given major responsibilities for educational provision are an example of this problem.

There is a need for central government to keep firm control over standards and some aspects of the conduct of education, in order to protect and further child rights. This is exemplified by the experience of a large federal country outside the region. The de-segregation of schools was an important advance for child rights in the USA in the 1950s and 60s. Some state level governments wished to retain separate schools for black children and white children – action at the federal level was needed to abolish this practice. Central government in all countries in Central and Eastern Europe and in the countries of the former Soviet Union will always have the responsibility for ensuring that key rights of children to education are respected, no matter what level of government or other institution provides that education.

The appropriate types of policy to improve educational access and quality in each of these six areas are open to debate. However, this should not remove attention from identifying the key problems and from recognizing the need for action. The goal of this Report is to highlight the serious challenges facing the education of children in the region. This is essential for the analysis and discussion necessary for constructive policy choices by governments and by the international community assisting them. Education has a vital role in fostering the development of *all* children, including the recognition of their rights and responsibilities as young citizens. In strengthening this role, reforms in education are an integral part of the transition to more humane societies enjoying a better quality of life.

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