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ARMENIA'S EDUCATION SYSTEM – RECENT TRENDS

Country Background

Armenia is one of the fifteen republics of the former Soviet Union. It is a small landlocked country with an area of 29 800 square kilometers. Turkey lies to the west, Georgia to the north, the Islamic Republic of Iran to the South, and Azerbaijan to the east. The population numbered 3.7 million in January 1995. 97% of the population are Armenians, 1.6% Kurds, 0.8 % Russians, 0,6 % others.

In 1991 Armenia gained independence and became a sovereign member of the world community. The country inherited a distorted, inefficient, and obsolete national economy strongly affected by the collapse of the central planning system. The 1988 earthquake and the conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh compounded the economic and social problems. The living standards of the population declined catastrophically. The constantly and rapidly changing world required constructive and democratic reformation of the political and economic system of the country. Armenia embarked on a transformation period.

The shift from planned economy to market economy revealed the feeble parts of the Soviet educational system that needed to be changed. The educational system could not respond to the requirements of the emerging market. There was an obvious need to reform it. This reformation was both politically and economically driven.

Main Issues in the Basic Education

The Armenian people had achieved a high level of education during the Soviet period. The communist regime achieved a high level of access to and equity in education. Enrolment in the basic education from age seven to fifteen was universal. There was broad equality between the genders in terms of access to different levels of education. The education was free and its financing was centralized. The quality of education, according to the international and national surveys, was high.

During the last 5 years, Armenia, with its 1500-year-old history of education, faced a problem of developing the national school and creating its peculiar system of education, which will meet the needs of society. Having limited natural resources, Armenia can have considerable achievements only by developing the scientific sphere.

With this aim in view, education acquires a special significance.

The educational system of Armenia includes pre-school, general secondary, special secondary, vocational (professional-technical), higher and post- graduate education.

Secondary education consists of 3 levels: Elementary school (1-3 grades), basic school (4-8 grades), and high school (9-10 grades). There are 1418 secondary schools, 26 private schools, serving 606,000 registered students. According to the Constitution of Armenia the secondary education is compulsory and free of charge.

Unfortunately, the educational system of Armenia and its former achievements are seriously jeopardized at this current phase of social- economic transformation.

Economic necessity makes many teenagers leave school at the upper grades (only 58 out of every hundred completed the 10th grade in 1995). Family incomes have fallen and parents are not able to pay for textbooks, clothing, and shoes necessary for children to attend school. According the National Survey 1995:

*Over 70% of parents are unemployed

*20,000 school age children do not attend school at all due to financial, economic and social factors

*120,000 school age children attend school irregularly due to lack of clothing and shoes, school supplies and books, and the deteriorated conditions of schools.

This contributes to the decrease of the number of students at all levels of the educational system. Near universal enrolment in basic education appears to have been lost.

The quality of schooling has fallen. Student knowledge of the curriculum has noticeably deteriorated; the material actually learned represents a mere 30% to 40% of basic subjects. The old school programs (especially history and social sciences) do not meet the contemporary requirements; neither do the content of the textbooks, the skills and relevance of educators. The outcome of educational reform greatly depends on the social condition of teachers, which is terrible. The working conditions of teachers are not always appropriate; their salaries are low. Qualified professionals, mostly men, leave the sector. During the school year of 1994-1995 the number of teachers with higher education decreased by 15%, and that of male by 5%. One of every six teachers is of retirement age. One out of four employed teachers does not have a relevant university degree. 2.5% of the teachers have only secondary education. Thus the number of teachers that require professional training has increased.

The current crisis situation of the educational sphere is the result of the decrease of financial input to the system. In 1990 public expenditure allocation to education made up 6.6% of the GDP. Because of the economic crisis of the transition period it went down to 1.3% in 1995. The maintenance and development of the sphere was not considered as a strategically important priority as the country was engaged in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.

The national budget for 1996 displayed a changed approach of the government to the educational system. 2.5% of the GAP has been allocated for education.

Even these meager resources are often deferred and cut, which results in delayed payments of teachers, textbook publishers, and other essentials with obvious negative implications for the educational system.

Access, quality, equity and funding are the central issues for reform. The essential trends in Armenian educational reform, from the above mentioned perspectives are the following:

1. Democratization of educational system.
2. Training of new educators and re-training of currently employed teachers.

3. Preparation of textbooks with reformed content and an increase in their supply.
4. Increasing parental and community participation in school government and financing.
5. Encouraging development of pre-school institutions.
6. Repair and provision of schools in accordance with the international standards.

STRATEGES TO IMPROVE ACCESS AND PROVIDE FUNDS

a) Democratization of the Educational System

In 1998 the government of Armenia passed a resolution about Decentralization of the Public School Governance. The main points of the resolution were the following:

1. In order to ensure the participation of the community in the school governance and to increase the use of budget supplies in the education, organize the governance of the schools through the School Boards.
2. The School Board is the highest body of school governance. The school principal is elected by the Board and is accountable to the Board.
3. The School Board provides leadership for educational progress, developing sound financial plans consistent with educational needs and community resources.
4. The School Board members represent the entire community and are elected by Parents' Council, Teachers' Council and community.

The Ministry of Education and Science with the support of UNDP and the World Bank started the implementation of the project in the 1999-2000 school year. The training for school principals was carried out to help upgrade their general management skills. It was urgent importance since in the transition period schools lost their support from the state, and public spending on education was reduced. The school principal was supposed to coordinate and guide the work of the board trustees, the teachers' council and the parents' council. However, not all schools had these committees. Different training for school board members was organized to address this gap. The role of the school board was greatly appreciated with respect to decentralization of the school governance and an increasingly important role of community participation. This resolution gives great autonomy in decision making to the schools, and local communities, on assumption that increased control will support accountability for educational results.

Decentralization was applied to governance of the school as well as to the teacher- student, teacher-administration, teacher- parent relationships, which also need to be democratized according to the Human Rights Resolution of UNESCO. The first step in this direction was the incorporation of the Human Right" and Life Skills" programs in the school curricula, in order to better prepare children to live in a democratic society and free-market economy, to make healthy choices, to know their rights and responsibilities. These programs are being introduced in Armenia through support of the UNICEF.

b) Parental and Community Participation

The issue of parent and community involvement in the school governance was one of the main points of education financing and management reform project. Parents and members of the local community

are an essential resource to be mobilized wherever possible. This is part of the move away from an excessive reliance on the state. “The parents will increase participation and school teachers and administrators will increase quality, both by improving teaching and by using resources more efficiently “(Martin Carnoy, 1999, P53). First, parents may help raise funds for a variety of purposes, support in after-school activities. Second, the encouragement of parents is essential to the progress of children at school. Parental involvement in school life may help ensure continued enrolment and attendance of children from less-advantaged backgrounds. Community mobilization is important especially in maintaining school quality in rural areas. A good example of rural community involvement was the project of the Government of Netherlands with cooperation UNDP-Armenia. The aim of the project was to support the rural schools to cover their operation and maintenance costs and to supplement the students’ lunches. The school garden was established with direct involvement of students and parents. It supplements the school kitchen with around 1 ton of fresh vegetables. The schools were provided with agricultural supplies (seeds, fertilizers, etc.) and technical assistance in cultivation techniques. The agricultural training program was organized for teachers, students, parents and community.

The main idea of parent and community involvement in schools is the belief, that the closer the parent is to the education of the child, the greater the impact on child development and educational achievement.

STRATEGES TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION

a) Textbook Revolving Fund

The provision of textbooks has been a critical issue in the educational system since 1992. The social assessment revealed that only 30% of students had access to textbooks. In 1997 the Armenian Ministry of Education and Science established a Textbook Revolving Fund (TRF), to ensure a sustainable supply of high quality textbooks to each student covering every subject for grades 1-10. The fund was entirely financed by the payment of rental fees for parents, based on a target four- year book life. The government has promised to contribute 10% of the total population. The main achievements of the TRF, in the view of the lead consultants to the project, are impressive. Every child in school from grades 1-10 has (or will soon have) their own copy of every required textbook. This is unique in the present circumstances of the Former Soviet Union (FSU) where funding for all aspects of education has declined alarmingly (20 times), and textbooks are in critically short supply in every other country. The rental fees are widely considered by parents to be affordable and reasonable. The TRF has supported the creation and publication of a new generation of textbooks designed to support a reformed curriculum. This program is part of Armenia-Education Financing and Management Reform Project of the World Bank.

b) Teacher Training

In 1998 the Armenian Ministry of Education and Science founded the Center for Educational Reforms. One of the main directions of the Center activities is retraining, re-qualification and attestation of teachers and management staff. The Center for Educational Reforms provides necessary methodical services for introducing new methods and techniques into the educational institutions. It carries out research of the basic issues concerning education, disseminates the results of progressive teaching experience and innovative- experimental activities.

Open Society Institute-Armenia (OSI) is also providing high-quality training to the teachers and is assisting the improvement of the educational system in general. In the strategic plans of this institute are reformation of teacher training/retraining programs, and reformation of ministry/community/parental attitudes.

c) **Repair and Equipment of Schools**

The economic basis of the schools is in dangerously insecure condition, as school didn't get enough funding for repair, furniture and equipment since 1992. The situation was changed during the last few years with the help of international organizations. In 1997 Social Investments Fund was founded to focus on the repair of most emergency schools.

An increasingly important aspect of the education is the use of information technology and the integration with the world educational and scientific community. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs is supporting Armenian school in the creation of school network system and promotion of the Internet as an educational tool. The U.S. Project Harmony NGO has pledged \$1 million for the second stage of the School Computerization Program implemented by the US Embassy in Armenia. About 60 schools, mainly in Armenian regions, will be provided with computer classes in 2001. The Internet will bring the world into Armenian classrooms, and provide a greater chance for success to children in the poorest schools and most remote villages.

d) **Pre-school education**

At pre-school institutions, the number of children decreased more than 2.3 times as compared to the maximum figures before independence due to budget cuts. This considerably hampers the pre-school education opportunities of Armenian children. The great majority of pre-schools is handed over to local communities and does not get financial support from the state. The kindergartens are on the verge of surviving and operate mostly at the expense of the enthusiasm of the teaching personnel and scarce support from some international organizations, mostly through food and repair supplies.

OSI-Armenia is realizing Step by Step Program in Armenia that is addressing some of the needs of pre-school institutions since 1998. This is a unique program for children 0 to ten year of age, and their families; advocating child-centered teaching and learning methodology. By August 30, 1999 32 pre-school classrooms were operating in different regions of the republic. They are fully equipped and furnished to serve about 450-500 children. One of the major achievements of the program is the partnership with parents, businesses, various foundations, and international organizations.

Conclusion

The approach and the role of the Armenian government in the educational reform are its response to globalization. The country is trying to adjust its educational system to the New World economic conditions and allocate local resources effectively. From presented projects it is clear that these adjustments differ greatly from World Bank and UN recommendations. The government hasn't enough funds to allocate in education and without the help of supranational bodies there is jeopardy to lose the system at whole. So this reform is finance-driven reform, and it has emerged under

external and internal pressures. The process of reformation is in the first phase of evolution. We are just adopting successful educational reforms and are trying to implement them from top to bottom. All the educational changes are directed to improve the efficiency without disturbing the basic organizational structure.

The high level of unemployment, severe polarization of the society, and scarcity of funding for educational institutions all create lack of interest among the parents and community to the educational problems. Thus, parent and community involvement in the reform is low. The teachers and administrators are not always supporting the educational change as the implementation of new programs is socially complex and requires special training. From force of habit in many levels there is still an attempt to implement new programs in the declarative form. So many projects are more formal than functional.

Hence Armenia is going through the ‘globalization reforms’ as many countries of Latin America and Africa did in 1980s and 1990s. To be successful, we have to analyze carefully the processes of reformation in these countries and apply its lessons to the social reality of Armenia.

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