77. Education in South Sudan

I have come to realise that a recurring question jumps into my mind almost every time I see little urchins happily running around the muddy streets of Malakal. They often wave gaily to me and occasionally call out ‘kawadja’ (white man) with big smiles on their faces. Do they think the whole world is like this? ‘Ignorance is bliss’ an aphorism says. Do these children realise they are disadvantaged by not going to school? Do they hope for something better or are they satisfied because this is all they know? Most never see TV, videos or even photographs, of other places.

Yet surely in this modern world, this ‘global village’, lack of basic health care is not acceptable. Nor is it enough to know only the tribal language, if the people are ever to venture outside of their region of birth. People have very limited options indeed if they do not possess the ability to communicate in a widely spoken international language. Here in South Sudan the most common languages are Arabic or English; in some parts of Africa it is French rather than English.

For South Sudan, the government has proclaimed that language will be English. In Malakal, Sr Margaret Sheehan began teaching English to women from the parish in the evenings. Now that she is on home leave to Ireland, the parish priest, Fr Stephen, has taken over the classes, which are consistently well attended. Learning English is an important step in building this new nation, as it faces the challenge of creating opportunity through better education, especially for girls.

Here are some of the stark statistics as presented in a document published by UNESCO this year, just before South Sudan became independent:

- One child out of every nine dies before its fifth birthday.
- Since the CPA was signed in 2005, enrolments in primary schools have doubled from 0.7 million (2005) to 1.4 million (2009), but this still represents only 46% of children who should be attending school.
- South Sudan ranks second lowest out of 123 countries on net enrolment rates for primary education, and last out of 134 countries for secondary education.
- Only 38% of adults are literate.
- Women represent 65% of South Sudan’s total population yet 92% of those who are not literate.
- Only 37% of those enrolled in school at primary level are girls. This drops to 27% in secondary school.
- Only 12% of teachers are women: 88% are men.
- 40% of children aged 13, and 50% of children aged 18, are not currently enrolled or have never attended school.
The student–classroom ratio is as high as 248:1 in some states.

Only 13% of teachers are qualified and about 40% have completed primary education. In primary school, the qualified teacher–student ration is 1:117.

Only 57% of classrooms are permanent buildings.

Nearly 90% of primary school children are overage.

Maybe ignorance is short-term bliss for some street urchins but I have also spoken with some good students in Sudanese schools who are very proud of their increasing knowledge and level of academic achievement. Education is the mechanism for upward mobility and the possibility of a better lifestyle. Sound education brings more awareness of good personal hygiene, avoidance of diseases and the skills for building a more productive society. But it is true, nonetheless, that education can open the door to values and attitudes that are far from Christian and which have the potential to undermine the present strong expression of the Christian faith in South Sudan. Those of us working in education in this new country believe in what we are doing; but we also know we must strive to preserve the attitude of genuine caring for, and sharing with, others rather than succumb to the self-interest evident among some in more opulent societies.

- Br Bill
| Malakal STTC | Sr. Margaret and eager students |
| Sr. Ninet and student | Yambio administrator Moses |
| Yambio staff house | Yambio STTC |