

The Namibian Educational System

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The very high unemployment rate is one of the major barriers for a pro-poor economical growth in Namibia. There are a lot of different, partly interacting reasons for the high unemployment rate, like the lack of labor intensive producing industries, the weak domestic market, low investment rates etc. One of the major reasons and also closely connected to most of the other problems and therefore fundamental to future progress is the “skills gap” in Namibia, the low number of qualified, well educated Namibians, which is mentioned by most analyses of the economy. 20% of employees in Namibia have no education for the profession they are working in; about 45% only attended primary school. While the low educational standard and the lack of skilled workers is of course a legacy of colonial times, the question remains why the independent Namibia has not managed to overcome those weaknesses until today. Thus, a closer look at the educational system of Namibia is essential.

The System

In Namibia, Pre-schools and Kindergartens are completely privately runned, schools mainly by the State. There are over 1500 schools in the country, of which about 100 are private schools, mainly farm schools.

The Namibian constitution and the Education Act (2001) stake the frame for the educational system: Compulsory school attendance exists for the seven years of primary school, respectively for children between the age of six and sixteen. School fees are not allowed for primary education.

Different phases of school are distinguished: Grades 1-4 (lower primary), 5-7 (upper primary, end of compulsory school attendance), 8-10 (junior secondary) and 11-12 (senior secondary). Some private schools differ from this model. In the first three grades, the lessons are given in the mother tongue of the majority of the students. In grade four, the switch to English is to be introduced, so that from grade five on, English is the only language to be used for teaching and tests.

After finishing grade twelve, the student receives the Namibia Senior Secondary Certificate (NSSC) and is allowed to attend a Namibian university. However, most subjects at the

universities have a restricted admission by installing a numerus clausus. It is not possible to fail the twelfth grade, but the student can retake it voluntarily for getting a better grade.

There are only two public universities in Namibia. While the Polytechnic of Namibia (Polytec) tries to concentrate on skills demanded by the industrial sector such as technical or administrative studies, the University of Namibia (UNAM) tries to cover other classic university subjects. However, there is no straight division of competences, e.g. UNAM offers engineering classes as well. As its name tells, the only private university, the International University of Management (IUM) in Windhoek, concentrates on management subjects. All three are located in Windhoek, UNAM and IUM also offer a few courses in other cities such as Swakopmund and Oshakati. All of the universities demand a fee for the courses, but some scholarships are provided by public and private donors for good students in financial need.

The few Vocational Training Centers in Namibia are still very young. They provide education for a handful of professions. For some professions, vocational training is taken up by the Polytec. For teachers, there are four Colleges of Education (Windhoek, Rundu, Katima Mulilo and Ongwediva) in the country with very different historical backgrounds. They will be taken over by UNAM in April 2010.

Spending

Since independence, the government has been investing large amounts of money into the educational system, around 20% of the national budget is spent each year to maintain and improve the system. Therefore, the Educational Sector can be identified as the major priority of government spending. A lot of donors, most prominently the EU, USAID, the World Bank and the Luxembourgian Development Aid are investing in the sector or support the government's education budget. Germany was also strongly involved by programs of the GTZ between 1995 and 2007 and still gives budget support.

Successes

Since 1990, Namibia has definitely made progress in overcoming the insufficient and unfair educational situation of colonial apartheid. Especially in terms of quantity, Namibia has been able to improve a lot. Schooling facilities have been built, renovated or expanded and the number of teachers increased by 30%, the number of students increased and the student-teacher ratio improved as well. In 2006, more than 95% of the Namibian school age children were going

to school and repetition and dropout rates have been going down. 94% of the students pass the 5th grade today (1991: 75%), the average number of years in school is above 8 by now, and the literacy rate amongst Namibians between the age of 15 and 24 has been going up to more than 93%. All in all, Namibia has managed to improve its Education for All Development Index (EDI) provided by UNESCO by more than 5% since 1999.

Problems

Despite all successes, it must be considered that Namibia started from a very low level, and there have been serious problems in the last years to further improve the figures in order to reach a satisfying quality and quantity outcome of education.

Enrollment

Even though access to primary education remains comparatively high, the number of school age children attending school has dropped to about 92% in the last three years. The Millennium Development Goal of more than 99% school enrollment for primary school and a literacy rate of almost 100% among the population between the age of 15 and 25 will not be matched. Three major reasons can be identified why quantity of education is stagnating or even decreasing:

1. Namibia is a large country with a very low population density in most parts. Therefore in some regions, schools are still very far away for some people and transportation is not provided. Plausibly, parents sometimes refuse to send their children on a several our walk to school each day and it is hard to enforce compulsory school attendance in such a big country.

Special problems occur to the few left nomad people in Namibia, for travelling Himba and San people, it is often impossible to send their children to school without giving them away to a school home, which many refuse.

As in other sectors, transportation remains an essential problem in Namibia, since the technical basics for e-schooling are not given for 99% of the people in need.

2. Even though the constitution forbids fees for primary schooling, school actually is not for free in Namibia. Students have to pay for school uniforms, school feeding, learning

materials and so on. The amount of these indirect school fees differ between the schools, but the very poor struggle to even afford the cheapest ones, many just cannot, especially in times of rising unemployment.

3. Due to HIV/AIDS and several poverty-related reasons, the number of orphans is very high in Namibia. Of a lot of them are taken care of by family members and children homes, but still there are many in the streets of the informal settlements around Windhoek-Katutura and other cities which don't go to school.

Quality Problems of Primary and Secondary Education

Despite the mentioned problems in increasing the numbers of students, the lack of quality outcome in terms of enough well educated students leaving primary, secondary, tertiary education or vocational training with good grades and sufficient knowledge is the by far most important problem identified by the various analyses of the sector, most prominent by the one of the World Bank published in 2005. The general competence level of learners in Namibia is still low compared to other southern and eastern African countries, and schools in rural areas do even worse than schools in the rest of the country. Too many students leave school with deficient literacy or numeracy. The numbers of student finishing secondary or even tertiary education is still low, and so is the percentage of students who finish secondary school or university with sufficient knowledge. Due to the poor quality, the NSSC is internationally not yet accepted as a general qualification for university entrance. Further classes or tests, mainly offered by private schools or institutions; have to be taken to attend a university outside of Namibia.

Considering the vast amounts of money spend in the Educational Sector, the sector is very inefficient. Namibia ranks among the top ten countries in the world considering the percentage of money spend on education, but among rank 120 considering the average outcome of well educated students.

Some major reasons for the poor quality outcome in primary and secondary education could be identified:

1. The schooling curricula have not been very ambitious before and in the first years after independence, but this has fortunately changed.

2. An insufficient teacher-student ratio and lack of quality learning material for all (especially in languages of the smaller minority groups) was a big challenge in the past. Even though government and donors were able to at least reduce this problem during the last ten years, it remains a problem, especially in some of the poorer rural areas.
3. Language remains a very crucial issue in Namibian schools. On the one hand, students often struggle hard to switch to English after the 4th grade and their overall performance suffers from these difficulties. On the other hand, many teachers don't even enforce the turn to English due to their own poor language skills. However, final tests have to be taken in English and students not accustomed to the language fail or do very badly.
4. The major issue in primary education really seems to be the poor quality of the school lessons and directly connected to this the poor education of the majority of the teachers. This is not only mentioned by several analyses, but most of the lecturers and teachers interviewed for this report felt this way themselves. In spite of ambitious learning curricula, many teachers just don't manage to teach the students what they are supposed to know. Identified Problems:

- Some of the teachers got their education already before or only in the first years after independence. They are relicts of the old system, with limited ambition for schooling blacks, and quite poor education for teachers. Positive influences of further on the job training remain low.
- The country needs more and better educated teachers. The government struggles for that, but the education of teachers is improving only very slow. Furthermore, HIV/AIDS makes it even harder to reach a satisfying number and quality.
- The majority of well educated and ambitious teachers wants to work in the cities, which makes the quality problem even stronger in rural areas.

Quality Problems in Tertiary Education

The greatest challenge for tertiary education is to eradicate the weaknesses of primary and secondary education in Namibia. Most outstanding seem the weaknesses in science and mathematics. Due to these problems, tertiary institutions currently do not receive a lot good applicants from the schooling system. Thus, funding is diluted by being forced to spend money on bridging programs to bring students up to par before they start their courses.

But just as the other institutions, the universities also have problems in hiring qualified lecturers and professors. While some are quite respected among Southern African scientists, the average standard is not very high. There are still not enough qualified Namibian candidates coming out of the educational system and it has not been very easy for foreign applicants get a work permit; many of the foreign candidates found other postings before the bureaucratic procedures have been finalized. Therefore the percentage of lecturers holding a Ph.D. or equivalent is quite low and the overall number of lecturers is too small. Hence, many university subjects are not offered in Namibia. Furthermore, universities still suffer from the same quality issue than schools do: Some lecturers were educated in and are still used to the old colonial system and haven't improved much since then.

It's not just the students, who suffer from not enough qualified lecturers, but also research stays on a quite low level in most subjects.

Decentralization is also a matter of concern. As mentioned above, currently most tertiary institutions are in the Windhoek area, thus disadvantaging the regions. Tertiary education needs to become fairer by establishing opportunities for empowerment in the rural areas.

Problems in Vocational Training

Official vocational training facilities are still quite new in Namibia. Until a few years ago, vocational training was not yet in the focus of the Ministry of Education and substantially underfunded. Even though this has changed recently, most vocational training is still carried out informally in the companies, without any degrees or standardization of quality.

The Reform: ETSIP

After analyzing the sector in close cooperation with the World Bank, the government (strongly supported by the donors) introduced a reform program to the educational sector in 2006. The Education and Training Sector Improvement Programme (ETSIP) is supposed to eradicate the weaknesses of the sector until 2020. It is an ambitious, comprehensive sector-wide program. Main measures, which all aim at better quality and efficiency, are taken in the fields of:

- Enforce early childhood development and pre-primary education
- Quality improvement of general school education
- Expand vocational education and training massively

- Quantity and quality improvement of tertiary education and training
- Introduce post-school adult and lifelong learning
- Better HIV/AIDS Management
- Increase Pro-poor access to education
- Increase general knowledge and innovation

In all of these fields, human resources management (including teacher education), standardization measures (clear definitions of competences learners should acquire), monitoring of results and usage of modern technologies are central points of ETSIP.

The various measures of ETSIP cannot be discussed or evaluated here in detail, but ETSIP definitely recognizes the major problems recognized in the previous chapters and tries to solve them.

Since 2006, the executing of and spending on ETSIP has been in plan, but evaluating the outcome of ETSIP so far is hard, since the program has not been introduced in long period of time and successes are not really expected yet. Changes in education take quite a long time to show results. In fact, there have been only very few remarkable positive changes in measurable results so far, mainly in slowly increasing numbers of students profiting from vocational training, but neither in the grade average of students in primary or secondary education, nor in a higher number of students graduating from secondary or tertiary institutions. Though, the Ministry of Education and the donor community are still optimistic of better results in the future. According to official monitoring, ETSIP is still going according to plan. However, it is very concerning that most of the lecturers and teachers interviewed for this report deny any visible impact of ETSIP so far, neither in terms of the quality of their colleagues, nor in terms of further education for themselves. Some of them even had never heard of ETSIP before. Obviously, there are still more problems in implementing and rolling out ETSIP all over the country than it is officially admitted.

Conclusion

Due to the historic and geographic situation of Namibia, the costs of education are comparably high in Namibia; additionally teacher salaries increased rapidly and are taking up the highest percentage of the budget. However, money seems not to be the deciding limiting issue for the

lack of satisfying results. The educational sector in Namibia still suffers from serious problems in terms of quantity and, more concerning, quality.

In order to increase the enrollment rate, it seems very obvious (and quite easy to enforce – not in terms of financing, but in terms of operating) that the government should cut down or take up the indirect costs of schooling. The free of charge primary education guaranteed by the constitution is undermined by the indirect fees. Getting rid of them would most definitely lead to a significantly increase in enrollment and a decrease of drop outs among the poorest.

Concerning quality, smaller problems like insufficient learning material should be solved quite easily. The language problems for students will stay in Namibia, but should be reduced by better teaching. Anyway, teachers' skills and education plays the key role in schools and universities, not just in terms of language. Only good teachers bring out good students. The whole system suffers from the lack of qualified teachers. Since good candidates for teachers coming out of the educational system itself are rare, that has obviously been a vicious circle so far which has to be broken by strong investments in teacher education and in making the teacher profession as attractive as possible. ETSIP tries to fulfill at least the first, but some of the interviewed teachers doubt the sufficiency of the taken measures. The issue of teacher education and the change of attitude of veteran teachers should be tackled even more strongly. Additionally, it should be made easier and more attractive for foreign lecturers to teach in Namibia.

One interviewed lecturer summed the quality problems of teaching up very nicely: “Most teachers were trained in or in the attitude of the old Cape System. But if you are trained to drive a small car or better maybe just a donkey cart, you will cause a terrible accident if you are made to drive a heavy truck, though they all vehicles. ETSIP wants the teachers to drive such a truck, but at the same time, it has not managed yet to improve the driving skills or even change the attitude of those teachers, which must go along with a change in system. ETSIP is like putting the truck in front of the donkeys.”