

## No shared vision for achieving Education for All: Turkey at risk

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**Abstract** Turkey is still far from realizing any of the six EFA goals. Since the Dakar Conference there have been many policy initiatives aiming at improving the quality of Turkish education. The impact and effectiveness of those policy initiatives are yet to be evaluated. The deficit of high quality analytical and empirical research constitutes a major weakness. So does the level of attention on monitoring and evaluation from policymakers. The recent introduction of strategic planning and performance-based budgeting could promote more emphasis on evaluation and monitoring in the coming years. In addition, a transparent, overarching education policy could foster policy dialogue among stakeholders. Overall, this article draws attention to the following critical factors for the EFA success in Turkey: political and economic support for education reform; the need to adopt strategy-oriented sector policies; increased capacity and emphasis on evaluation and accountability of educational policy-making; the need for a new national impetus to improve quality in education.

**Keywords** Education for all · Education policy · Turkey

### Introduction

Equity and quality issues in the education sector threaten Turkey's social and economic development. Urgent and immediate education reform is needed if Turkey is to maximize the window of opportunity presented by favorable demographic conditions, namely a younger population (especially in relation to European Union countries), increasing life expectancy and decreasing fertility rates. Current conditions are expected to decline after 2020 (Gürlelel 2004).

In an effort to respond to equity and quality challenges, the Turkish education system has gone through two major waves of reform during the last decade. The first wave sought

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to expand access to education, triggered by a world-wide commitment to basic education via the “Education for All” campaign of the 1990s. These reforms peaked in 1997 with the expansion of compulsory schooling from five to eight years (Aydagül 2002).

The current second wave is dedicated to comprehensive curriculum reform to improve the content and quality of education. The governments’ efforts to tackle these challenges have been supported and complemented both by Turkish civil society and the private sector. Simultaneously, international organizations, particularly the European Commission, World Bank and UNICEF, have provided valuable financial and technical support.

This article draws from a country case study, which reviewed the policies and programmes of basic compulsory education (grades one through eight) that were implemented after the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000 (Aydagül 2007). The research is based on a review of policy documents, sector studies, assessments, and non-governmental reports, looking at developments from three different perspectives: policy environment, equity and quality. Policy conclusions conclude the article.

## Background

Turkey has been taking part in the EFA framework since the Jomtien Conference in 1990. The influence of the EFA campaign on Turkish education policy and on the expansion of basic education was demonstrated by the introduction of a new eight-year compulsory education system in 1997 (Aydagül 2002). The Basic Education Programme of 1997 succeeded in rapidly expanding the coverage of compulsory education in the country (Dülger 2004).

As part of the EFA framework, Turkey presented a country assessment prior to the Dakar Conference in 2000 and followed this up with a National Action Plan two years later. There is little evidence that this Plan provided a benchmark or platform for evaluating and monitoring the progress towards the EFA goals. However, the Ninth Development Plan, which covers the period 2007–2013, is more inclusive of EFA goals than previous development plans. In addition to goals related to early childhood education, universal access and education quality, the new plan prioritizes girls and students in rural areas and addresses dropouts as important policy issues.

## The policy environment

Turkey has one of the most centralized education systems in the region (Gershberg 2005). The Ministry’s internal restructuring plan proposes a substantial downsizing of central units, but this plan has yet to be implemented. Moreover, the issue of education governance was not part of planned public administration reform, which was geared towards strategic, budgetary, performance and trust deficiencies in the public sector (Dinçer and Yilmaz 2003).

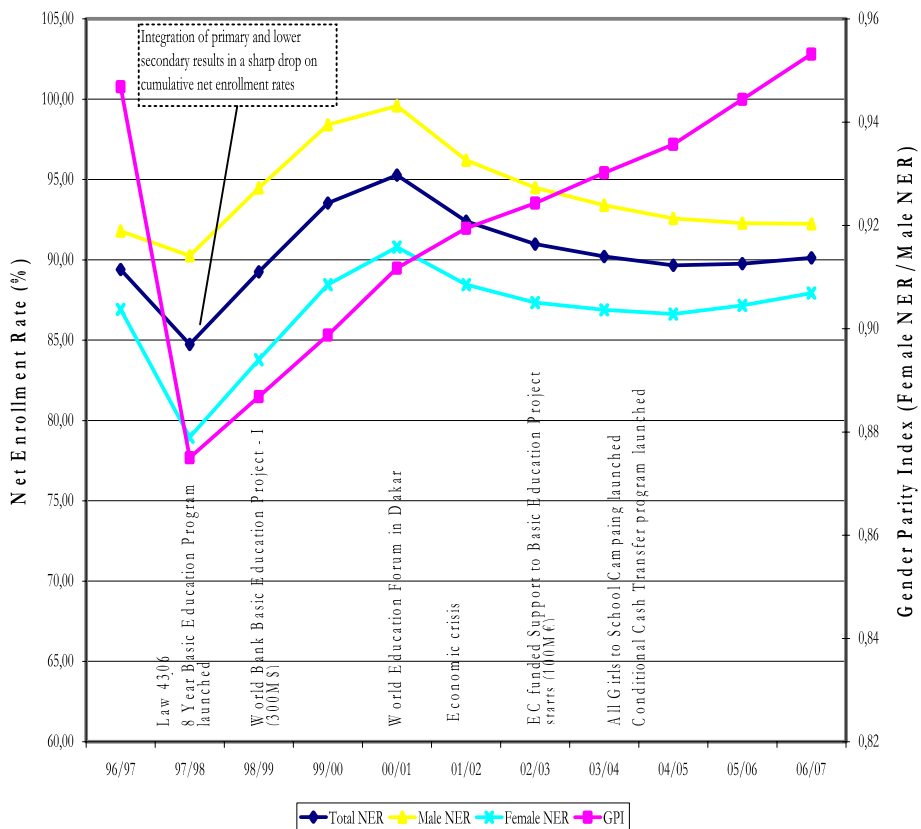
Nevertheless, increasing the quality and effectiveness of the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) continues to be a critical policy priority. The Turkey Education Sector Study (World Bank 2005) notes that “the current system is not structured to respond to the needs of individual schools, nor does it support teachers to improve the learning of all children in their classrooms.” This underlines the fact that the structure of the education sector remains a challenge for Turkey. The recent introduction of strategic planning and performance based budgeting could promote an emphasis on evaluation and monitoring in the coming years. Transparent, overarching education policies could foster policy dialogue among more stakeholders.

## Policies and strategies to promote equity

The year 2007 marked the tenth anniversary of Law 4306, which extended compulsory basic education and launched comprehensive education reform in Turkey. Between 1997 and 2002, Turkey enrolled 1,100,000 students to grades one through eight via a rapid access expansion program, through which 104,000 classrooms were built and 70,000 new primary school teachers were recruited (Dülger 2004). An estimated US\$3 billion was spent annually by the government as well as by private donors. After surviving an initial steep drop, ten years later the gender parity index (GPI) has surpassed the 1996/97 levels (see Fig. 1). However, Turkey still fell short of achieving the gender parity goal in 2005.

### Barriers

An important “social equity” problem exists in Turkey in relation to equal access to education. There are serious educational disparities according to gender, region and socio-economic status in Turkey and they tend to increase from the northwestern provinces towards the southeastern ones (Aydağül 2006; Smits and Hoşgör 2006; World Bank 2005; Wort 2007). Girls and women in southeast Turkey are the most disadvantaged group.



**Fig. 1** Trends in NER following the expansion of compulsory education to eight years.

Source: Education Statistics of Turkey 2006–2007, Ministry of National Education

Overall, one adult woman in five in Turkey is illiterate. One girl in ten does not attend primary school and three in ten do not attend secondary school. Of all provinces that spend least on education per student, 90% are located in East and Southeast Anatolia. However, the issue is not confined to a particular region, as education quality in Istanbul, the country's biggest metropolis, also suffers from lack of adequate investment.

Existing evidence suggests that public spending of US\$1,214 per primary level student is inadequate to deliver quality education in safe, hygienic learning environments (Yilmaz 2007). Families are faced with significant financial burdens; it is estimated that families with primary level children spend around US\$1.36 billion per year, which undermines the notion of compulsory and free education as guaranteed by the constitution. These educational expenses contribute to regional, gender and social class inequalities, and hinder many children's access to and completion of basic education (Hoşgör 2004; Kurmuş et al. 2006).

### Effective policies and strategies

In addition to implementing policies aimed at improving educational access for disadvantaged children in rural areas of Anatolia (e.g., bussing students and expanding boarding schools), the government has focused on easing demand-side barriers. A key government initiative has been *Let's Go to School, Girls*—the girls' education campaign. The organizations MoNE and UNICEF led a massive inter-sectoral campaign to mobilize different partners, seeking to increase female enrolment rates and achieve gender parity by 2005 (UNICEF 2007). In fact, a statistically significant decrease in gender disparities occurred in only five of Turkey's 33 provinces. There were improvements in 11 other provinces, but these were not statistically significant (Büyükoztürk 2005).

Furthermore, the government's Conditional Cash Transfers (2003–2006) reached almost 856,000 of the poorest families, providing financial support for the education of 1.56 million children. An extension of the programme, together with improvements in implementation, has been suggested (World Bank 2005; Keyder and Üstündağ 2006).

### Good quality schooling

In 2003, the Board of Education launched the most comprehensive curriculum reform in decades. An important characteristic of the new curriculum is a change in pedagogy to accommodate “a constructivist approach to teaching and learning, including active learning, multiple intelligence theory, and different types of assessments” (Wort 2007, p. 14). The Curriculum Review Commission (2005) saw the new programmes “as a great step in supporting the multifaceted development of students and laying the foundation for the transformation from ‘passive citizens’ to ‘active citizens’.” The Commission also drew attention to teachers and teacher trainers, stating there is no chance of success for the reform if teachers decline to reorganize classroom learning processes in accordance with current curricula or if they lack the necessary skills to do so (Curriculum Review Commission 2005).

### Policy conclusions

Clearly, many reform initiatives have been undertaken since the Dakar Conference in 2000. Their effectiveness has yet to be realized, however; Turkey is still far from achieving

the six EFA goals. It is neither possible to establish a relationship between these initiatives and current progress, nor measure their cost-effectiveness due to the lack of benchmark information and systematic empirical assessments. Nevertheless, existing data do provide a foundation for reviewing Turkey's recent progress towards achieving the six EFA goals.

### Political and economic support for education reform

Turkey's political and economic stability in 2002–2007 provided an environment that enabled the government to tackle urgent policy needs. An excellent example was the passage of most comprehensive curriculum reform in Turkey in decades. Turkish governments, whether as a single party or in a coalition, must find ways to sustain and increase the political will for educational reform. Important pre-requisites for achieving EFA goals—for example, political commitment to remove social barriers, improve gender parity and equity and tackle serious public administration reform—can only be undertaken by a committed government.

The education sector has benefited from increased public and private spending on education. While progress in spending is welcome, the current average public spending of 4% of GDP on education is still far from the 6% threshold suggested by the former Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education and OECD averages. If economic stability and growth can be sustained in the coming years, Turkey should aim at increasing public spending on education. Priority should be given to ensuring that all children have access to free, quality pre-primary and primary education.

### The need to adopt strategy-oriented sector policies

Despite recent efforts, Turkey has serious equity and quality issues to tackle in the coming years if she is to achieve the EFA goals by 2015. A critical factor will be the capacity of MoNE to engage in quality policy-making. Research shows that an important flaw in previous and current policy initiatives has been the lack of strategy-oriented sector policies. This issue has also been raised in international assessments by the World Bank (2005), the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2005) and the Delegation of European Commission to Turkey (Wort 2007). For example, Wort argues that “there are is no overall strategy that brings together reforms in curriculum, setting of teacher and principal competencies, in-service and pre-service teacher training and assessment systems” (2007, p. 17). He adds that “many current reforms are taking place independently of each other without due consideration of their strategic alliance” (p. 17). The OECD report recommends that “the nation must move from highly fragmented, uncoordinated initiatives and pilot programs, to systematic reform....[K]ey reform elements...must be aligned with each other and national goals and standards” (2005, p. 114). Stepping up the formulation of a strategy-oriented education sector policies could certainly act as a catalyst to the overall education reform process.

### Evaluation and accountability of education policy-making

An important conclusion of recent analyses is the lack of assessments on the impact and cost-effectiveness of public policies, programmes and projects implemented to achieve equity and quality in education. The policy life cycle often falls short of an empirical, objective and rigorous evaluation phase, which impedes further policy making cycles.

Lessons learned from previous policy experiences should constitute a rich learning source for the MoNE, but often do not.

The current capacity and activities of the Department of Research and Development within MoNE should be improved to better address this need. There is also room for increased collaboration with universities. The government and the Higher Education Council should promote and support universities to undertake more quantitative and interdisciplinary research into the education sector.

A new national impetus to increase quality

The basic education reform campaign, beginning in 1997, is a good example of the effectiveness of a large-scale education reform, owned and supported by all stakeholders. A decade later, Turkey could certainly benefit from similar school-centred campaigns and a renewed commitment to quality in education. The next wave of reform should aim at increasing the human, physical and financial capacities of schools. Throughout the country, schools need to become dependable and reputable learning institutions; and teachers should constitute the most important element within this framework. The new curriculum requires teachers to deliver new skills and use new teaching and assessment methods. This necessitates not only a cycle of continuous learning and professional development for almost 600,000 teachers in the teaching force but also a modification of pre-service training that responds to emerging professional needs.

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