The right to education demands a closer look

Statistics alone may not paint an accurate picture of those without a voice

JOHAN LINDEBERG and GABRIELLE BERMAN

Thailand has a relatively good track record when it comes to education, at least according to the statistics.

According to the statistics, boys and girls attend school in relatively equal measure, and literacy rates are among the highest in Asia. The country has also adopted a number of education policies aimed at reaching traditionally marginalised and excluded groups.

So, in reflecting on the right to education in Thailand, and particularly the right of all the children of the country to a high quality education in an inclusive and supportive environment, has Thailand reached its goal?

The reality is that we don’t have a comprehensive picture. When you look at the statistics, there are initial indications of differences in education achievement and participation in different regions and for different socio-economic groups.

The ratios of primary school age children attending Prathom 1 (Grade 1) were 75 percent in the northeastern and southern regions, 63.5 percent in the central region including Bangkok, and 61 percent in the northern region, according to the Unicef report Monitoring the Situation of Children and Women for 2005-2006.

Children attend school in Ban Buphai in Ubon Ratchathani, in northeastern Thailand. Although everyone has a right to an education in the Kingdom, some may still be falling through the safety net. JOHAN LINDEBERG
The reality, however, is that six million children of secondary school age were still attending primary school, half of whom were between the ages of 15 and 18. Also, rural children of secondary school age were twice as likely to be enrolled in primary rather than secondary school.

Further disaggregated data, however, are needed for a clearer picture.

The mid-decade assessment of Thailand's achievement in ensuring education for all highlights that the experience of children from certain ethnicities and the quality and access to education for those in a number of geographically isolated areas and children of migrant workers are unknown.

Are girls and boys of all these groups getting the same opportunities? Are the poor truly getting a useful education? Is the curriculum relevant? Is it useful for those who live in rural areas? Are all those attending school actually getting a quality education?

The statistics look good, but what and who aren't included in this data - and what does the data look like when you break it down by not only gender but also ethnicity, socioeconomic status and district?

This type of information is critical if the right to education is to be a reality for everyone in Thailand. This information must be systematically collected as truly inclusive policies have to be based on rigorous information on the most marginalised and disadvantaged groups in the community.

Failure to ensure the right to education is not only difficult for the individuals involved in terms of their chances to succeed in life, but also for their children and for the nation as a whole. Investment in education for all is a long-term investment in the future of any country. It makes sense not just morally, but also socially and economically.

On the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which fell on Dec 10, it is time to look a little bit closer, to care and to speak out - so that rights are, just that, rights, not privileges.

The United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights was drafted in response to atrocities that occurred as a result of ethnic discrimination. Discrimination is not only about violence against minority groups but, importantly, it is also about ensuring that the most disadvantaged have the same opportunities that the rest of the population have.

In reflecting on rights, we reflect on responsibilities and power. Disadvantaged groups in the community are unlikely to have the resources or the influence to ensure that their rights are met. Their very disadvantage means that their ability to voice their concerns, demand their rights and even know their rights is weakened.

Therefore, the government needs to actively collect specific data on these groups and find ways to determine the educational realities for many of the uncounted and unconsidered, to determine their access to education and the quality of their education, and to determine whether there are social, physical, economic, language or other barriers that prevent them from realising the right to education.

The government, however, needs to know that the rest of the population, those who have had all the advantages of the good education that is available in Thailand, actually care.

Rights are about the government doing their job, and they are also about citizens holding government to account. For the voiceless, this is the responsibility of those who do have a voice, and who have and do enjoy their rights.

Johan Lindeberg is an associate expert, specialising in inclusive education and human rights and education. Gabrielle Berman is a project officer specialising in human rights mainstreaming and the human rights-based approach to development cooperation. Both are currently working in the Asia-Pacific Education For All Unit at Unesco's Bangkok office.