Latin American countries have progressed rapidly in the last thirty years in providing primary education for the child population. In the old established parts of cities a high proportion of the children are enrolled and finish primary schooling. But it would seem that in the shanty towns, peopled by the new arrivals from the countryside, and in the rural areas, at least a quarter of the children of school age are not in school in the initial grades and less than three-quarters of those who begin school proceed to the terminal class. At the same time a high proportion of the parents in marginal areas are illiterate and live in poverty.

Virtually all governments have committed themselves to UPE, namely the basic minimum content of education which is seen as essential for everyone. But if they are to succeed in planning the extension of adequate education to the marginal areas there are some political, social and technical problems which they must solve.

Political Will

Perhaps the first pre-requisite for a solution is that governments should possess the political will to provide adequate education as part of a determined and sustained effort to end extreme poverty in the country. Cuba has given an example of success in this regard. The question is whether in countries with mixed capitalist and state enterprise economies it is possible to provide adequate education and development support for the poor. Can UPE therefore be linked with measures to raise productivity, incomes and welfare of the population? In view of the substantial progress made in developing countries towards achieving UPE and the fact that in more developed capitalist countries UPE has been achieved, it cannot be said that the existence of capitalism represents an insuperable obstacle to UPE and social development. However, recent political trends in Latin America have been in a direction that has made it difficult for governments to undertake consistent policies of democratization of education and financial support for UPE or to take sufficient measures to abolish poverty.

Community Participation

Democracy at the local level is needed if local people are to co-operate in various ways in the success of UPE. But governments have tended in recent years, for example in Mexico, to reduce the powers of local communities as regards the control of education, among other things, while still requiring the poor to contribute in work and money to the building and operation of the schools. This contribution, which is
a reflection of the political and financial situation of governments, needs to be reviewed if UPE is to succeed in the marginal areas. There are thus several choices before the authorities. Either they spend more on UPE in the marginal areas, or they rely on increased community participation — in which case they must do more for the communities. Or they must do both, namely spend more and co-operate more fully with the communities.

The nature of this choice may be seen if we examine why, at present, the children of rural and urban poverty areas have a smaller chance to complete primary education than their better established urban brothers and sisters. These specific problems, which underlie planning, concern the provision of adequate education in areas of scattered population and indigenous language and culture; the recruitment and training of teachers; nutrition, health and clothing of pupils; absenteeism, drop-out and repeating; the participation of the community in the management of schools.

Rural population includes many small and scattered hamlets, where the people raise livestock and cultivate maize or other subsistence crops. Education authorities in Mexico send young secondary graduates to found schools in hamlets with more than ten and less than thirty children. For two or three years, before leaving for further studies, and hopefully being replaced, these young men teach the children and adults. They are accepted by the communities which feed them and provide accommodation and facilities for the school.

In rural areas where authorities seek a more permanent and satisfactory educational solution, they build schools and residential quarters for the children and teachers in isolated areas, with local help. In Mexico, there are ‘native’ schools, staffed by local people who normally are unqualified but are seeking qualification on a part-time study basis, and ‘national’ schools staffed by qualified teachers. The quality of education, judged by cohort progression and performance is lower in ‘native’ schools than in ‘national’ schools because the teachers are not trained sufficiently.

In rural areas the young ‘national’ school teachers, qualified in the larger towns, seek to return to the towns as soon as possible, whereas the ‘native’ school teachers, who are unqualified, are more stable. Consequently, it would seem necessary, if governments can accept the political risks, that UPE in rural areas should be staffed in the main by teachers recruited from and trained in the rural areas. These teachers would be able to help the population in respect of health, nutrition, production, culture and sport, rather than behave as ‘refugees from the towns’, which is the case with ‘national’ school teachers at present.

Hungry and cold children do not study well. If, in co-operation with local people, children at school could be fed by the school, they would sleep less in class and concentrate better. Children need protective clothing during the winter and rainy seasons and here, too, schools can identify children in need and encourage the community to provide for them. Schools also need help at the beginning of each year for the medical and dental examination of the pupils, and during the year if children are ill. Doctors and nurses working in the community are sometimes unavailable for the school for bureaucratic reasons, namely that there may be no agreement on this matter as between the health and education authorities.

Local people, together with teachers, heads and inspectors, need to work together to a greater extent in order to reduce drop-out, absenteeism and repeating of children. These happen for economic as well as educational reasons and the community with government support can do much to reduce them if educational personnel are prepared to investigate individual cases thoroughly.