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Education For All

Goals For The Year 2000

DESPITE significant expansion in primary education in recent decades, a growing number of children are not in school, the number of illiterate youth and adults is increasing, and the basic learning needs of many go unmet.

If current trends and conventional approaches to education and training continue, the state of education will certainly worsen, thus aggravating rather than solving global problems.

According to UNESCO, about 105 million children between six and 11 years old were not in school in 1985. Seventy per cent of these were in least developed nations and 60 per cent were girls. If current trends continue, the number of out-of-school children will almost double to 200 million by the year 2000.

Success or failure in meeting the basic learning needs of all people will depend ultimately on the actions taken within individual countries. A carefully planned, innovative, long-term effort by each country is needed.

While each country will set its own goals, the Conference will suggest targets for the year 2000.

In general, these goals will cover primary education for all children by the end of the century. Because it is the major vehicle for basic education of children, quality primary schooling will be central to the new effort.

The second goal is to reduce dramatically the adult illiteracy rate. Currently, nearly one in four adults, or more than 900 million men and women, are illiterate. Nearly 98 per cent of these live in developing countries. The Conference aims to reduce adult illiteracy to 15 per cent by the year 2000.

Aisa will remain the heart of the problem with nearly 660 million illiterates; Africa will have about 165 million; and Latin America and the Caribbean region 42 million. North America and Europe will have only about 17 million, although these people are particularly disadvantaged in their societies.

According to UNESCO, more than one half of today's illiterate people live in India and China which have 623 million and 229 million respectively.

One immediate question is that of priorities: Who will benefit first from the renewed global effort? Strong arguments exist for giving girls and women top priority.

"Literacy of women is the most important single factor in the reduction of mortality of children," says James P. Grant, Executive Director of UNICEF. "The children of more educated mothers have a greater chance of survival and of healthy gorwth than those of the less educated or illiterate." Literacy generally increases the capability and efficacy of women as individuals, enhances inter-generational educational benefits, lower fertility and maternal mortality rates.

The Conference aims to remove the disparity between male and female literacy by the year 2000. In some countries this will be especially challenging. In India, for example, 57 per cent of adult males are literate against 29 per cent of women.

"Lack of education and training has deprived many countries of their most precious resources, an educated population," says Wadi D. Haddad, Executive Secretary of the Inter-Agency Commission of the Conference. This, Mr. Haddad points out, has in turn stunted social and economic growth.

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirmed the right of everyone to education, but education—tne empowerment of individuals through learning—is much more than a right. It is a powerful factor in meeting the challenges the world faces towards the turn of the century. People learn to read and write for personal, economic, political and social reasons. In a village literacy centre in Haiti, a grandmother smiles wistgully and says: "My children live far away, and I want to learn to write so that I can tell them my secrets.' A young woman, her face glowing with pride, remarks: "I want to get a good job someday." A thin wiry man says firmly: "I come here because of what happened in the Duvalier regime. If I learn to read and write, that kind of government will not be able to return."

But if present trends continue, people will continue to lack learning opportunities. William Draper, the Administrator of UNDP says that education "is being short-changed...as low-income countries struggle with their debt-ridden economies." He points out than, between 1972 and 1985, central government investment in euducation dropped from 13.2 per cent to 7.6 per cent of the total budgets of all low-income countries except in India and China.

Financial Crisis

The financial crisis in many devleoping countries is but one pressure on education. Major economy, social and cultural forces are all putting strain on efforts to meet basic learning needs—widespread economic stagnation and decline; growing disparities within and among countries; increasing marginalization of populations, severe deterioration of the environment and rapid population growth.

Yet, basic education can be a powerful factor in shaping these very forces and in dealing with their effects. It helps meet other basic human needs, increases productivity, enhances social and cultural awareness, and promotes international understanding.

Basic lerning can help contain and even reverse the current threat of economic stagnation or decline. Ample evidence exists on education's contribution to economic development. For example, primary schooling is known to improve the productivity of workers in the factory and the field and to provide the necessary skills for self-employment and entrepreneurship.

Scientists in the United States estimate that 70 to 80 per cent of cancer deaths in that country are linked to behaviour that could be changed by education.

The only known "cure" for AIDS at present is prevention. People need to learn what the human immuno-deficiency virus is, how it is transmitted, and later their behaviour to avoid contracting the disease.

Environmentalists warn that the very survival of our planet is rapidly becoming an issue of public educaiton.

Getting more children into schools is not enough. A primary school that graduates pupils who cannot read, write or solve simple problems has failed as a school. The emphasis has to be shifted away from simply how many people attend many school programmes. Instead, the question that should be asked is, are people actually learning? Are they getting the essential knowledge, skills and values needed for life? Frederico Mayor, Director-General of UNESCO, points out that even among those children fortunate enough to go to school, standards are not even, and drop-out and repetition rates are high. "The quality of education provided in many Third World schools is sometimes so distressingly poor," says Dr. Mayor, "that even pupils who persist in schools for several years may never achieve and enduring level of literacy."

Nor are educational problems confined to the developing world. An increasing number of school-leavers in some industrialized countries are functionally illiterate, unable to realize their potential in a technologically complex society.

Governments, donors, and educators from around the world are analyzing scores of successful models and ideas to improve the quality of as well as access to education.

Meeting basic learning needs require creativity and the imaginative use of all possible means and sources of education. Many developing countries will find it rewarding to turn to other channels of education, such as through religious and community-based instruction. They will also be calling upon radio, television, newspapers, clubs and libraries. A vast range of educational technologies from folk drama and traditional songs to television and computers will be used to teach children and adults, and to train instructors.

In one successful example of alternative education, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) is to educate chidlren—especially very poor rural children—who cannot be reached by government schools or, once reached, do not stay in school.

—UNICEF