Investing in education

CHILDREN are children everywhere and their basic physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual needs remain the same. They need love, nurturing, protection and time and space to play and grow. And they need an education to help them fulfil their potential and prepare them for life — to support their families and contribute to their community, nation and humankind.

Paramount among the common challenges facing governments in North and South may be the need to shift from investing in armaments to investing in people, especially the younger generation. Currently, in a perversion of priorities, the world spends an average of US $20,000 on a soldier, but only $350 to educate a child.

The world's industrialised countries spend more on their military forces in three days than the US $5.6 billion the 42 countries of sub-Saharan Africa devote to educating their 213 million children in a year.

Costa Rica and post-war Japan are examples of countries that have prospered partly because their economic, political and social systems have not been burdened by military needs and demands. Rather than spending scarce resources on armaments and equiping legions of soldiers, Costa Rica spends some 18 per cent of its national budget on education. until recent economic austerity measures, the figure was as high as 30 per cent.

Defence spending in the developing world in 1988 exceeded 1960 levels by more than 700 per cent. Developing countries chalk up US $200 billion in military expenditure each year for litary expenditure each year, four times the economic assistance they receive from donors and more than enough to service their external debts annually.

The global arms race has diverted scarce resources and the attention of political leaders and their policy advisers from such grave problems as poverty, over-population, hunger and starvation, the environmental degradation, illiteracy, and the lack of basic education.

EDUCATION FOR SURVIVAL

A second challenge common to North and South is helping every child develop the personal, human, civic and global knowledge, skills, values and attitudes needed for survival and progress into the next century.

In both poor and affluent communities, people need to learn at an early age respect for and how to take care of their bodies, their minds and their total well-being. In many industrialised countries, such health and social problems as AIDS and drug and alcohol abuse have reminded people just how important access to basic information is.

The global Facts for Life effort (see another article in this kit) is part of this process of empowerment that would give everyone basic information about nutrition, sanitation and personal health practices.

People everywhere also need to learn basic human values, to communicate and to feel and be part of the human family. Instead of remaining indifferent or sliding into prejudice and hatred, children need to develop respect and tolerance for human weaknesses and differences among sexes, races, classes and cultures. Young people need a safe and caring environment to help them develop sensitivity, compensation and the capacity for empathy, self-sacrifice and generosity.

LAYING THE BEDROCK

These human quantities are the foundation of civic such values as open-mindedness, fairness and respect for truth and social justice. Young people need to learn to value and protect human rights and human dignity, non-violence and a respect for equality and the rule of law. They need to develop aversions to inequality, privilege, greed, exploitation, violence, coercion and repression.

In both North and South, education must help them develop spiritual values, including a wariness of crass materialism and wasteful consumption.

People throughout the world also need to develop global values, especially an appreciation that humankind's collective fate is bound up with the fate of the earth. They need to acquire a sense of responsible consumption, sustainable growth and caring for the environment.

Finally, with unprecedented migration to cities, education must retain and teach cultural values — teaching young people to appreciate their indigenous cultures and encouraging them to incorporate their traditional values in modern life.

"The dilemma", says Margaret Catley-Carlson, President of the Canadian International Development Agency, "is that our religious, philosophical and moral systems are all set up in terms of rural values. We haven't even started developing values that we are willing to recognise as being healthy city values and yet we are going to be an urban planet in about 12 years."

Increasing appreciation for rural values may also help slow urbanisation and may help buffer urban residents against the alienation and isolation many feel in cities.

Where do children learn basic values? In many Northern countries, there is increasing concern about parents and communities who are leaving the teaching of values to schools. The Republic of Korea, on the other hand, recognises school as only part of the learning environment. Clearly, values come from everywhere → movies and television, music, books, magazines and examples set by idols in sports, popular culture and politics.

Perhaps most important, children's values are instilled by their parents, not only in words but through their deeds at home and in the community. To assure the basic education of every child, parents need to learn to be parents.

In communities in both North and South, education for all can and should empower the poor and the marginalised to seize new opportunities to improve their lives. It matters not whether children are rich or poor, black, white or yellow, whether they are from the highlands of Latin America, the deltas of Asia, the deserts of Africa, the great cities of Europe or the suburbs of North America. They need to be endowed with the confidence and commitment to become the best that they can be.

"Much of the gulf between misery and opportunity, squalor and hope, can be bridged by education," Barber Conable, President of the World Bank, told his Board of Governors recently.