

Education For All: The Challenge Before Us

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As we enter the 1990s, we will certainly experience growing economic, cultural and environmental inter-dependence, technological advancements that are hard to imagine now and highly sophisticated knowledge-based economies. In such a future environment, to be deprived of basic education is to be deprived, in a very real sense, of the essential tools of modern living. Without the skills to participate in a literate, technological world and the knowledge to interact with their environment, people will remain on the margins of society and society itself will lose their vast potential contribution.

The Challenge

Yet, as we enter the new decade, one in every five of our fellow human beings has no access to basic learning opportunities and many more who have access do not acquire an adequate level of learning competency. If current conditions and trends persist, the situation by the year 2000 will be even worse. The challenge, therefore, lies beyond linear expansion

and "business-as-usual." The need is urgent to rethink the purpose and goals of basic education and to broaden the involvement of all sectors of society in providing it equitably and effectively for all.

The "Education for All" initiative calls on the world community to commit itself to a new vision of basic education—one that emphasizes learning competence, flexible and varied forms of delivery systems,

building new alliances among various social institutions, mobilizing new resources and enhancing the environment for learning. This vision is to be

translated into a global, sustained and long-term effort to meet the basic learning needs of children, youth and adults.

To this end, the World Conference on Education for all and its preparatory activities aim to:

Highlight the importance and impact of basic education provide a forum for sharing of experiences and research results to invigorate ongoing and planned programs; and forge a global consensus on a framework for action to meet the basic learning needs of children, youth and adults.

A rare opportunity now presents itself—that can turn the tide from a crisis for basic education to a time of opportunity and promise.

First, as we approach the new decade, global initiatives toward peace are creating a great potential for international cooperation. To quote Barber Conable, President of the World Bank in his address to the Bank's Board of Governors last September 26: "there is a new recognition of the pressures that bind countries together: the need for peace and mutually assured security, the rapid emergence of a truly global economy, and the imperative of managing the world's resources in the interests of people everywhere... The possibilities of building a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world economy in the 1990s grow stronger."

Second, an exciting body of scientific and cultural development is accumulating—enhanced by the fruits of technology and the inventiveness of the human mind in areas such as brain science, communications and community action.

Finally, there is more confidence

that the problem of universal basic education is solvable as countries of different backgrounds have accumulated experience in providing basic education equitably and effectively.

Many countries have made remarkable progress as a result of imaginative and sustained investment in basic learning opportunities. The experience of North America and Europe and more recently Japan, Republic of Korea and Singapore strongly support the conclusion that basic education for all is attainable and is a necessary part of an equitable and efficient foundation for national development.

Which leads me to the question, why this Regional Consultation?

First countries and institutions in this region have made significant progress in the provision of basic education opportunities. However, meeting the basic learning needs of all remains a challenge to all societies. Good quality universal primary education, attainment and maintenance of literacy, and continuous education of the public in life and social issues will never be a finished business. (To be Continued)

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Regional Conference On Education

The theme of the Regional Conference on Education now underway in the capital is "Education For All" and nine countries are participating, including the host country Bangladesh. Nine similar Regional Conferences are

underway at other places in the world indicating international concern for education as an issue. All are in

preparation for the big one—the World Conference on Education due to be held at Bangkok in March next year.

In the light of declining standards of general education all over the world and the expression of concern by individual governments the theme of this conference, "Education For All", takes on new meaning. For it will not be enough simply to reach the goal of bringing basic education to the 900 million illiterates living today in a modern world. Out of this number are the 100 million children who do not even go to school and are the increasing concern of nations. But how the world proposes to handle this immense, if not gigantic, problem will be written down at these conferences.

With the approach of the Twenty-first Century and its concentration and emphasis on what has become as High-Tech we witness the Age Of The Computer which has succeeded in making the gap between North and South even wider in almost every sphere and we are hard pressed to keep up particularly in the field of education.

Knowing this and knowing also that the vast majority of people lacking education of any sort live within our region we are more than concerned with the outcome of this conference, for it will point the way in which our own lives will be travelling.

When dealing with concern for the illiterate and under-privileged populations as existing in countries like Bangladesh we must ask ourselves if giving them what has become to be called 'functional literacy' is sufficient to act as balm to our collective conscience or do we want our people to be able to do more than simply be able to count their fingers and toes.

Returning to the theme of the conference "Education For All" let it be education that is meaningful through realistic programmes. We watch with interest the deliberations of the conference and pray they find a solution to the most pressing problem of our times for education is the foreguard to the solutions of the rest of our ailments.