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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses major changes in the coverage, structure, and conception of what constitutes basic education. Many of these changes have been brought about by a growing international focus on basic education. This evidences a gradual but fundamental change in the manner in which education is perceived in relationship to economic development. Once seen as an item of consumption, education is now recognized as an investment in the most essential factor of production, human competence. The importance of basic education has also been given fresh impulse by the growing attention being given to social development by the United Nations system. Education is seen as the key to progress in the areas of social development, population, and the role of women. To the arguments for education as a basic human right must be added that of education as an indispensable means for social and economic development. On the national level, these changes are a result of an increasingly evident commitment and political will on the part of governments, increasing involvements of agencies, non government organizations, media and others. These emerging changes will address both the need to expand access of education, and to improve the quality, relevance, and usefulness of the education actually received by those who have some access. Changes are grouped as those: (1) expanding access to basic education; and (2) reshaping the content and process of basic education. While the exact shape of reform will be different from country to country, in most cases, the direction of change will be away from traditional structures. (Author/DK)

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BASIC EDUCATION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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Introduction

On the threshold of the twenty-first century, the world is witnessing major changes in the coverage, structure and, indeed, the very conception of what constitutes basic education. These changes have been marked and, to a lesser extent, brought about by a number of recent landmark events focusing on basic education: International Literacy Year, the World Conference on Education for All, the World Summit for Children and the Education for All Summit of the Nine High-Population Countries. Indeed, the holding of these events evidences a gradual but fundamental change in the manner in which education is perceived in relationship to economic development. Once seen as an item of consumption, education is now recognized as an investment in the most essential factor of production: human competence. The importance of basic education has also been given fresh impulse by the growing attention being given to social development by the United Nations system. Forthcoming major United Nations conferences will examine different aspects of social development and seek to influence national opinion and policies in regard to them: e.g. the Population Summit in Cairo, the Social Development Summit in Copenhagen and the Conference on Women in Beijing. Education is the key to progress in all of these areas. Hence, to the arguments for education as a basic human right must be added that in favour of it as an indispensable means for social and economic development.

On the national level, these changes are a result of an increasingly evident commitment and political will on the part of governments, and increasing involvements of agencies, NGOs, media, and other partners in the Education for All alliance.

These emerging changes will address both the need to expand access of education to the millions who still have no educational opportunities, and to improve the quality,

relevance, and usefulness of the education actually received by those who have some access.

Expanding Access to Basic Education

The record of the 20th century in expanding educational opportunities is, at once, a source of pride and of shame. For much of the world, the concept of obligatory and free public schooling began in this century. Indeed, for most of the developing world, mass education began in earnest only after the achievement of independence in the decades following the Second World War. Since 1960, enrolment in the world's schools has doubled, growing from an estimated 250 million children in 1960 to approximately 500 million today. As a result, these enormous educational efforts have almost tripled the number of **literate** adults in the world's population from 1,002 million in 1960 to over 2,700 million today. This is a profound and fundamental change that will have far-reaching consequences in all areas of human endeavour.

And yet, there are still more than 900 million adult **illiterates** in the world today. It is an outrage to the human conscience that one out of five men and two out of five women in this world will enter the twenty-first century deprived of the most essential skills - the ability to read, write and calculate - for effective participation in the modern world. In the poorer regions of the globe, the harsh reality has been that the great efforts towards expanding education systems have not been able to keep up with galloping rates of population growth.

The next century will see nations and societies giving special attention to providing some form of education for all. They will learn from the experience of the past that reaching the unreached does not merely mean expanding existing education systems. They will recognize that groups or parts of society left unserved are precisely those who find existing delivery systems unsuitable to their needs, life patterns, and aspirations. Educators will, therefore, devise and design new models and delivery systems especially tailored to the sub-groups they are intended to serve. This is true whether the unreached are the few (e.g. minority groups, nomads, etc.) or the many, as in some societies, even a majority of children and adults.

In countries - mostly in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia -where literacy rates and school-enrolment rates are around 50% or below, educational systems adapted from the North will have to be seriously studied and, quite possibly, overhauled. Limited resources, constraints arising from structural adjustments and lack of traditionally trained teachers may mean that major segments of society will continue to be unserved and unharnessed for development, if countries insist on pursuing an educational delivery paradigm that is neither affordable nor relevant to the economy and society. In one African country, for example, a recently installed government has chosen to replace traditional primary schools with community learning centres as the key educational institution in the village. These quasi-autonomous community learning centres serve simultaneously as day-care centres for young children; literacy and skills development centres for adults, using peer teaching and learning methods; and as the venue for educating children, using community parents as well as trained learning facilitators to identify learning needs and effective ways of meeting them within the context of the community.

Even in countries where literacy and schooling are almost universal, there continue to be pockets and parts of the population that remain underserved. Ethnic and religious minority groups, remote island and mountain populations, nomadic tribes, immigrant populations, short-term or long-term refugee settlements, street and working children, are but a few of the many diverse groups that require especially designed educational delivery systems. In the next century, nations will become increasingly aware of the need to make education truly universal - if only for the sake of keeping the social fabric intact - and the need to take innovative measures and even to face higher *per capita* costs in order to do so. Effective projects for specific groups launched in the 1990s will, in many cases, be the sources of inspiration to which educators will turn in the twenty-first century in designing larger scale national programmes in the future.

Perhaps the most glaring shortcoming of present educational practice is the intolerable disparity of educational opportunity between men and women. In some nations the differences are especially striking, but as a recent UNDP report points out, there is no nation on earth in which women are treated as favourably as men, and this is true in education as in other fields. Unless there is a dramatic change in the prevailing trends, three regions of the world will enter the twenty-first century with half of their women still illiterate and with a gap of more than 20 per cent between the literacy rates of men and those of women: Sub-Saharan Africa (30%-50%), South Asia (34%-59%) and the Arab States (27%-49%). Fortunately, the 1990s have witnessed a fundamental change in both declared policy and national resolve to close the gender gap. Strengthened political resolve in the capital has not as yet, however, filtered down to villages and communities and brought about the needed changes. The task of the twenty-first century will be to translate honourable intentions into an acceptable reality.

Children with special needs are a sub-group that has traditionally been discriminated against. Important research findings inform us that up to three or four children in the average classroom, the world over, have minor hearing, sight or other deficiencies. These are not dramatic enough to warrant education in specialized institutions, but their problems are often misjudged by poorly trained teachers and interpreted as reflecting a lack of motivation or ability. In many cases, such children are judged unfit for schooling. Reorienting schools and teacher-training institutions in order that special needs may be recognized and handled would save an estimated ten per cent of the population from being misjudged and mis-educated or, as all too often happens, denied the benefits of an education. Recognition of the need for education to be tailored to the child - and not the other way around - will result in a fundamental re-orientation of schooling in the next century. In the ideal school of the next century, each child with his special gifts and limitations should thus be offered a tailor-made programme that can maximize his learning potential and capacity to contribute to society as an adult.

Reshaping the content and process of basic education

While attending to the minority that still have no access to education, the nations of the world will not neglect the majority who do have some access, but whose needs are not fully met or whose potential is not being fully realized, by this available education. There is a current preoccupation with improving the quality of educational systems that already exist, but the next century will almost certainly look beyond issues of quality improvement, to question the relevance of the very structure, content, and process of the educational endeavor.

To be sure, educational ministries in the next century will continue to concern themselves with the essential means to improve the quality of education: first and foremost, the improvement of the teachers and other education workers, both by in-service and pre-service training as well by bettering the status, conditions, and renumerations of teachers; then also regular curriculum revision, greater provision of textbooks and other learning materials, more reliable measurement of learning achievement, ameliorating the conditions of learning (school buildings and furniture, parent/community support, etc.) But already there is a growing sense that the next century will have to look more at effectiveness rather than efficiency, at doing the right things rather than doing things right, at making better things rather than making things better.

All this implies an effort in the next century to come to grips with the persistent malaise of educational systems that produce graduates who cannot find jobs, that develop students who do not return to their communities or even their countries because of the alienating experience within a transplanted educational system, that perpetuate traditional academic disciplines over thematic studies that truly meet the needs of society, the community and the individual.

Countries that have already started to fundamentally re-examine the premises of their educational systems - and that may well be the trailblazers that others will follow in the next century - seem to have focussed on community involvement at the grass roots level as the key to reform. The alienation and irrelevance of centrally governed systems stem precisely from communities and learners being at the passive receiving end of an educational process whose content and pedagogy are predetermined without their involvement, input or commitment. Returning ownership and control of this process naturally leads to a reexamination of content and process in light of their usefulness, whether for employment and productivity, for health, environment and other life skills, or for personal development. The boundaries and accompanying stigmas associated with formal, non-formal, and adult education fade and eventually become meaningless. Education becomes a life-long process, preparing individuals for life-style and even career changes that are inevitable in a fast changing world. An atmosphere transforming a community into a mutually teaching-learning community is thus engendered and sustained. Family responsibility for the care of their children will be supported rather than undermined; as a result, children in the first years before schooling will receive early care more systematically than ever before. Communities would first call upon their own material and human resources where possible, and complemented by a judicious interaction with the outside only at strategic times and for strategic purposes, thus avoiding unhealthy dependence upon outside resources and initiatives. This fits in well with a global trend towards subsidiarity and decentralization of governance, especially in larger countries.

This is not to say that a community driven education should lead to narrow parochialism. The next century will naturally demand of communities themselves an openness to new knowledge and new modes of transmitting that knowledge, with greater need for scientific/technological literacy, and greater use of media and other forms of distance education. There would inevitably be engendered a sense of belongingness to both the local and the global community.

Thus curricula will gradually be structured by theme issues and life skills more than by traditional subject areas; pedagogy will assume a more discovery/participatory learning mode to replace the autocratic one-way transmission of "knowledge" by the teacher/expert

(so inimical to the professed goal of education to teach democracy, tolerance and interaction with peers); teachers will find themselves with redefined roles, and the requirements for these new roles may well be different from the credential-heavy and discipline-bias requirements of today.

A particular case in point as regards curricular content could be mentioned: The more thoughtful educationists are correctly pointing out that while educational systems around the world have progressed in the technologies of imparting literacy and numeracy skills, it has not made much progress in the technologies for imparting the third major area, which encompasses life skills, social skills, or valuing skills. While the twentieth century has produced a generation of experts in computer and the knowledge explosion, this generation is far from being proficient, much less expert, in the value/life skills of peace, tolerance, respect for diversity, and the ethical foundations upon which such skills and knowledge acquired must be based. It has been said that the failure of educators in the century is not the failure to teach science, language, or math, but the failure to teach mankind to live together in peace and to harness the potentials in individuals and societies for full and equitable development. While tomes are written on the teaching of the traditional disciplines, little is known about how to generate a school atmosphere in which the more fundamental values in life are "caught" rather than "taught." Many young adults faced with conflict in a multi-ethnic society may well have turned to violence by default, as the schooling of their childhood years had given them no opportunity to handle dialogue and diversity of opinion, where the role models at school were teachers of absolute power and one-way communication, where repression and rigid uniformity rather than democratic openness was the prevailing atmosphere.

Conclusion

While the exact new shape of the reform will be dramatically different from country to country, it is safe to say that in most cases the direction of change will be away from the traditional structures as we know them. It must be stated that this reform will be largely dependent on the recasting of a new economic order in the countries themselves, so that resources needed for these reforms can be re-channeled from other uses or misuses. Significantly, a new economic order in the countries of the developing world will in turn depend on the willingness of the rest of the global community to fundamentally reshape a new international economic order, upon new premises regarding the distribution of the world's resources and its global income.

And while all this goes well beyond the province of basic education, it is paradoxically only upon the basis of a new paradigm of basic education that we can plant in the minds and hearts of future generations the capability, and more importantly, the resolve and commitment to bring about the fundamental change that will be so essential to human progress and well-being in the twenty-first century.

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