

Education for all: Achieving the goal

The Amman affirmation MID-DECADE MEETING OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONSULTATIVE FORUM ON EDUCATION FOR ALL

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■ Education is empowerment. It is the key to establishing and reinforcing democracy, to development which is both sustainable and humane and to peace founded upon mutual respect and social justice. Indeed, in a world in which creativity and knowledge play an ever greater role, the right to education is nothing less than the right to participate in the life of the modern world.

■ Aware of the power and potential of education, the international community committed itself at the World Conference on Education for All held in Jomtien, Thailand, in March 1990, to meet the basic learning needs of every individual. In major conferences since Jomtien, the nations of the world have repeatedly endorsed the central importance of basic education in all aspects of the development process: preserving the environment, managing population growth, combating poverty, promoting social development and creating equality between the sexes. We have now met in Amman, Jordan, at the gracious invitation of His Majesty King Hussein Bin Talal, to review progress toward the goals set in Jomtien and, of even greater importance, to find ways of overcoming persistent problems and confronting new challenges in order to achieve education for all (EFA).

Gains Achieved

■ In the six years since the adoption of the World Declaration on Education for All, there has been significant progress in basic education, not in all countries nor as much as had been hoped, but progress that is nonetheless real. Primary school enrolment has increased, an estimated fifty million more children are enrolled today than in 1990. The number of out-of-school children, which had grown inexorably for decades, is also beginning to decline. There are today 20 million fewer out-of-school children of primary-school age than at the start of the decade. This progress is the result of concerted efforts by governments and peoples to extend educational opportunities. New partnerships have emerged, new resources have been tapped and new energies and ideas have been devoted to making education for all a reality.

■ Accompanying these quantitative gains has been a growing emphasis on the quality of education. Without educational content relevant to current needs, without preparation in the learning skills and new knowledge required for the future, and without efforts to improve learning achievement, access may neither serve the purposes intended nor provide the benefits expected. Fortunately, serious reflection, more rigorous planning and a spirit of innovation have prepared the ground in many countries for important educational advances in the years ahead.

■ We acknowledge the forces of progress at work in all parts of the world: the new dynamism with which Africa is struggling, in difficult circumstances, to reverse the negative trends of the last ten years; the valiant efforts of South Asia to bring basic education to hundreds of millions of people; the increasing political support being given to EFA in the Arab States, which is increasingly perceived as the best preparation for meeting the challenges and uncertainties of the future; and

the measures taken in other regions of the world to protect, sustain and enhance the gains that have been made since the Jomtien Conference.

Shortfalls

■ Yet, if the achievements of the last six years give reason for optimism, they provide no room for complacency. Continued progress requires even more forceful and concerted action, based on good information, sound research and careful analysis and aimed at achieving clearly specified results.

■ No point was more stressed in Jomtien than the urgent need to close the gender gap in education, both as a matter of simple equity and as the most effective means for responding to demographic pressures and promoting development. Yet, progress towards this goal has been excruciatingly slow; much more must be done.

■ The expanded vision of basic education espoused in Jomtien has often been reduced to a simple emphasis upon putting more children into school: an essential step, but only one of many measures needed to achieve EFA.

■ Early childhood care and development, with its enormous potential and distinctive role in promoting the active learning capacities and the overall well-being and development of children, while receiving greatly increased attention, nonetheless remains seriously under-developed and under-supported in many countries.

■ This lack of support applies as well to out-of-school literacy and education programmes for adolescents and adults. There are some 900 million adult illiterates in the world, nearly two-thirds of them women. In all societies, the best predictor of the learning achievement of children is the education and literacy level of their parents. Investments in adult education and literacy are, thus, investments in the education of entire families.

■ There has also been a tendency to focus on basic education without recognizing its essential links to secondary and higher education, as well as to teacher training and the development of technical and vocational skills. The World Declaration on Education for All was intended to empower, not to limit -- to propose minimums, but not to set ceilings.

The Road Ahead

■ As we look to the end of the century and beyond, the leadership in each country must assume the responsibility for accelerating progress towards EFA, setting firm targets and timetables for achieving them.

■ International agencies and donors must also play their full role as partners in the EFA movement, matching national efforts with significantly increased international support, improved co-ordination and greater responsiveness to country priorities.

■ All EFA partners must learn how to mobilize new resources as well as how to use existing resources more effectively. In the quest for EFA, enhanced political will, greater financial and material resources and improved management are all essential.

Emerging Challenges

■ In the light of the developments of the past six years, it has become essential to re-examine goals and add new areas and means of action to those set forth in the Jomtien vision:

■ Given the trend toward more open societies and global economies, we must emphasize the forms of learning and critical thinking that enable individuals to understand changing environments, create new knowledge and shape their own destinies. We must respond to new challenges by promoting learning in all aspects of life, through all the institutions of society, in effect, creating environments in which living is learning.

■ Given the growing recognition and reality of multicultural and diverse societies, we must respond by including local content as well as cross-cultural learning in basic education and by acknowledging the essential role of the mother tongue for initial instruction.

■ Given escalating violence caused by growing ethnic tensions and other sources of conflict, we must respond by ensuring that education reinforces mutual respect, social cohesion and democratic governance; We must learn how to use education to prevent conflict and, where crises do occur, ensure that education is among the first responses, thereby contributing to hope, stability and the healing of the wounds of conflict.

■ Given debt burdens, restrictions on social expenditures and continuing wasteful expenditure on weapons of war, we must respond with measures to reduce debt burdens, including the transformation of liabilities into assets through debt swaps, policies that promote investments in a nation's people and future, and reforms to the international economic system that give poor countries a chance to earn their way in the world.

■ Given rapidly growing numbers of youth at risk, often alienated from society and facing unemployment, we must seek ways to make education more responsive, both to the immediate realities facing these youth, as well as to the changing realities of a world in which basic learning skills are ever more important.

Continuing Challenges

■ Even as we focus our attention on these new realities and challenges, we must persist in our efforts to meet the goals set forth in the World Declaration on Education for All:

The priority of priorities must continue to be the education of women and girls. Successful approaches and programmes must be identified in order that they may be replicated and expanded. There can be no enduring success in basic education until the gender gap is closed.

The training, status and motivation of teachers continues to be at the very core of educational concerns. While we must make better and wider use of technology and media, they can complement, but never replace the essential role of the teacher as the organizer of the instructional process and as a guide and example to the young.

The full vision of EFA, that of a learning society, recognizes the role of parents, families and communities as the child's first teachers. Both learning and teaching begin at birth and continue

throughout life, as individuals work, live and communicate ideas and values by word and example.

EFA can only be achieved through a broad partnership united by a shared purpose. It is essential to sustain the spirit of partnership and to broaden it to include all elements of society: parliaments, religious bodies, voluntary and community groups, the business sector, the media and others. EFA was founded on a faith in partnerships and a belief that, in a shrinking world, we are destined to share fully in the successes as well as the setbacks of other peoples and countries. In the quest to achieve EFA, it is essential that we sustain and enhance this spirit of solidarity.

The efficient and effective use of resources continues to be essential to the progress of EFA. We must seek more efficient management of education systems, make more effective use of partnerships, draw more systematically upon research and experimentation, and develop reliable information and assessment systems.

The right to education has been powerfully reaffirmed by the near-universal ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Yet, there are still over 100 million children without access to education. We must respond urgently with new approaches and strategies capable of bringing quality education within the reach of all, including the poor, the remote and those with special educational needs. This calls for a comprehensive effort tailored to the needs of specific populations and based upon the best available expertise and technology.

Renewing the Pledge

■ Six years ago, at Jomtien, the international community agreed upon the necessity and the possibility of achieving Education for All. Today, we, the participants in the Mid-Decade Review of EFA, reflecting on the experience and knowledge gained during the intervening years, reaffirm that necessity and possibility and re-dedicate ourselves to the essential task of bring the benefits of education to all.

*** The Amman Affirmation, the final communiqué of the Mid-Decade Meeting of the International Consultative Forum on Education for All, was adopted by acclamation on 19 June 1996. A final report of the meeting, that will provide additional information on the issues cited in this text, will be issued later in 1996 by the EFA Forum Secretariat based at UNESCO headquarters in Paris.

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