

Towards achieving education for all — I

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THE main tool we have to achieve development and sustain it is by releasing the human potential of all people and strengthening the capacity to deal with their own situations and problems. And the way to achieve this is through education—education through formal schooling, through self-learning, and through non-formal means including radio, television, and religious and commercial channels of communication.

That the benefits of progress could be brought to all people, and the role that education can play in this are clear, for example, in the health field. As the Director General of the World Health Organization (WHO), Dr. Nakajima, told health educators in August 1988:

"We must recognize that most of the world's major health problems and premature deaths are preventable through changes in human behaviour and as low cost. We have the know-how and technology but they have to be transformed into effective action at the community level. Parents and families, properly supported, could save two-thirds of the 14 million children who die every year—if only they were properly informed and motivated. Immunization alone could save 3 million lives—and another 3 million deaths a year could be prevented by oral rehydration, a simple and cheap technology. A recent report by the US Surgeon General indicated that diet and food habits are implicated in two-thirds of all deaths in the United States. A study just completed in India has shown that about 600,000 Indians die from tobacco-related diseases a year: the worldwide total as estimated by WHO is 2.5 million deaths per year.

Dr Nakajima is telling us in this that knowledge "self-health" knowledge—could make a life-or-death difference for massive numbers of people in industrialized and developing countries alike.

And basic knowledge—knowledge which is already available can make the crucial difference in other aspects of people's lives, beyond health. In agriculture, for example, the effectiveness of farmers depends on the knowledge that they have. A recent study concluded that a minimum of four years primary education increased farmer productivity by an average of 8.7 percent for all countries and 10 percent for those undergoing modernization and growth. Similarly, several studies have established that the more education a mother has, the fewer children are desired in her family, and the greater the survival rate of those who are born. Studies have also shown that at any income level, families were better fed the higher the mothers' education.

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH KNOWLEDGE

Where there used to be hills of knowledge, today there are Himalayan mountains of knowledge—mountains growing taller with each passing decade. But when we are addressing the issue of education for all, we must look, in effect not just at the mountains of knowledge available but knowledge relevant to the relatively disadvantaged, to those

removed from the easy channels of sharing knowledge—whether it is the 50 percent of South Asia's population which lives in poverty or the more than 10 percent of North America's families living below the poverty line. And among these poor, the suffering of massive numbers of people could be alleviated and their lives could be improved, if only they were empowered with relevant knowledge—knowledge which is already in existence. This includes, of course, knowledge of how to obtain more life-enhancing knowledge—or learning how to learn. It also should include a new and deep respect for the knowledge that exists among people themselves but which has so far either been ignored or neglected.

Not only does such knowledge open new opportunities for confronting old problems; it is also crucial for facing major emerging problems such as drug abuse and AIDS, against which our most effective weapon is prevention through education. Similarly, education regarding the harmful effects of some life-style habits of the affluent are our best defence against cancer and heart problems.

It is also important to note that progress in almost any social sector—whether it is increased immunization coverage or the appropriate agricultural technology—depends on education in order for that progress

to be sustained. BRIDGING THE KNOWLEDGE-GAP

Yet with all these possibilities so close at hand, never before in history has there been such a gap between knowledge capable of improving people's well-being and its availability to those who most need to know. The need is to go beyond a linear expansion of present educational efforts; furthermore, even the maintenance of the present activities is threatened in many countries by an unfortunate combination of economic adjustment without "a human face" in response to financial difficulties and benign neglect at a time when there is an almost universal shift toward greater reliance on market mechanisms. In the 37 poorest nations, spending per head on education has been reduced by 25 percent over the past few years.

What can we do to help bridge this knowledge-gap? How do people become empowered with knowledge? How do they become motivated to use knowledge to promote the kind of change which contributes to this progress? These questions, I believe, define one of the most important challenges of our era, and they are precisely the questions which face this conference.

In seeking to help in the empowerment of people with knowledge, several basic factors have to be taken into account, some of them relatively new.

First, we know that learning begins at birth; the ability to acquire knowledge and to participate actively in further learning, both in and out of school, depends on the physical, mental, and social development and learning that occurs prior to age 6. If the children are unhealthy or malnourished, to that degree their attention span or learning capacity will be diminished.

Second, we know that all people need to be given an opportunity for at least several years of schooling, and that a special effort is required in many countries to bring young girls into the schooling system. We welcome the action by several South Asian countries in declaring 1990 the "Year of the Girl Child," with its promise to promote equity in enrollment. Similarly, we also need to be looking at other sectors of the population who are disadvantaged, like the illiterates, the poor, the disabled, the displaced and the working children.

Third, we all know that there are major improvements which need to be made to make schooling more relevant and of higher quality.

Fourth, we know that in many parts of the world we need to use resources for schooling efficiently if we are to universalize education, and to reach the hundreds of millions currently unreached by the schooling process. At the same time, it has to be stressed that the goal is not just numbers of children in

school but meaningful learning achievement. The minimum that must be mastered by all in primary education needs to be defined in each country and simple systems developed to assess the learning achievement.

Fifth, the past 50 years has not only brought a tremendous increase of knowledge relevant to people's well-being, but at the same time, a virtual revolution has occurred in our capacity to communicate it—e.g., by electronic media, radio, TV, computer, fax. The technology surrounding communication has been advancing exponentially. Every few years, the costs of communicating are halved. This is one of the few areas in our society in which costs are going steadily down and are projected to keep going down—while almost everything else—food rent, transport and just about any consumer product—seems to be becoming more and more expensive. How do we take advantage of this communications revolution?

Sixth, we know that communication of knowledge-education can come through many channels, and new uses are rapidly being discovered for the new technologies. Where television has become a normal feature of life, children are learning more today through TV than they do in school. How important, then, are media influences where schools are either non-existent or of very low quality? It is old news today to note that the radio is ubiquitous, and even VCRs can be found in large supply in some of the most remote and poorest corners of the world, including in the roadless valleys of the two Yemens. How do we put these new resources to their fullest use? This has become a major challenge.

(To be continued)