

Towards achieving education for all—II

Dr. Nyl Nyl

HOW much more important also, can be the religious communicators, our traditional "educator", who have been newly empowered by the modern means of communications for education? And how can they contribute far more toward the goals of empowering people with knowledge and learning skills?

MOBILIZING ALL CHANNELS

In the area of child protection and survival, substantial achievements have been made already. If we want to translate these experiences to the education field, we see quite clearly that "education for all" cannot be accomplished by the education sector alone, nor by governments alone. If we want to take this goal seriously, a major alliance of new partners must be brought into the act.

Nor is this a task applicable only to the Third World. Surely, the strongest benefit of global enthusiasm for Basic Education for All will be felt by the world's poor. But, as an indication of problems in education shared by developing as well as industrialized countries, besides the 900 million to 1 billion illiterates in the Third World, there are close to 30 million functional adult illiterates in the US and Canada.

Furthermore, rich and poor nations alike share such problems as drop-outs, dated or otherwise irrelevant curricula and low quality education that is inordinately expensive, to name but a few.

We are all faced with a common challenge: How do we better prepare children for schooling and schools for children so to make the formal education system more relevant and less expensive? Developing countries must discover how to make the formal systems both cost effective, and, even more importantly, more relevant, and capable of retaining students, while the industrialized countries must seriously face the relevancy issue, and also must take the lead—with creativity—in discovering how to modernise these new revolutionary communications mechanisms for formal instruction.

Throughout the world, breakthroughs are occurring in overcoming these problems. How do we go-to-scale on the lessons being learned? Obviously, much more evaluation and research and dissemination of the results are required. One's imagination is piqued by the massive Integrated Child Development Service in India which reaches 20 million children, ages 0-6, in a combined programme of health, nutrition and non-formal pre-schooling. Or by experiments such as the new primary school model being developed in Bangladesh, in which the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) a non-governmental organization, is working with the government among the poorest of landless families. Daily attendance rate is over 95 per cent and the drop-out rate is only 1.5 per cent. The Bangladeshi Ministry of Education has also pioneered a satellite system of feeder schools at Bhaluka. Communities have been involved to provide for the first three years of schooling for their children's education. This has boosted enrolment from 25% to 90% of the children of the age group. Some apparently brilliant innovation, in training of teachers, fostering of parent participation, and development of relevant curricula and effective pedagogy may well be replicable at low cost in many other settings.

BASIC CHALLENGES

We face two basic challenges. First, how can basic education be universalized? How do we put the all in "education for all"? How do we reach the people at the margins of society with basic life skills?

The second basic challenge is how to greatly increase the effectiveness of the existing knowledge/communication sys-

tem for the purpose of empowering people with knowledge relevant to their well-being? What can be done, by people like us and by those whom we can influence, to help facilitate processes through which people will have several times the knowledge—relevant knowledge—than they do today?

Our efforts to increase the commitment to relevant education in different forms has a moral dimension as well as a practical dimension. Perhaps I may discuss the moral dimension first.

After a decade of gestation the United Nations General Assembly has now passed the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention, which provides an important internationally-agreed standard, asserts the right of the child to an education, and also to education about child survival and development issues. Children's rights, of course, translate in reality to adults' responsibilities. Thus, the Convention asserts the responsibilities of States to several specific measures in providing an education for children, based on the recognition of:

—the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity."

Furthermore, the Convention asserts the responsibility of States:

"To ensure that all segments of society, in particular parents and children, are informed, have access to education and are supported in the use of basic knowledge of child health and nutrition, the advantages of breast-feeding, hygiene and environmental sanitation and the prevention of accidents."

The adoption of the Child Rights Convention on 20

November 1989 by the UN General Assembly perhaps symbolizes a new favourable world environment for bringing the issue of human needs and human development to the forefront. There is now a very distinct possibility of a Summit Meeting of World leaders on children next year. More than 100 countries have now endorsed the idea of holding the first ever north-south-east-west summit exclusively on children's needs. Such a summit would be an unprecedented historical opportunity to mobilize national and global efforts in favour of giving children and adults the opportunity for basic relevant learning.

As we enter the final decade of this millennium we may ask what more precious legacy could be left to the 21st century than the education and health of those people who will comprise the societies of the future—that is, the children of today. Perhaps, in fact, there is a greater gift. But it will be given through the same efforts. The single greatest gift of this century could be crystallized during the coming decade. It would be to mobilize and restructure, in the 1990s, all existing channels of education—of communication—for empowering people, including particularly those currently largely unreached, far more than ever before, with the vital relevant knowledge presently available. If this is accomplished, societies of the future will take for granted that education is everyone's concern and responsibility. Such an ethic would help ensure the well-being of children for generations to come, and it would offer convincing evidence that we are progressing as a more just and humane civilization.

As regards the other dimension of the practical side, it

may be mentioned that in many countries of this region, and even more so in other regions perhaps, the economics of trying to achieve Education for All presents a rather harsh reality. One of the basic purposes of the EFA initiative however is to try and get that reality transformed. Why should basic education not be 'affordable'? The short-sightedness of cutting back on basic education budgets that are already low must be realised and must be fought—and not just by the education sector alone. The countries of this region can afford many things. But they can not afford poverty and poverty cannot be fought by people incapacitated through lack of education. Therefore, education must be given its proper place on the political and developmental agenda.

Also from a practical point of view the wealth of experiments and experience in the countries of the region is almost unparalleled. However, there has been only modest success in bringing these experiences to all the children and adults. Can we come up with enough constructive, positive approaches for dealing with the enormous issues and challenges that we face in going to scale in education for all in the same way as we have succeeded in some other areas such as the protection against preventable diseases within the framework of primary health care? In order to do this we must sustain the intellectual and practical energy that has for so long been directed towards the questions of 'why' 'what' to the questions of 'how'. The question of 'how' may not be as glamorous as the other two. This perception has to be changed if we want to achieve what we say we want.

For, in the end education is not only a human right, advo-

cate by educationists. Without it the inequities and the disparities that create and maintain underdevelopment will increase and threaten not only the survival and development of entire nations but also the hope of the creation of more just and equitable relations between the nations of the world.

A strong message of endorsement of the following three main goals for the next decade of the global initiative on Basic Education for all, should be sent to the world conference on education for all in Thailand next March.

(a) at least 80 percent of primary school age children achieve a minimum level of learning as defined by each country,

(b) the illiteracy rate of adults reduced at least by half from the 1990 level with priority given to women and girls and the productive age group of 15 to 40 years, and

(c) all members of society have regular access to basic knowledge skills and information disseminated systematically and widely through all channels of communication, and education for improving living condition of people.

(d) the meaning and scope of education be broadened to include incalculation of societal values so that scourges of the society like drug abuse, AIDS, destruction of environment can be prevented

The Thailand Conference on Meeting Basic Learning Needs has the potential to become the turning point in the field of basic education, much as 1978 in Alma Ata was the pivotal moment for those committed to "Health for All." It is a formidable challenge—one which we could only dream to meet with the intensive leadership of exactly those of us gathered here today. Can we bring the benefits of modern progress-through education to all? For the future of our children and of our world together, I think we can.

[The writer, who is Director of Programmes at UNICEF, presented this paper at the South Asian Regional Forum on Education for All, Dhaka, recently.]