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# Children's right to education

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**D**URING my 37 years in Bangladesh I have attended many meetings, seminars and conferences, both inside and outside the country. I have often become somewhat indifferent, and mentally weary or "tuned out" because of hearing the same thing repeated so many times. Several times I have been tempted to give up on all seminars and conferences—which require so much time, expense and trouble—and concentrate exclusively on the practical work which needs to be done.

But we can never operate in a vacuum. We have to work according to a rational and well-planned agenda of action which is suited to the people's needs and problems. A man once tried to convince the British historian, Thomas Carlyle, that it is the people of action rather than the people of theory who most influence

the course of history. Carlyle replied: "They said that about a fellow named Rousseau and their skins went to bind the second edition." It was Jean-Jacques Rousseau's book *The Social Contract* which gave the theoretical basis and inspiration for the French Revolution.

The subject matter of this conference was new to me and it was treated in a multifaceted manner. The varied perspectives of active workers from different countries and different areas of endeavour have made this conference an interesting and profitable one for all of us, I hope. All the U.N. member countries have been preparing in some way for the Convention on the Rights of the Child. No one has the last word or the best word. Each country has to analyze the situation according to its own circumstances and resources available and see what it can realistically do to

olve some of the many problems of children which have been discussed at our conference.

I said in my welcome address that besides the basic right to life, the right to education is perhaps the most important of children's rights. Without education it is difficult to break out from grinding poverty. Without education it is also difficult to protect one's other rights.

Bangladesh is called a poor country—but it is rich in human resources. Children, particularly, are termed the hope of the future. But that is only if they are educated. Due to poverty in so many families,

not only are the husband and wife both required to work but the children as well. Most of them have poorly paying jobs but at the very least they earn their own support. For example, the boys and girls who work as domestic servants get a place to stay, food to eat, clothing to wear and a little bit of money to send home. Their life may be difficult but they are maintaining themselves.

How can government take such a huge number of children out of their places of work and send them to school? It is estimated that one-third of the children of primary school age are not enrolled in school.

Only 14% of primary school students finish Class 5. Universal Primary Education (UPE) has been tried before but failed. Even when all educational materials and clothing are supplied to children it is still not enough. Their labour is necessary to supplement the family income. UPE is strongly connected with development for all. It is a part of a total development strategy, which brings up the family to the point where the parents can afford to let their children go to school. They will even be happy to let them go to school because education is the main key to their future.

Most of us here are much

more educated than our parents. They didn't have the same opportunity we had but they wanted us to have as much education as possible. What we have achieved is based largely on our early education which our parents were mainly responsible for.

How can government see to it that all children receive permanent functional literacy? Certainly some radical changes in education are necessary. One way might be through requiring employers to release children for one or two hours of school every day. Special classes can be arranged, at least in the cities, for street children and slum children, who are the

main ones who have to work for a living. Special methods are available for rapid teaching of such children. They are able to learn as much in two hours as normal students do in a full day's school session. Because they are able to put to use some of their newly acquired knowledge in their jobs, their retention of what they learn is much greater than normal. In some schools for slum children run by private groups we find that the working children are zealous for learning. They are eager to come to school for classes.

We cannot expect ideal solutions overnight for problems of long standing. "Half a loaf is better than no bread at all." To do something that is realistic and effective for helping thousands of children break out of the bonds of ignorance and illiteracy would be a satisfactory accomplish-

ment, even if UPE is not attained within five or ten years. Government is limited in its resources for education and needs the supplementary aid of private individuals and voluntary agencies. It was the slogan of a highly successful literacy movement of the 1950s in Bangladesh: "Each one teach one." If this slogan was universally adopted and put into practice by all the educated, illiteracy would soon be conquered. I hope that our little contribution in this conference will help our countries to understand better the nature of the problems of children affecting human rights and the possible ways they can be met. (Read at the Second South Asian conference on "Children's Rights and Child Labour" recently held in Dhaka. Dr R. W. Timm is the Executive Secretary of the Commission for Justice & Peace.)