

## **Education and Sustainable Development**

*(‘Fair Comment’ in the Commonwealth of Learning Newsletter: Connections)*

Sir John Daniel, O.C.

We launched the UN Decade for Education for Sustainable Development in 2005 when I was Assistant Director-General for Education at UNESCO. What did it mean? At that time 'sustainable development' was more exclusively linked to environmental issues than it is today, but we wanted it to be more than a decade for environmental education. The longer we grappled with the term 'sustainable development' the simpler our interpretation became. It means development, in all the rich meaning of that term, which is sustainable. We must not eliminate opportunities for future generations in order to pander to ourselves.

My main task at UNESCO was to coordinate the efforts of intergovernmental organisations (UNESCO, World Bank, UNICEF, etc.) and national development agencies to progress the global campaign for education for all (EFA). Although the objective of securing education for everyone goes back to the end of WWII and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a concerted focus on it really began with the Jomtien Conference in 1990. However, the 1990s were a turbulent decade during which the campaign actually went backwards: there were 100 million children not in school in 1990 and by 2000 this had grown to 125 million. So in 2000 the drive to EFA was given greater impetus, not only through a second conference at Dakar and the proclamation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) but, very importantly, by putting in place systematic follow-up mechanisms.

These included a Fast-Track Initiative to direct significant funds to developing countries that had already nearly achieved Universal Primary Education and the publication of an annual Global Monitoring Report on progress towards the EFA goals. As a result, our understanding of the links between education and development became both more holistic and more evidence based. For example, the strong link between secondary education for girls and sustainable development became very clear. Women with secondary education have, on average, 1.5 fewer children than those with only primary schooling. Limiting population growth is the most promising way of limiting climate change and even a one-child difference per woman represents 3 billion more or fewer people on the planet by the middle of the century.

Despite good progress the battle for EFA is by no means won. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030 include education goals articulated in last year's Incheon Declaration. From my perspective, however, there are two major gaps in the Incheon Declaration. First, and almost unbelievably in the second decade of the 21st century, it makes no reference to the potential of technology to drive education forward. Second, these development agencies still retain their coyness about acknowledging the

large role of small private schools in bringing quality education to the poorest communities. But I suppose the important step is to have the world sign up to the SDGs and the importance of EFA. As COL has shown brilliantly, technology has its own dynamic once it is unleashed and governments will, sooner or later, realise that they need help from all sectors if they are to achieve the Incheon education goals.