

Wednesday 24 February 2016

Sustainable Development Begins with Education

Remarks by
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Good afternoon, it is a pleasure to be back at UNESCO and to take part in this session on sustainable development and education with Jean-Yves Le Saux and Sabine Detzel. It's also good to be involved in an AFUS event. I follow closely the excellent activities that AFUS offers to its members, but since I live on the edge of the known world in Vancouver I am rarely able to take part in them.

I thank Neda Ferrier and my former ED colleague Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić for setting up this discussion on a topic that has been central to UNESCO's work in the past and remains vital for its future.

Our aim today is share our perceptions of UNESCO's role in the great global drive towards education for all: both celebrating the successes and exploring the challenges.

The commitment to 'full and equal opportunities for education for all' goes back to UNESCO's constitution. However, for today's discussion we shall take as our starting point the Conference on Education for All that convened in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990. I will take you from there to the middle of the last decade. Then my colleagues Jean-Yves and Sabine will bring you up to date by looking ahead to 2030. This is the target date for the Sustainable Development Goals that were agreed at the UN in September 2015. Goal 4 focuses on Education¹, based on the targets set by the Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action, adopted in May last year.

I wrote about the progress of the EFA campaign up to about 2009 in my book *Mega-Schools, Technology and Teachers: Achieving Education for All* that was published in 2010. I shall draw on that narrative but my approach today will be more personal.

I begin with just two comments about the importance of achieving education for all.

First, I quote Nelson Mandela, who once said: 'there can be no contentment for any of us when there are children, millions of children, who do not receive an education that provides them with dignity and honour and allows them to lead their lives to the full'.

The second is to note the strongest direct link between education and sustainable

¹ Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong opportunities for all.

development, which is secondary education for girls. Women with secondary education have, on average, 1.5 fewer children than those with only primary schooling. Even a one-child difference per woman represents 3 billion more or fewer people on the planet by the middle of the century. Limiting population growth is the most promising way of limiting climate change.

There are, of course, many other reasons why sustainable development depends on education, but I will focus now on progress towards EFA in the two decades after Jomtien.

The Jomtien conference was convened because in 1985 some 105 million children aged between six and eleven, the majority of them girls, were not in school. Forecasts suggested that this number could double to 200 million by 2000. The purpose of the Jomtien conference was to stimulate a new and broader vision of basic education. It led to the adoption, by 155 governments, 33 intergovernmental bodies and 125 NGOs, of a set of six targets to be reached by 2000.

These targets were not achieved. Indeed, in absolute terms the world went backwards. In 1990 100 million children were not in school and by 2000 this had grown to 125 million. We can go into the reasons for this failure in discussion later. The 1990s were a turbulent decade and several factors moved the goalposts out of reach.

Accordingly a new conference on Education for All was convened in Dakar in 2000. It also set six goals, this time with the target of 2015. Abhimanyu Singh from India, who subsequently played a key role in supporting UNESCO's follow-up to Dakar, was the rapporteur.

The World Bank's background documents for the Dakar conference showed that it expected be designated as the lead body for the implementation of the Dakar Framework for Action. In the event, however, thanks to some fast footwork by incoming Director-General Matsuura, this role was given to UNESCO.

There was, however, an important consolation prize for the Bank, which was given the coordinating role for pursuing the Millennium Development Goals, the MDGs that were approved at the big UN Millennium Summit later that same year.

I joined UNESCO a few months later and was charged with fulfilling the mandate we had been given in Dakar. In those days relationships between the major agencies, UNESCO, World Bank, UNICEF and so on, were pretty poisonous, full of petty rivalries and backbiting. But it was clear that we would all have to work together and I set off down that path.

Ronald Reagan once said that you can achieve anything provided you don't care who takes the credit, and I operated on that principle. It was very helpful that the new head of Education at the World Bank, Ruth Kagia from Kenya, happened to be at a meeting at

UNESCO on March 1, 2001, her first day on the job. We got on well and vowed that the Bank and UNESCO would collaborate closely.

The MDGs included shorter versions of two of the six Dakar goals, achieving Universal Primary Education and eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education. Naturally the World Bank focused its efforts and funds on them. At first we at UNESCO regretted that the other four Dakar goals had been effectively set to one side, but we quickly realised that if we were to improve on the world's performance after Jomtien we needed to be pragmatic and concentrate on the essentials.

One manifestation of this focus was the Fast-Track Initiative, launched at the Development Committee of the World Bank in 2002 with the aim of providing concentrated support to complete the task of achieving the quantifiable EFA goals in countries where conditions were judged to be propitious. This led to some very productive and convivial meetings. I well remember Minister Jeffries from Guyana remarking that to use the word 'fast' in connection with anything involving the World Bank was an oxymoron.

In fact the alliance between the Bank and UNESCO worked well. The Bank had the money but the developing countries regarded UNESCO as 'their' agency, which gave credibility to our joint decisions.

It was also enormously helpful that UNESCO was given the funds to publish the annual Global Monitoring Reports on EFA. There's a saying that 'if you can't measure it, you can't manage it'. Having this intellectually powerful group hold a mirror up to our efforts added to the sense of purpose that developed over the decade.

I will conclude my remarks there. UNESCO can be proud that the EFA campaign made much faster progress in the 2000's than it had in the 1990's. There was still a large unfinished agenda. For example, the 2009 Global Monitoring Report commented: 'progress towards the EFA goals is being undermined by the failure of governments to tackle persistent inequalities based on income, location, gender, ethnicity, language, disability and other markers of disadvantage'.

This provides a good lead in to the contributions of my colleagues. Inequality is now a headline issue everywhere. The Incheon Education 2030 Declaration is picking this up, as well as the Dakar Goals that were left on the side table during our work in the 2000's.