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Book: Open Higher Education in the 21st Century
Session: Resilient approach to the covid-19 crisis

What is the Crisis; What is Open Education?

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"Mega-Universities and Knowledge Media: Technology Strategies for Higher Education"
and

"Mega-Schools, Technology and Teachers: Achieving Education for All"

In my five minutes I shall address two questions:

- First, what is the covid-19 crisis?

- Second, what is open education?

The crisis is that Covid-19 has increased inequalities. Access to education has become less equal, which increases inequalities in every domain of life.

In 2000 the UN announced a list of Millennium Development Goals to be achieved by 2015. One was to achieve Universal Primary Education, because millions of children were not in school. I was then Head of Education at UNESCO, where my job was to drive a campaign by governments and development agencies to get all children into primary school.

That campaign was quite successful. By 2015 most countries, except for Nigeria and Pakistan, could claim to have achieved universal primary education. The quality was often poor, and many children did not complete their programmes, but there was real progress.

Covid-19 has reversed that. UNESCO estimates that the learning losses due to school closures during the pandemic equal the gains made in the last 20 years. Many millions of children are still affected by school closures, which have disproportionately impacted the most vulnerable and the marginalised.

Open education is the best way to repair those losses. Recent decades have seen the creation of open universities - some 60 at last count - and an increasing number of open schools.

The UK's Open University is the pacesetter for the open universities, and India's National Institute of Open Schooling, which has over two million pupils enrolled, is the world's leading open school.

Why do these institutions call themselves open? Why is that important?

The slogan of the Open University opens it on four dimensions: open to people, open to places, open to methods, and open to ideas.

Open to people means open admission - taking anyone who wants to study and helping them to succeed.

Open to places means being omni-present. It means a distance learning system that combines communication through technology with local learning hubs where pupils and teachers can meet.

Open to methods means using all useful communications tools and teaching strategies to reach and encourage the learners.

Open to ideas means being ready to change when new subjects and needs emerge.

These open schools and universities are difficult to run. First, they are often very large. But the bigger problem is that the people operating them are often stuck in traditional educational thinking: to be selective, to be closed, to be limited to particular spaces, to assume that yesterday's curriculum will be good tomorrow.

We must break out of those habits.

The Chinese symbol for crisis brings together the ideograms for both danger and opportunity.

Let's hope that covid-19 is a true crisis. A danger, but also an opportunity to tackle the major challenge of our times, inequalities.

Thank you