

Eliminating the Traffic Jams on the Road to Freedom



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Introduction

It is a pleasure to be here. I am intrigued by the concept of the Students' League of Nations and delighted to be speaking to you in the Palais des Nations. Having spent four years in the United Nations system working for UNESCO, I have visited this building before but never addressed a General Assembly.

The Students' League of Nations is a powerful idea and I particularly approve of the rule that you can't represent your own nation. Being able to understand the perspectives of others is a key to civilised living as global citizens. What better way to understand other perspectives than to present them convincingly to a sceptical audience? Some cultures resolve disputes by requiring each opposed party to express the point of view of the other in a way that the other agrees is accurate.

I am nervous about coming to you in the middle of your debates. I suspect that you would rather not interrupt those debates to listen to me. Furthermore, when you give a speech on another topic in the middle of a debate, the reaction you get is coloured by the state of the debate. Let me give you an example.

For eleven years, from 1990 to 2001, I was the vice-chancellor of Britain's Open University. It is much the largest university in Britain, with nearly 200,000 students. They have a vibrant student association which holds a large annual conference along the lines of a political party conference. The student body elects several hundred students, on a geographical basis, to represent them at the annual conference,

where they debate an impressive number of resolutions about the student condition.

As head of the Open University you must take the annual conference of the Students' Association very seriously. By tradition I was invited to address the conference each year and I prepared carefully for this event. My speech tried to combine an account of my stewardship, an explanation of the major changes under way and an exhortation to support the University.

In 1993 my speech was scheduled in the middle of a debate about the University's home computing policy. With the growth of computing it was clear that the University could no longer teach some subjects in a credible manner unless it required students to use computers. For a University whose students studied mainly at home this was a challenge. Second, it was also obvious that we could provide richer and more rapid academic and personal support to those students who did have a computer at home that could connect to the University. (Remember that ten years ago the Internet was not part of everyday vocabulary).

So it was in the University's interest for all students to acquire computers. However, in 1993 personal computers were relatively more expensive and less useful than they are today. The Open University has a very egalitarian spirit. Because it exists to open up higher learning to all who can benefit, regardless of prior qualifications, there is strong resistance to anything that imposes barriers to study, such as the cost of a computer.

This debate was raging as I went up to give my speech. In those days, as today, I gave my speeches using a laptop computer, which is the best aid to public speaking ever invented. But by opening up my laptop as I arrived at the podium, I showed that I had joined the computer world. This did not endear me to a significant faction in the debate, which argued that unless everyone could acquire a computer, no one should be required to have one.

They listened to me politely, although I doubt that I changed any minds. Time did that. As the penetration of computers into society marched on, and as the student executive discovered the advantages of using computer communications for conducting the business of the association across Europe, the attitude flipped over completely. Three years later, when I again gave my annual speech at the conference, the students chastised me because we were not moving fast enough to introduce computing across the University.

All that is simply to warn you that your debate may influence the way you judge what I have to say. I hope that the issues I shall raise will resonate with you. I shall talk about education and my title is: Eliminating the Traffic Jams on the Road to Freedom.

There is an irony here. You are some of the best educated people in the world. Not only are you attending good schools, you are attending international schools, which are the crème de la crème of the world school system. A good international school not only gives you a qualification, like the International Baccalaureate, which is recognised by employers and universities all over the globe; it should also give you an international outlook.

You will not experience any traffic problems on the road to freedom. Your education has given you a great choice of futures. You will become the leaders of your generation. That will put you in a position to do something about the problems of the world. That is why I am talking to you about the biggest problem in international development, namely the huge numbers of people without education.

First, I shall tell you why the issue of education should be of concern to you. Second, I shall make a brief excursion into history. Today we tend to take education for all for granted. It is actually a relatively recent concept in legislation - and even more so in practice. Third I shall look at education around the globe. Where has education for all been achieved? Where is good progress being made? Where are the seemingly hopeless cases? From there I shall describe what is being done, by countries themselves, and by the international community, to move the world toward education for all. My final section will be more speculative. We cannot promote education for all without asking ourselves what kind of education we mean. What is quality education?

It seems that 11 September 2001 - or more accurately, 12 September 2001, by which I mean the response to September 11 - has started a change in thinking. This beginning of the third millennium seems to be, in Charles Dickens famous words, the best of times and the worst of times. It is the best of times because there has never been a greater awareness that the disparities between people are not just bad for the poor, but also dangerous for the rich. It is the worst of times because old habits die hard. Having raised the cry of 'terrorism' America has encouraged other states to attempt a military response to the global social problems and injustices that breed discontent. Whether invading Iraq has drained the pool of disaffected people, or reduced the dangers they present to the rest of us, seems doubtful.

Education for All: why is it important?

Why is it important that all be educated? Historically there have been two main responses to this question. The first, which has its roots in the enlightenment and the French Revolution, simply states that education is a human right. The states that signed UNESCO's constitution in 1945 stated their belief in 'full and equal opportunities for education for all, in the unrestricted pursuit of objective truth, and in the free exchange of ideas and knowledge'

When 164 countries came together in Dakar, Senegal, in 2000 for the World Education Forum they declared that: We re-affirm the vision... that all children, young people and adults have the human right to benefit from an education that will meet their basic learning needs in the best and fullest sense of that term.

The second type of response to the question, why is it important for all to be educated, is that education for all is important because it contributes to the economic and social development of nations and communities. This is the pragmatic response. In recent decades the pendulum has swung between this developmental justification for education and the idea that education is simply a human right.

Back in the 1970s there was much talk about investing in human capital. This was simply a way of

saying, in the language of finance, that educating people would yield a good pay-off through their increased productivity. We also know now that when people, especially women, are educated they tend to have smaller families and healthier children.

By the 1990s, after the Berlin Wall had fallen and Nelson Mandela had been freed, human rights, including the human right to education, took a more prominent place in international discourse. Has the world's response to the attacks of 11 September 2001 already relegated human rights to a lower place on the world agenda? I wonder how you answer that question.

Amartya Sen, Nobel prize winner and Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, gives us reason for hope in his book *Development as Freedom* because he shows that development and human rights are two sides of the same coin. He defines development simply as the process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy. Freedom is central to the process of development for two reasons. The first is that the key measure of progress is whether the freedoms that people can enjoy have been enhanced. The second reason relates to effectiveness. It is primarily through the free agency of people that development is achieved. It is people - individuals - acting as free agents, who develop families, communities and nations.

So the expansion of freedom is both the primary end and the principal means of development. Basic education, in turn, is central to the expansion of freedom. I do not refer only to political freedom and freedom of expression, but to the more basic freedoms: freedom from hunger; freedom from avoidable diseases; and the freedom of having a home.

A little history

But these are modern views. We need not go back far in history to find very different attitudes to education. In pre-revolutionary France, for example, the church made some attempt to provide a rudimentary education and, as the eighteenth century wore on, municipalities provided some facilities as well. But the emphasis was on child minding rather than education and teachers had low status.

In his book, *Pioneers of Popular Education*, Hugh Pollard reports the story of Pastor Stuber, who was sent to a new parish in the Vosges Mountains in eastern France in 1750. On arrival he asked to see the school. I quote: 'He was then conducted to a miserable cottage, where a number of children were crowded together without any occupation, and in so wild and noisy a state that it was with some difficulty that he could gain any reply to his enquiries for the master.

"There he is," said one of them, as soon as silence could be obtained, pointing to a withered old man, who lay on a bed in one corner of the apartment.

"Are you the schoolmaster, my good friend?" enquired Stuber.

"Yes, Sir."

"And what do you teach the children?"

"Nothing, Sir."

"Nothing! - How is that?"

"Because," replied the man, with characteristic simplicity, "I know nothing myself."

"Why then were you instituted schoolmaster?"

"Why, Sir, I had been taking care of the village pigs for a great number of years, and when I got too old and infirm for that employment, they sent me here to take care of the children."

The former pig herder was typical of hundreds of teachers across Europe. In Prussia the task of school master was entrusted to war veterans; in Holland to aged servants and unemployed cabmen; in Switzerland to ignorant artisans, discharged soldiers and uneducated youth. Such were the beginnings of popular education in Europe. Such was the situation which thinkers like Rousseau and pioneers like Pestalozzi set out to transform into an effective and humane education system.

Nations came to aspire to education for all at different times and in different ways. In Japan, for example, modernisation started when the country opened its door to the West in 1867 in the Meiji Restoration. In Meiji Japan, the national goal was to build a rich country and a strong army. Education was regarded as an important means to achieve these national goals and an Education Act was issued in 1872. Its main objective was to provide education to everybody, regardless of status and gender, so that the whole population would be able to enjoy happiness and prosperity equally. The Act stated that "learning is the key to success in life, and no man can afford to neglect it. ... everyone should subordinate all other matters to the education of his children. ...Henceforth, through out the land, without distinction of class and sex, in no village shall there be a house without learning, in no house an ignorant person."

Compared to Europe, Japan had useful foundations to build on. Even before the Meiji Restoration, feudal Tokugawa Japan had a comparatively high rate of literacy for a pre-modern society. Nearly 50% of boys and some 15 % of girls were getting some kind of formal schooling outside their homes. In the 1860's literacy was probably approaching 30 %. At the time of the Restoration, there were between 7,500 and 11,000 terakoya, or temple schools, and perhaps another thousand diverse educational institutions.

Across the Pacific, in the United States, the first compulsory school attendance act was passed by Massachusetts in 1852. However, this state had already legislated on education two hundred years earlier, although the Massachusetts Act of 1642 had nothing to do with school. It placed on parents, and on the masters of children who had been apprenticed to them, the responsibility for their basic education and literacy. Government officials were there to see that all children and servants could demonstrate competency and reading and writing. All this reflected the view that in a heterogeneous society the masses had to be educated in order to understand the written codes of the governing laws and documents of the new country.

In Europe, the legislation on education came later. Compulsory education was enacted in Britain in 1880 and free education in France in 1881. But, of course, legislation is only first step. In the countries I have mentioned, which are all what we now call developed or industrialised countries, the extent and quality of education have repeatedly returned as political concerns right up to the present day.

In the case of Britain, Correlli Barnett includes, in his hard-hitting book, *The Audit of War*, a chapter entitled *Education for Industrial Decline*. It notes the findings of a Carnegie Trust Report, *Disinherited Youth*, published in 1939. Barnett observes: 'Lumping the samples from Cardiff, Glasgow and Liverpool together, probably no more than one youth in a hundred had emerged from the education system with any paper qualification whatsoever, scholastic or vocational.' Sixty years later 'education, education, education' was still proclaimed as the major priority of the first Blair government.

Education for All: where are we?

I mention these points as I move on to my third section and review progress toward education for all around the globe. From now on I shall concentrate mainly on developing countries but remember that achieving education for all, in the fullest sense of the term, is not only a developing country problem.

My biggest surprise, when I joined UNESCO four years ago and began to meet officials and politicians from around the world, was to find widespread dissatisfaction with education systems in all parts of the world. Ambassadors from Asian countries whose education provision used to be the envy of other countries told me of their governments' despair at decline in effectiveness of their school systems.

Nevertheless, these challenges are an order of magnitude different from the problems of many developing countries. How can I describe the situation there?

The simplest way of expressing the bad news is through the raw absolute numbers. Today there are 103 million children, 57% of them girls, who never go to school at all. At least an equivalent number do start school but drop out - or are taken out for economic reasons - before they have learned anything useful. The unschooled children of previous generations are today's adult illiterates and we estimate there are 800 million of them, half a billion women and 300 million men. In our contemporary world one woman in four is illiterate.

However, other absolute numbers also contain some good news. The total number of primary school pupils rose from an estimated 500 million in 1975 to more than 680 million in 1998. If this pace of increase continues, the number of pupils in the world's primary schools would reach 700 million next year and 770 million in 2015. Nearly all this increase in demand for school places, if it is satisfied, would occur in developing countries, notably in Southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

It is easier to understand the challenge if I express it in proportionate terms. For most developing countries school enrolment growth of 5% per year until 2015 would achieve the target of Education for All by that year. However, several countries would have to grow at 10% annually, which is quite a challenge. That would leave at least 32 countries that are unlikely to meet the 2015 target of Education for

All without very special efforts. Nearly half of these countries are, or have until recently, been embroiled in conflict.

Sub-Saharan Africa is of particular concern, because enrolment there will have to increase at almost three times the rates achieved in the 1990s in order to meet the 2015 target. Almost half of the additional school places that the world requires are in this region.

What is being done?

So what is being done to achieve these ambitious targets? Education for All was set as a goal in the UNESCO constitution in 1945. When the world returned to the issue at the turn of the millennium it found progress disappointing. In 2000 the largest meeting of heads of state and government ever to take place at the United Nations made a Millennium Declaration. This included eight Millennium Development Goals that include universal primary education and gender parity in schools as well as goals related to poverty, hunger, health and the environment. These goals have target dates of 2015 and, if they are achieved it will transform the lives of billions of your fellow human beings for the better.

The same year, the World Forum on Education for All held in Dakar, Senegal, set some more detailed targets for education and laid out a strategy with follow-up mechanisms. In my work at UNESCO I was at the heart of those follow-up mechanisms and had a good overview of the considerable efforts being deployed. In my new job as president of the Commonwealth of Learning I have the same preoccupations, because most of our work is aimed at using technology to make possible the massive increase in human learning that the achievement of each of the Millennium Development Goals will require.

Let me start with the Dakar targets and then comment on the strategy and mechanisms. There are six targets, which I find it helpful to remember with the acronym GET EQUAL.

The first target concerns girls and gender. The goal is to eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005 and achieve gender equality by 2015 - with a special focus on ensuring full and equal access for girls to basic education of good quality.

E is for elementary or primary education, where the deadline is to ensure that by 2015 all children, especially girls, children in difficult circumstances and from ethnic minorities have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality.

T is for training, to ensure that the learning needs of all young people are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes.

The next E is for early childhood. The goal is to expand and improve comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.

QU stands for quality, without which all the rest is pointless. The Dakar Forum charged us to improve all aspects of the quality of education to achieve recognised and measurable learning outcomes for all -

especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

Finally, AL stands for Adult Literacy, the challenge of achieving a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, as well as equitable access to basic and continuing education for adults.

So there are three quantitative targets with deadlines and three that are qualitative. What is the strategy for achieving them?

The first principle is that the primary responsibility for achieving Education for All lies with national governments. International and bilateral agencies can help, but the basic drive has to come from the country itself. In Dakar all countries committed themselves to developing national plans for Education for All and the international community promised in return that no country seriously committed to Education for All would be thwarted in its achievement of this goal by lack of resources.

The promise about resources needs to be kept in perspective. At present 97% of the resources devoted to education in developing countries come from the countries themselves and only 3% from the international sources. The challenge for the planners in these countries is to chart a sustainable strategy for achieving education for all. For most this will mean some reallocation of resources to education from, say, expenditure on arms. It will often mean reallocation of resources within the education budget to basic education and away from other levels. Many developing country governments spend much more per capita on university students than on pupils in primary school.

What will be the total bill for achieving Education for All? This is, of course, a complex calculation that is very dependent on the assumptions that you make. OXFAM and UNICEF estimate the cost at an extra \$7-8 billion per year. UNESCO and the World Bank have figures in the range of \$13-15 billion. Although these figures differ by a factor of two they do give us the scale of the problem.

We all have our favourite comparisons. After 11 September 2001 the USA increased its defence budget by \$48 billion. One third of that increase, applied year-on-year, would take care of Education for All. But let's not pick only on the Americans. I gather that the amount of money that Europeans spend each year on bottled mineral water would also cover the cost of achieving Education for All.

Of course, one of the problems in all areas of development is that the rich countries engage in much self-cancelling expenditure. On the one hand western countries eagerly sell arms to the parties involved in the world's many conflicts and civil wars. On the other they wring their hands about the difficulty of educating children in situations of conflict. Or take agriculture. Rich countries, through their foreign aid budgets, attempt to alleviate rural poverty in the developing world. Yet the rich countries subsidise their own farmers to the tune of \$1 billion per day, which is more than six times their entire foreign-aid budget. These subsidies to rich farmers have the direct effect of throwing millions of farmers in the third world deeper into poverty.

However, we have to deal with the world as we find it, contradictions and all. We are finding that the

greatest challenge in ensuring progress toward Education for All is, so often in life, the challenge of co-ordinating the efforts of the various players.

Various international agencies, like UNESCO and the Commonwealth of Learning, help countries that want to achieve Education for All to translate their political will into an effective plan. But that plan is not an end in itself. It has to be part of the national planning process led by the ministry of finance. That process in turn has to be set in the complex framework of arrangements by which the World Bank and the IMF apply debt relief and concessionary loans to the general goals of poverty alleviation and development. It is a world of acronyms, such as HIPC (Highly Indebted Poor Countries), PRSPs (Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers), UNDAF (United Nations Development Assistance Framework) and CCAs (Common Country Assessments).

Fortunately I do believe we are making progress. The development agenda in general, and education in particular, was making good progress up the agenda of the G8 nations until it was sideswiped by a preoccupation with terrorism. This next year, however I hope that the G8 Summit will again play a helpful role getting action on education, especially in Africa.

Involving civil society is another principle at the centre of the drive to Education for All. My earlier historical survey showed that it was communities and civil society organisations that led governments to aspire to education for all. That is even truer today, yet it is not always easy to deliver. Those governments that are most challenged by Education for All are often also those that treat the whole notion of civil society with suspicion. However, things there are improving too. India, for example, is achieving considerable success by devolving much responsibility for the supervision of schools to local people through their elected councils, or panchayat.

What kind of education?

Reference to civil society brings me to my final section and some comments about what kind of education we aspire to bring to all. You will have noticed that one of the Dakar goals is to improve all aspects of the quality of education to achieve recognised and measurable learning outcomes for all - especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

The World Bank has been doing some good work on the question of quality by asking the simple question, 'how much education does it take to make a difference?' The answer, in the Bank's inimitable language, is that 'countries may be trapped in a low-returns equilibrium until their level of human capital accumulation rises beyond five or six years of schooling. Once the threshold is passed, countries seem to achieve a higher steady-state growth path.' In simple language this means that getting a decent proportion of kids to complete primary school is more important than worrying about gross enrolment rates. Quality education means working at reducing repetition rates so that completion of primary school is something that parents and children can aspire to.

Numbers are important, but many are also asking 'education for what?' Even before the shock of 11 September 2001 I found that ministers of education were asking themselves whether, in assessing the

quality of education, the habitual focus on individual student performance needed to be balanced by attention to the role of good education in contributing to the creation of harmonious communities.

The challenge, it seems to me, is to achieve a proper balance between the creation of human capital and the creation of social capital. Human capital means the individual knowledge and skills that make a person more autonomous, more flexible and more productive. It is the personal capital that you or I can invest in finding fulfilment in our lives. But human capital is not enough by itself. No man is an island. We also need social capital, which is trust in other people, networks of contacts, the coming together of people for a common goal that creates communities.

You can find a nice analogy for this blend of human and social capital in an unexpected place, namely the Euro banknotes. On one side of each note there is a depiction of a window or a door. This can be a symbol of the creation of human capital as education allows us to look out on the world, to understand it, and to prepare to take our place in it. On the other side of each note - and each note represents a particular era of architecture from Rome to the 20th century - a bridge is depicted. This can be a symbol for social capital, the creation of links to other people and other communities that allows us to live together constructively in societies.

However, I also find the coins, which have one common side and one national side, a rather nice analogy for an education system that combines education in the common heritage of humanity with study of the special traditions of each nation.

Conclusion

There is much more to say, but I will leave it there. Education for all is a relatively recent aspiration for humankind. Even those countries that espoused this ambition many years ago still find it difficult to implement it with the scope and on the scale that they would like. I have described the situation of the many countries that have only recently embarked on this journey toward Education for All and how the international community is trying to help them.

You have all benefited from some of the best education that the world has to offer. There are no traffic jams on your roads to freedom. But if you want to live in a better world than our generation has left you, then I urge you to support the campaign for education for all that is the key to reducing the shameful disparities within humankind.

In a less complex and interconnected world people could perhaps afford to neglect education. Today they cannot. Education for all is the road to a decent life for all. It is our human duty to remove the traffic jams that obstruct it.