

Sustainability and Resilience: Can Education Deliver?



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Hon Minister, Distinguished Colleagues

Since we last met in The Bahamas, there has been much change. Today, we stand at the crossroads to determine the direction for education in the twenty first century. What kind of education do we need to make our citizens resilient and our progress sustainable? Let me share three examples from our work at the Commonwealth of Learning.

First, representatives from nineteen Commonwealth countries got together for three weeks in The Maldives to develop a course on sustainable agriculture. They hardly had time to enjoy the beaches as they worked well into the night. At the end of this bootcamp, they were ready with the first draft of the entire course drawn from the web. This then became an open educational resource for anyone anywhere in the world. What was possible in three weeks because of this collaboration could not have been achieved even in one year. The National University of Samoa, took up this course and offered it as a diploma. The first cohort of graduates is already in full-time employment. Leafaitulagi Vaaelua a graduate is working in the Ministry of Agriculture in Samoa.

The second example comes from India. Women entrepreneurs at the bottom of the pyramid established a farm producers company with COL support. Many of these illiterate women learnt corporate finance through their basic mobile phones. Experts from neighbouring institutions and the women learnt from each other in the local languages. Not only did these women generate economic assets to support their families but also developed a sense of agency and empowerment. Peria Jakammal, who had never taken a bus outside her village has now initiated a women's federation and become a respected leader in her district. The World Bank attributes the success of the project to two things—tailoring the learning experience to women's cognitive social capital and providing links with financial institutions and labour markets.

Over 35,000 girls in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Mozambique and Tanzania have received training in life skills and technical skills for employment and entrepreneurship in the last two years resulting in enhanced livelihoods for over 7000 girls and preventing the early child and forced marriage of another 500. Faaria a fourteen year old girl is one of the many girls who escaped child marriage because of community advocacy. These outcomes, achieved in such a short time, were possible by the coming together of civil society, the community and the family. Not only did this COL project benefit the targeted girls but also changed attitudes within the families and the community. We can see social change taking place.

What do these three examples have in common? One, learning leads to livelihoods enabling the individuals and communities to become resilient. Two, the use of technologies appropriate to the context is critical to these interventions. Three collaboration rather than competition is key.

First, you will have noticed that the emphasis is on lifelong learning rather than education alone. Learning must happen from cradle to grave which means we need to go beyond formal education to informal and non-formal learning as well. If learning has to contribute to livelihoods it needs to go beyond building capacity. Prof Amartya Sen proposes the capability approach which helps us to see that learning and acquiring skills are not an end in themselves but steps that help individuals and societies achieve development outcomes. This approach encourages us to think beyond outputs such as acquiring a degree to outcomes—how this degree will lead to a better quality of life. It also shifts the focus from developing capacity to capability and to the question—now that we have the capacity, what will we do with it?

Second, technology will help us tailor innovations to achieve both speed and scale in quality education and lifelong learning for all. How can we use technologies to close rather than increase the divide? Technology by itself cannot be a panacea for sustainability and resilience. It has to be placed in an appropriate social political and cultural context. Innovations are required to reach the last mile. Can we begin our planning process by taking into account the last person in the queue? Instead of constructing our policies around the majority with better access to infrastructure and connectivity, can we consider the situation of the remotest and the most far-flung first in our policies and programmes?

Third, one key strategy for creating resilient and sustainable societies is collaboration and partnership. We need to complement and strengthen each other's efforts. As SDG 17 reminds us, partnership will be fundamental to achieving the other 16 Goals including SDG 4. There is a great deal of emphasis on lifelong learning and skills development in SDG 4. However, in many countries, the ministries of education and skills are different and often the twain do not meet. If education has to deliver, there will have to be better cooperation and coordination between different ministries, development partners and key stakeholders. What makes partnerships work? The COL experience shows that partnership cannot be a zero sum game but works if it is based on a win-win framework for all.

Building the resilience of the most vulnerable and marginalised communities through learning will have the greatest impact on sustainable development. Are we prepared to support them? And as we stand at the crossroads, let us remind ourselves of the words of Robert Frost 'Two roads diverged in the wood and I took the one less travelled—and that has made all the difference'.