

Bridges to Global Security: The Promise of Education



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*By
Mr. Lewis Perinbam, O.C.
Chairman of the Board of Governors
Commonwealth of Learning*

I am deeply privileged to be invited here this evening, in this special forum, and given the opportunity to address this distinguished audience. In this beautiful building a visitor has a sense of timelessness while all the while resonating to the urgent demands of our tumultuous age. This occasion allows me to pay tribute to the Ismaili community for its imaginative and generous contributions in many parts of the developing world, principally in the fields of health and education. In each of Asia and Africa the remarkable achievements of the several Aga Khan initiatives have earned wide respect and are gaining much deserved attention as models to be emulated and replicated.

I should be remiss, however, if as a Canadian, I did not acknowledge as well the immense contribution made to Canadian society by the presence within it of vibrant, contributing Ismaili communities. They add much to the dynamism of a Canada which is representative of many cultures and many ethnic backgrounds. Speaking to a joint session of Parliament in Ottawa on March 9th of this year, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, referred to Canada as a cameo United Nations, enabling it to function effectively as a bridge-builder among different international communities, just as Canadians do within their own borders.¹

As His Highness the Aga Khan has demonstrated so brilliantly, bridge-building is both a humble and a noble vocation. In a world of strife and distrust, of wide disparities in well-being and in opportunities for wholesome accomplishment, bridges are crucial if humankind is to preserve its fundamental decency. Evidence of that decency is found in the fact that, throughout the turbulent history of our species, the traits that have been most revered relate to the offering of a helping hand, the expression of generosity

and accommodation, the tendering of hospitality. These are natural human characteristics, found in societies in every country. It is essential that those traits be respected and preserved if we are to understand and overcome the current unprecedented challenges to our well-being arising out of the new global circumstance. Through several millennia those characteristics were expressed within local - often isolated - cultures. Local as well was knowledge, confined by circumstance to the immediate community. It is difficult for our generation, accustomed to instant electronic communications and television images on a global scale, to comprehend the confining nature of that kind of life.

The brilliant British scholar, Joseph Bronowski, described vividly the limitations of such physical confinement in his celebrated BBC-TV series several years ago. He chose as one example the Bakhtiari, a nomadic grouping that has altered little its pattern of life in what is now Iran, since the retreat of the last ice age some twelve thousand years ago. The group carries with it all its possessions as it crosses six perilous mountain ranges annually in its outward quest for fresh pastures, then crosses the same six ranges again on return, packing and unpacking each day of the year. Of them, Bronowski said: "There is no room for innovation, because there is not time, on the move, between evening and morning, coming and going all their lives, to develop a new device or a new thought - not even a new tune. The only habits that survive are the old habits. The only ambition of the son is to be like the father."²

As exotic and implausible as that lifestyle appears to persons living in this thriving urban metropolis, I suggest it is important for us to remember that remnants of similar limited social comprehension are not unknown in a number of places today. When such persons are forced to co-exist with the often bewildering technological landscape that the rest of us occupy, more than confusion can result. To the dismay of many, tensions and rage burst forth. Especially is this the case when indefensible disparities in well-being between the wealthy and the poverty-stricken become evident. In such circumstances those human traits of accommodation and hospitality can be turned inward, mental insularities exploited, and hostile behaviour encouraged. In such cases we in relatively affluent communities must guard against the automatic inclination to cease building bridges and to pull-up those that are in place. To act in such a fashion is both short-sighted and ineffective, and always has been. In years gone by the most heavily fortified of castles, with the deepest of moats, could not long withstand the assaults of archers and catapults, the new techniques of warfare. In the earliest months of the 21st century the most militarily powerful state in all history, separated from the disaffected by moats the width of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, proved far from impregnable. On our understanding of this quantum leap in vulnerability depends the future well-being of humankind.

Yet those horrific events of September, 2001, and the many others that have since followed, have initiated an almost single-minded reaction on the part of many governments in the North: one of overwhelming attention to physical security. In doing so, we have been persuaded that it is less important to respond intelligently and effectively to two quite distinct categories of phenomena that now imperil the global landscape, each of which bears upon the physical security threat. The first is the desperate misery in which hundreds of millions of persons now live, overwhelmingly in the South, devoid of any hope for some amelioration of their plight. The second is the vulnerability of persons everywhere to the several perils arising out of an increasingly over-burdened, over-active, and inter-connected planet and the human species that dwells upon it. Let me turn briefly to these two phenomena and in doing so emphasize as

strongly as I am capable that the age is long past where "we" in the North could lay claim to some degree of intellectual credibility by referring to "them" in the South. In this intense, compressed, holistic, global age, the operative term must be "us".

The first phenomenon - the massive disparities in wealth between rich and poor, is a dividing line that exists between nations and, all too often, within them. Although 35 years have passed since the World Bank Commission chaired by former Canadian Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson issued its groundbreaking report "Partners in Development"³, and 24 years since the appearance of the first of the two reports of the Independent Commission chaired by former West German Chancellor Willy Brandt, a report entitled "A Program for Survival"⁴, the processes of economic and social development remain as obtuse, and their goals almost as distant, as at any time since the birth of the United Nations.

Notwithstanding the expenditure of massive sums of money from sources both public and private, progress towards raising the standard of living of the poorest - important because of the physical benefits it bestows - and progress towards diminishing the outrageous South-North disparities - important because of the commitment to social justice that it confirms - have both been painfully slow.

Ample evidence exists in any number of social and economic indicators compiled by credible analysts. As one example, the remorseless, immoral, net transfer of resources from South to North, the reverse of what development assistance is dedicated to accomplish, offers as yet only sporadic evidence of reversal. One such successful example, in itself evidence of the tragic state of affairs, is the expectation that in the year 2004, those developing countries that may be described as 'emerging markets' will repay more to the International Monetary Fund, to the World Bank, and to other international financial institutions, than they borrow. The tragedy? Should this be the case, it will be the first year in more than a quarter of a century that these countries of the South are able to balance their books.⁵

Willy Brandt introduced his Commission's 1980 Report by stating that development is not merely an economic process, important though that element is. In what now appear to be prophetic words, he continued: "The new generations of the world need not only economic solutions, they need ideas to inspire them, hopes to encourage them, and first steps to implement them. They need a belief in man, in human dignity, in basic human rights; a belief in the values of justice, freedom, peace, mutual respect, in love and generosity, in reason rather than force."⁶ It is the absence in all too many places of these ideas, hopes, and beliefs that permit the recruitment of young men and women for the evil forces of terrorism in this century. This was emphasized by Kofi Annan in his Ottawa speech. He said: "A world in which millions live in misery without prospect for development cannot be regarded as a world at peace."⁷

The second phenomenon - the mutuality of vulnerability of all humans - is readily illustrated by a number of examples. One is the immediacy of human fear and massive economic losses as pathogens hostile to human health spread without warning around the world, hitch-hiking in comfort in the luxurious cabins of modern airliners courtesy of their unsuspecting human hosts. Among them are rare mutations of malaria, SARS, avian flu, and the most devastating disease in all history, HIV-AIDS. Another of these peripatetic, and novel, examples, is the fluctuating and destructive weather patterns of the past few years, as evident in the unprecedented heat wave in Western Europe this past summer. The U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has concluded that for the first time ever, "The balance of evidence suggests a

discernible human influence on the global climate."8 Other incidents that serve as evidence of the interdependence of countries and regions - in some instances almost their integration - fall in the sectors of economics and trade, of population growth and migratory patterns, of commerce in contraband including narcotics, weaponry, and women. In each of these examples, political frontiers are virtually non-existent.

Of this massive accumulation of increasingly significant and complex dynamics, all of them beyond the effective management of any single country, no matter how powerful it may be, Professor Ivan Head, the distinguished Founding Director of the Liu Centre for the Study of Global Issues at the University of British Columbia in my home city of Vancouver, and formerly Foreign Policy Advisor to Prime Minister Trudeau, has concluded:

"It is not an exaggeration to state that the first quarter of the 21st century will test the willingness, as well as the ability, of human beings to function as a productive, civil, species. The current unprecedented growth of human population will test the carrying capacity of the planet as increasing demands are made upon the physical environment by growing numbers of persons, and will test the social resiliency of the species as competition for resources, space, and cultural expression becomes more pervasive and more intense. If disasters are to be avoided and opportunities seized for an increased and sustainable well-being of humankind, new techniques of accommodation and cooperation will be required among human beings, and between humans and their environs."9

These phenomena emphasize that we are all members of a single global community. Not a single society, but a single community, and - as in all communities - we share certain responsibilities for the well-being of our neighbours. In the global community, as in a village community, should disparities in well-being become excessive, whether measured in terms of health, of economic opportunity, of education, of a wholesome natural environment, of safety - those elements now referred to increasingly as "human security" - the result is instability and insecurity for all. Extremes of poverty and wealth or of wellness and disease are the seeds of envy, of hostility and, all too often, of criminal behaviour. This reality has been understood in all societies for millennia. The response to it has varied considerably, from socially responsible democracies such as found in this country or in my own, to authoritarian regimes that exercise discriminatory practices to maintain the status quo, but seldom wholly effectively. The challenge was described most graphically 150 years ago by the French nobleman and author François-René de Chateaubriand.

"Try to convince the poor man, once he has learned and ceased to believe, once he has become as well informed as yourself, try to convince him he must submit to every sort of privation, while his neighbour possesses a thousand times what he needs; in the last resort you would have to kill him." 10

In our lifetimes, ignorance of events far distant has given way everywhere as cascades of photographs and spoken words now descend from earth-orbiting satellites to ubiquitous television sets in even the most remote communities. Impoverished villagers in the South are now aware, often in lurid detail, of the conspicuously lavish lifestyles enjoyed by the wealthy of the North. Images of depravity offensive to many cultures in the South are seized upon by populist leaders, sometimes in opportunistic fashion, to

deplore and oppose the extension of practices they regard as heathen. And always it is the illiterate and the barely educated who are the targets of appeals to resist, to strike back, to make strident claims for equitable treatment or - in the extreme - to seek salvation through violent means.

Literacy and numeracy are not in themselves guarantors of economic betterment or of justice. Their absence, however, often denies both. The long chronicle of humankind's accomplishments reveals the constant presence of a single motivating feature. It is the ability of the species to acquire, to utilize, and to enhance knowledge. The word best employed to describe how that process is passed from generation to generation is education. It changes form and assumes differing guises from the primary grades through to tertiary levels in universities. It is at times theory-based, at others of immediate practical application. It is the irreplaceable key to understanding our world and ourselves; to anticipate the future and to husband our natural environment for the benefit of all human beings. It is both the expression, and the adhesive, of the commonality of humankind.

A major unstated premise of any educational curriculum worthy of replication is its commitment to a communitarian ethos, but not simply or only for the most immediate community or the most familiar society. In the 21st Century this ethos must be a refinement and enlargement of what Robert Redfield, the distinguished American anthropologist, said were "largely undeclared but continually realized ethical conceptions" that held together precivilized societies.¹¹ Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau turned to that theme in his memorable Mansion House address following the conferment upon him of the Freedom of the City of London in the Guildhall in 1975. He reflected on the magnitude of the contemporary human community and then called for a global ethic: "An ethic that abhors the present imbalance in the basic human condition - an imbalance in access to health care, to a nutritious diet, to shelter, to education. An ethic that extends to all men, to all space, and through all time. An ethic that is based on confidence in one's fellow man."¹² In its absence, said Mr. Trudeau, men and women anywhere could not claim to be free.

In our quest for understanding and for guidance, where should we begin? Perhaps with a reminder from Hobbes' "Leviathan" that self-centred behaviour leads to untenable results. Wrote Hobbes "... as long as this natural right of every man to every thing endureth, there can be no security to any man."¹³ In sum, the single-minded pursuit of individual freedom and wealth, self-righteous in the extreme, in the absence of social responsibility, leads neither to freedom nor to security. Writ large in country after country, the evidence is to be found. Tragedy will be the consequence should we deny or misinterpret those events and their inevitable aftermath.

No one has better understood this circumstance, nor has consistently dedicated resources more generously and more effectively towards its solution, than has His Highness the Aga Khan. In his address last December to the 16th convocation of the Aga Khan University in Karachi, His Highness referred pointedly to parts of the Muslim world but in words that are equally applicable to all societies:

"The feelings of the subordination of people - that they are victims of an economic or cultural globalization in which they cannot be full partners but from which they cannot remain apart - these feelings fuel some of the most potent, destructive forces at play in our world today.... When people of a

distinctive faith or culture feel economically powerless, or inherit clear injustice from which they cannot escape, or find their traditions and values engulfed culturally, and their societies maligned as bleak and unjust, some amongst them can too readily become vulnerable. They risk becoming the victims of those who would gain power by perverting an open, fluid, pluralistic tradition of thought, and belief, into something closed, and insular."¹⁴

In that same speech, His Highness emphasized that, in his judgement, there is a clear need "to mitigate not what is a 'clash of civilizations' but a 'clash of ignorance'...."¹⁵ In order to address the latter and to enhance learning opportunities for the Muslim communities in Asia and Africa His Highness, through the Aga Khan Development Network, has demonstrated exemplary leadership. Partnerships have been created, expertise and experience sought out and utilized from all over the world. AKU, for example, now entering its third decade, has, among so many other accomplishments, contributed mightily to the dignity and self-confidence of young Pakistani women while training them to perform the skilled medical and nursing tasks so needed by their country. I was privileged as Vice President of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) to be instrumental in approving funds for the imaginative partnership between McMaster University in Canada and the AKU which launched this process. The newly created University of Central Asia will bring post-secondary education to a region long denied it. Campuses are located in three of the mountainous republics - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. In 2002 a network of Schools of Excellence was launched directed to the needs of youth in the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia and South East Asia. Eventually, schools will be located in 14 separate countries, a magnificent undertaking. These and other undertakings of the Ismaili community, partnering with universities and governments in those countries and others, including Canada, are harnessing the power of education and making it universally accessible.

Fortunately, educational initiatives by other organizations are complementing those laudatory achievements and doing so with the same sense of urgency¹⁶, and the same willingness to employ unconventional techniques. One such is the Commonwealth of Learning with which I am proud to be associated. COL is a specialized agency of the Commonwealth and is headquartered in Vancouver. Its primary mission is to assist the governments of the 53 Commonwealth member countries, but particularly those in the South, to take full advantage of open, distance, and technology-mediated learning strategies in order to provide increased and equitable access to education and training for all their citizens. Its goal is to build capacity within the participating countries located in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and the Pacific.

COL has been a pioneer and a leader in recognizing the value and the potential of open and distance learning to bring education within the reach of all, to improve its quality, and to contain the costs of doing so. Since its inception in 1987 it has proven effective in lifting the burden of poverty from countless numbers of persons in Commonwealth nations by using new technologies and techniques to overcome illiteracy, improve educational standards, and train hundreds of thousands of new teachers. COL will count it a privilege to place its expertise and capabilities at the disposal of the Aga Khan Development Network to assist it to expand and advance its splendid work.

No one should underestimate the immense range of rich benefits, including economic, that result from

increased education. In India it is estimated that a one-year increase in the average number of years of primary schooling of the workforce would raise outputs by some 23%. In Bangladesh the average salary of secondary-school educated women is about seven times that of women with no primary education. More than a quarter of a century ago, the Economic Council of Canada calculated that the single highest return of any investment - over the longer term - was to be found in the field of education.¹⁷

These statistics should not be surprising. Education confers myriad benefits to individuals as well as to society at large. Another prominent example is health. In 1999 the World Health Report stated "Poorly educated individuals may fail to observe basic hygiene or neglect appropriate weaning practices for their children.... The magnitude of the demonstrated effect of girls' education on health and fertility outcomes... provides a powerful argument for investing in extension of educational access to girls."¹⁸ In turn, for many years the World Health Organization has established the linkage between health and a number of desirable outcomes. In her opening address to the 55th World Health Assembly in Geneva in May 2002, the then Director General, Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland stated that "... unless people are healthy, we will not see economic growth; we will not see stability; we will not see human dignity or fulfilment of human rights; we will not be at peace."¹⁹

In the absence of both educational qualifications and good health, the economic consequences in developing countries can be catastrophic. One recent illustration of many is the decision announced in mid-March by Tiger Wheels, a multi-national manufacturer of cast-aluminium wheels for motor vehicles, located in South Africa, that it is diverting investment to new facilities in Poland and in the United States. The reasons cited are the low productivity and economic losses in South Africa compared to circumstances in comparatively much higher wage countries elsewhere. The company spokesman explained: "For every 60 wheels cast at the South African plant, three must be melted down and recast, 30 percent more than at the Polish plant.... [T]hat is because 9 out of 10 of the South African workers never finished high school, while the same proportion of the Polish workers have university degrees. One-fifth of the South African workers can neither read nor work a simple calculator."²⁰ He went on to point out that the Polish workers were also healthier; in the South African plant one worker a month was lost to AIDS.

Important, however, as is the ability to enhance one's standard of living through higher income, and to contribute to the national GDP, we should be wrong were we to overlook the broader benefits to humankind that are the result of a broad-based, secular education. Among these are an awareness of the contributions to humankind that originate from within other ethnic or religious communities; an understanding of the need for cooperation among all societies in order to meet and manage the challenges of a global age; an ability to cultivate reasoned analyses, reasoned choices, and defensible opinions; an acceptance of the fact that, in the words of His Highness, "the right to think is [not] the enemy of real faith".²¹

Education is many things and over the years has been described in many ways. In 1874, Disraeli said "Upon the education of the people of this country the fate of this country depends."²² In 1920, H.G. Wells argued that "human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe".²³ A half-century later, Mwalimu, Julius Nyerere, wrote that education "must be a part of life; integrated

with life and inseparable from it".²⁴ Today, in the dawn of the 21st Century, when the critical ingredient in humankind's quest for security is an understanding of our commonality as a species, education is the necessary tool to meet that end. Simply put, education today is the most effective of all bridges.

Among those of the current era who understand this fact, none has proved more tireless, more innovative, nor more effective in his efforts to extend education throughout the South than has His Highness, the Aga Khan. Throughout his Imamate, he has been an articulate spokesman for a peaceful, progressive, and compassionate Islam that respects above all else Allah's creation, man himself. As the Golden Jubilee of His Highness approaches, I respectfully offer this expression of my admiration to the Ismaili community worldwide for its unflinching pursuit of this lofty goal. With your permission, Mr. Chairman, I dedicate these remarks to that community and confer upon it the title of 'master bridge-builder'.

Thank you.

1 The Vancouver Sun, 10 March 2004.

2 Bronowski, J., "The Ascent of Man", Boston, Little Brown, 1973, p.62.

3 New York/London, Praeger Publishers, 1969.

4 Cambridge, MIT Press, 1980.

5 New York Times, 17 February 2004.

6 Supra, note 4, p.12

7 Supra, note 1.

8 The Third Assessment Report of Working Group I, Shanghai, January 2001, www.ipcc.ch/.

9 See also Head, Ivan L., "On a Hinge of History; the Mutual Vulnerability of South and North", Toronto/London, University of Toronto Press, 1991.

10 Mémoires d'outre-tomb, tome VI, p. 451, Garner, Paris, 1924.

11 "The Primitive World and Its Transformations", Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1953.

12 Office of the Prime Minister, Press Release, March 13, 1975.

13 Cap. XIV.

14 www.iis.ac.uk

15 Id.

16 Id, "I hope that you, like AKU, will, with broadened international and cultural horizons, recall the heritage of Muslim civilizations past and discover that change and progress take time, but that they also require impatience."

17 The Economic Council of Canada, Second Annual Report, 1965.

18 The World Health Report, 1999, p. 6, Box 1.1.

19 WHO 55th World Health Assembly, Doc. A55/3.

20 New York Times, 13 March 2004.

21 Address at the 25th Anniversary Graduation Ceremony of The Institute of Ismaili Studies, www.iis.ac.uk

22 House of Commons, 15 June 1874.

23 "Outline of History", Ch. 15.

24 "The Declaration of Dar-es-Salaam", p. 29, in Hall, Budd L. and Roby Kidd, "Adult Education: A Design for Action", Oxford, Pergamon Press, 1978.