

Combating Poverty through Adult Education



Combating Poverty through Adult Education, Silver Jubilee Celebration, Institute of Distance and Continuing Education, University of Guyana, Inauguration of the Dennis Irvine Lecture Series

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Transcript

1. May I first congratulate and compliment the University, its Institute of Distance and Continuing Education, the Vice-Chancellor, and Mr. Samuel Small on the Silver Jubilee of the Institute and in celebrating and recognising a great regional academic leader, scholar, administrator, international public servant, Dr. Dennis H. Irvine, through a Lecture Series in his honour. Secondly, please accept my sincere gratitude for giving me the honour of delivering this inaugural lecture in the Series. I am humbled by your invitation, flattered at the thought of addressing such a distinguished gathering, enormously pleased to pay homage to a great friend of The Commonwealth of Learning (COL), and at the same time to also have the opportunity to publicly place on record the gratitude of COL for the unstinting service and support Dr. Irvine rendered to COL while he was in Canada and when he returned to his native land, Jamaica. All those who have come to know him, hold Dennis, in great awe. We are constantly amazed at the erudition, energy and passion he brings to the things he does and through his powers of argument, persuasion and clever diplomacy, the contributions he has made to education, not only here in Guyana but to the greater Commonwealth also. When he invited me, Mr. Small suggested that I speak of adult education and poverty alleviation. The first I know a little about through professional experience and the second, a little bit more through personal experience. This lecture is therefore based less on scholarship of the subject and more arising out of a sense of despondency witnessing the indignities and inequalities suffered by those who have been denied greater opportunities for learning for one reason or another.

2. Most of us, who are gathered here this evening, I dare say, are children of the twentieth century. We have seen during our lifetime the end of the shame of colonialism; the achievements of science and technology; a freer flow of information; a few uncertain steps towards the universal rule of law; a greater access to education and health for most; and an acceptance of the principles of equality for all human

beings.

3. Notwithstanding these achievements we still live in a world of great inequality. A good part of humanity is still denied access to an equal share of the planet's wealth, to justice, to a decent living; the disparity between those who have and those who do not in terms of food, health care and social security continues to be appalling. This disparity is not just between urban and rural communities, developed and developing nations, it is everywhere. We are well into the beginning of the new millennium and as we progress further into it, human development should be measured not by scientific and technological progress alone, not by levels of freedom and certainly not by the number of bombs, guns and people at arms but by the simple yardstick of the level of equal opportunity for all people. That more than anything else, should be the greatest humanizing factor of all.

4. Throughout the ages, education has been the most powerful agent of change. Many of the world's leading thinkers, political leaders, development specialists and others have come to recognise that the empowerment of individuals through the provision of learning - a basic human right and social responsibility must therefore be protected. It is this desire to empower individuals that led to those who met in Jomtien, Thailand in 1989 to declare among other things that: every person - child, youth and adult should be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs.

5. That declaration by and large had remained rhetoric in many parts of the world. People in Guyana are in fact a lot more fortunate than their contemporaries in large parts of Africa, South Asia, the Arab world and your own neighbourhood. While your country has reached almost universal primary education and perhaps more than 50% of children completing primary education are able to continue into secondary school and well over 90% of your adult population can read and write in one or another language, citizens of many of those countries I have just mentioned continue to suffer educational deprivation of the worst kind.

6. Eleven months ago and just a little beyond ten years after the first World Conference on Education for All held in Jomtien, Thailand in 1989, some 180 government representatives, a multitude of donor agencies and non-governmental organisations, hundreds of experts met in Dakar, Senegal to assess the progress made by the EFA initiative that began in Jomtien. Among those who met in Dakar, especially the official government delegations, took justifiable pride in their achievements in the UPE sector, between 1989 and 1999. However there were also many, especially from the NGO movements who were more critical and quick to point out the reality has mostly not matched the rhetoric. Performance measured in proportionate terms is certainly remarkable. But performance measured in actual numbers, given the growth of populations, revealed a frightening level of deprivation if one were to include the post basic and adult populations. Depending on whose statistics we use, primary education was still out of reach for some 135 million children, and close to 900 million adults continue to be illiterate. There is another dimension to the statistic and this has to do with retention of children in classrooms for the total of five or six years of primary schooling [abysmal, some 100 million fail to complete their basic education], opportunities for continuation of learning beyond primary schooling [on the average less than 50% globally] and training of the workforce which finds itself in mostly unskilled and underpaid situation [mostly ignored by the state and rarely taken up by civil society].

7. The irony of the situation is appalling given the level of contemporary knowledge that we have about the economic and social return from investment in education. Consider, for example, the numerous cases that were brought to the attention of delegates at Dakar:

- In Vietnam, poverty incidence in households headed by somebody with no education is 68%. It decreases to 54% for those with primary education and to 41% for those with secondary education.
- In Niger, the incidence of poverty is 70% in households headed by an adult with no education, compared to 56% for those who have attended primary school.
- In Zimbabwe, the heads of poor households are twice as likely to have received no formal education as the heads of non-poor households.
- In Peru, almost two-thirds of the extremely poor households are headed by someone with no education, compared to less than one-third of non-poor households.

8. There is another way of looking at these returns. Because education helps to unleash the productive potential of the poor, it is good for growth and good for alleviating poverty. Consider:

- In India, a one-year increase in the average number of years of primary schooling of the workforce would raise outputs by 23%.
- In Brazil, roughly a quarter of its economic growth in the 70's could be attributed to an increase in the average education of the workforce: one additional year of education, on average, increased real output by about 20%.
- In Bangladesh, the average salary of secondary-educated woman was about seven times that of a woman with no primary education.
- In Nepal, increasing the average education of a farmer by one year expanded agricultural output by 5.2% in the Tarai region and by about 5.9% in the hill region.

9. Some of you may know that while my genetic make up is almost completely Dravidian, the environment that shaped me and my career is almost completely South East Asian. That is the part of the world that, until very recently, earned worldwide recognition for the economic growth and transformation, earning it descriptions such as tigers and dragons. Between the mid-sixties and late nineties the region which contains perhaps two out of every three human beings has seen a socio-economic change at a rate that seldom has been experienced anywhere in the world before. For decades, most of Asia was condemned to poverty and destitution. As the Economist described these countries in 1991, at the beginning of the second half of the last century, one-half of Japan's workforce was in paddy fields, Singapore was still a mosquito ridden and politically volatile colony, Hong Kong a small port coping with refugees from neighbouring Guangdong and other coastal provinces of China, Taiwan was also hopelessly coping with its own stream of refugees from Shanghai, Korea was on the brink of a civil

war and poorer than even Sudan, Mainland China going through its trauma of the cultural revolution, and the ASEAN nations overall struggling with pre- or post-independence political challenges.

10. However, by early 1990, these nations were in the middle of an economic boom sustaining annual growth rates of about seven percent perhaps two to three times faster than that of any other part of the world. You of course know that at the start of this millennium the average Taiwanese was richer than most New Zealanders; the people of Hong Kong were much better off in wealth than their former colonial masters; Singaporeans better off than most Europeans and South Koreans having a GDP in excess of US\$6,000 per capita annually. Despite the economic contagion of 1998 and 1999, there is still an unshakeable confidence in the neighbourhood that I grew up in, that the predicted economic power shift from Europe and North America to the Pacific Rim by the middle of the present century will take place. Coupled to the economic growth are social developments that indicate that the average East Asian will be healthier, have a longer life expectancy, and will be better fed and sheltered. While there are many factors that may have contributed to changing the region from "poorhouse to powerhouse", investment in education and more education is probably the most important of all. All through the eighties and nineties, the nations collectively may have devoted between 6 and 20% of their annual budgets into education resulting in an amazing picture of access to learning at all levels. As we start the new century, almost all East Asians would have received compulsory secondary school education [except perhaps some pockets in the People's Republic of China] and on top of that, of the pre-adult age group one out of four Singaporeans, one out of three South Koreans and Hong Konger and one out of two Japanese and Taiwanese would have gone to a teacher training college, a liberal arts or science college, technical institute or university. In all these countries every single citizen below the age of 25 would have benefited from at least 12 years of education.

11. Besides the economic benefits that many of these studies demonstrate, the social and personal benefits to individuals are also emerging from a series of empirical studies on the impact of even modest levels of education. For example:

- a passport to better health [e.g.]: a district level, study in India provided evidence that an increase in female literacy from 22 to 75% reduced the predicted under five mortality rate for children from 156 per thousand to around 110 per thousand.
- a most effective contraceptive: an educated society generally has a much lower rate of population growth. This is because education often leads to a higher income, greater empowerment of women, more uninhibited access to family planning services, a dramatic fall in fertility rates and a much smaller family size. According to an Indian census in 1980, the total fertility rate for women with no education was 5.1; for those with primary education 4.5; for those with upper primary education 4, for those with secondary education 3.1 and university graduates 2.1.
- a road to empowerment: in communities especially where religious and other cultural traditions condemn women to a life of servitude and destitution, the only hope for breaking that viciousness seems to be a provision to take education to women and girl children. This is a story, demonstrating the power of the ability to read and that may have a resonance here in the audience: Four to five months after Najima [a rural person in a village in Bangladesh] had begun

a course in reading, was washing clothes at home. She took down her husband's shirt to wash, and noticing some papers in the pocket, removed them before soaking it. But when she took the papers from the suit pocket, she realised that they were divorce papers, and had been prepared in a registry office, without her knowledge and with her thumbprint forged. She was very nervous at having discovered them, but swiftly took them to the elders of her and the husband's family. These elders met and the situation was eventually resolved without the divorce. When all the furore was over, her husband asked her: "how did you know what these papers said"? "I can read now", she quietly said.

12. If we accept the premise that education, more than any other factor can make the difference between wealth and poverty, health and misery, conservation and destruction, national unity and division, then the levelling of educational opportunities must be a priority for all of us who care about our fellow citizens. Education can then be no longer considered as just a function of the participation rate of the 18- to 24-year-olds in our populations. It must also include all those who are already working and in need of continuously updating their skills and knowledge regularly. Therefore, provision for lifelong learning will have to replace the outdated concept of a "sufficient initial education". Such a provision would not only provide for the basic post-secondary education of 18 year olds, but also for regular updating, extending, broadening and supplementing their skills and knowledge throughout life. It applies as much to those who work in the fields of computing and those who are engaged in farming.

13. Life-Long Learning [LLL] is all about PROVIDING ACCESS AND OPPORTUNITIES for learning and training of individuals who find themselves in a world that is so rapid in the way it changes, refreshes and renews itself. Such dynamism makes demands on individuals to constantly update themselves in the context of their work place, social lives and participation in healthy and vibrant democracies. There is increasing evidence that information and communications technologies are beginning to play a very effective role in the promotion of lifelong learning.

14. Who are these individuals? Basically there are at least two categories of individuals. There are those who are under-represented across a whole range of post-basic education and those that have had the benefit of some form of post-basic education but clearly not equipped to deal effectively with the technology driven century in which they find themselves in.

15. The first group requires active intervention on the part of the state, business houses, voluntary organisations, etc., and will include:

- illiterate and neo-literate populations
- ethnic, marginalized and minority groups
- people with learning difficulties
- girl children and women
- those living in remote locations
- the physically challenged

16. The second group may already possess post-basic education and not require active intervention on the part of the state of business houses, etc., but would still need provisions that will enable them to access learning resources. These people can be expected to know their needs and will include:

- out of school youth
- employees in workplaces
- people with basic education
- professionals needing continuing education
- older adults

17. Learners from under-represented groups face obstacles such as:

- lack of learning skills
- lack of confidence
- lack of money
- lack of counselling and advice
- lack of personal support

18. Learners from the second group face challenges that are slightly different and these include:

- inadequate supply of learning provisions
- inflexibility of learning systems
- lack of money
- inadequate supply of information

The above are not necessarily exclusive to each group, but are a reflection of the general malaise of the environment in most countries.

18. Regardless of which group the potential users of life-long learning provision come from, it seems to me that there are some things that are central to the subject. These are that:

- Learning throughout life is a fundamental human right and that learning must become normal and central to a person's life.

- Learners must be encouraged to take an increased ownership of their own learning and management throughout their lives.
- Variety and diversity of learning opportunities should be an important factor in this consideration.
- Information and guidance must be provided to all citizens on such learning access and opportunities.
- Learning is about learners and they must be at the centre of these ventures.

19. The progress of the first part of this century in terms of human development may have only one yardstick of measurement and that is the level of equality of opportunity between nations and among people. Unless people, regardless of race, religion, nationality and socio-economic status, are empowered with knowledge and skills, achieving equality of opportunity will be difficult; not achieving that equality does not augur well for the welfare of the planet. Failure to transform today's imbalance of wealth and resources will become tomorrow's cause for conflict between and within nations. Peace and poverty, ignorance and environmental concern, under-education and greater wealth, illiteracy and self-esteem are not compatible.

Vice-Chancellor, Mr. Small, Ladies and Gentlemen, COL has been privileged to work with you during the last 10 years of your 25 years, and I certainly wish to see the partnership between COL and the Institute last the next 25 years.

Thank you.