

# *Literacy as an International Challenge: Jomtien, Dakar and Beyond*

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*Prepared for: The 47th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference of The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, Darwin, Melbourne and Canberra, Australia, 3 - 14 September 2001*

*Conference theme: Reassessing the profession of politics to raise the public perception of Parliaments and Parliamentarians / Workshop topic: Poverty Alleviation / Requested topic for paper: Literacy*

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## **Transcript**

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 rich and poor nations but also within nations and communities. Nowhere in these equations of disparities will one find something greater than that seen in education and educational provisions.

Throughout the ages, education has been the most powerful agent of change. Many of our leading thinkers, political leaders, and development specialists 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

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to benefit from education; opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs.

Many would say that the Education for All (EFA) declaration remains little more than rhetoric. In April last year, slightly beyond ten years after the Jomtien World Conference on Education For All, some 180 government representatives, a multitude of donor agencies, and hundreds of international experts met in Dakar, Senegal, to assess the progress made by the EFA initiative. Dakar provided an opportunity not only to take stock and set new targets on the basis of the previous ten years of experience but also to learn from the lessons of the first decade of the EFA. These new targets, like those set by other global agendas, call for achieving Universal Primary Education (UPE) by 2015. By doing so, it is hoped that a number of things such as halving the incidence of poverty, reducing child deaths by two-thirds and reducing maternal mortality by one-half, can more readily be achieved.

Beside target setting, Dakar also recognised the need to help many nations develop their own action plans to achieve these targets as well as to mobilise resources from all available locations both within and outside national jurisdictions. A further call reiterated the role of civil society in matters relating to education and the importance of committing providers of education to defining, designing, maintaining and sustaining quality in its delivery. All these are tall orders.

At the start of the last decade of the last millennium, when the forum in Jomtien was convened, there were:

- more than 960 million adults who were illiterate, two-thirds of them women and girls;
- more than 100 million children, mostly girls, who did not have access to primary schooling;
- more than 100 million children and countless millions of adults failing to complete their basic education programmes, while millions more satisfied school attendance requirements but did not acquire essential knowledge and skills; and
- more than a third of the world's adult population (some 2 billion individuals) with no access to printed knowledge, new skills and technologies that could improve the quality of their lives and help them to shape social and cultural changes.

Among those who met last year in Dakar, many, especially on official government delegations, took justifiable pride in their achievements between 1989 and 1999 in meeting the basic education needs of humanity; however there were also many, especially from the NGO movements, who were more critical and quick to point out that the performance has mostly not matched the rhetoric. Performance measured in proportionate terms certainly was remarkable - adult literacy has indeed improved from about 46% in the seventies to about 70% in the nineties and enrolment ratios in primary schools have gone up from about 57% to about 77% with secondary school enrolments increasing from about 36% to about 47% - but performance measured in actual numbers of those denied education or access to education indicated a frightening increase. This paper is about the promise made in 1989 in Jomtien, the subsequent performance of the global community in keeping that promise and the educational challenges we confront as global citizens in the early part of the twenty-first century.

Citizens in many developed countries take their right to education for granted. So they should. As signatories to all of the three great international treaties on economic and social rights many countries recognise an equal access to education by all of its citizens as an important human right. These countries spend a fair portion of their wealth in meeting this obligation. But that is not the case in most countries outside the rich nations of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). In many of them, the rights of all citizens to education continue to remain unfulfilled. It is not as though these other governments have not done anything at all about reducing educational deprivation: impressive progress has been made towards realising these rights. But this is not enough.

In terms of real numbers - which often tell the horror of the situation - close to one billion people still remain blind to the written word and another billion are for all intents and purposes functionally illiterate. In a report prepared by a Global Commission On Population and Quality of Life, Commissioners had this to say about what it means to be illiterate at the personal level:

Literate people find it hard to grasp the full impact of illiteracy. In a world operating on written laws, rules and instructions, being illiterate is a severe handicap when participating in decisions affecting life. It is tantamount to disability, affecting every aspect of living. It confines job opportunities to the most menial and low paid tasks. It means being unable to read instructions on a packet of seed, a tin of powdered milk, or an oral contraceptive. It means being unable to read newspapers, street signs, warning signs. It means the inability to check legal rights, an inability to check if a title or deed is faulty. And it means being exposed to fraud and expropriation.

There is, of course, an even bigger loss to communities that carry the burden of large numbers of un- or undereducated inhabitants. At the Dakar meeting, participants and delegates were able to agree on clear and tangible economic benefits to communities that invested in educating and training their people. These included among other examples the following:

- in Nepal, raising the average education of a farmer by one year increased agricultural output by 5.2% in the hill regions of the Himalayas;
- in Bangladesh, the average salary of a secondary school educated woman was about seven times higher than that of a woman with no primary education;
- in India, a one year increase in the average number of years of primary schooling of the workforce raised output by 23%;
- in Brazil, roughly one-quarter of the country's economic growth in the 1970s could be attributed to an increase in the average education of the workforce and one additional year of schooling increased output by at least 20%;
- in East Asia, according to numerous studies, primary education was a factor in explaining 60-90% of the predicted growth of countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea and Thailand; and

- in Japan, World Bank studies indicate that economic wealth consists of 1% natural capital, 14% physical capital and 85% human and social capital.

Besides economic benefits, there is also considerable evidence being assembled to show that social benefits were equally dramatic with even the basic minimum of educational intervention in developing countries. Consider for example:

- in urban India, when mothers were uneducated, the child mortality rate was as high as 82 per thousand, but it dropped sharply to 34 per thousand when mothers were educated;
- in Bangladesh, contraceptive use was only 27% for women with no education but it increased to 66% for women with more than secondary education; and
- In Sri Lanka, high female literacy rates (87%) have contributed to a decline in the rate of population growth to only 1.3% per year.

These and other cases demonstrating the economic and social benefits of education including benefits such as improvements in the standards of hygiene, reduction in infant and child mortality rates, rise in civic consciousness, greater political empowerment as well as an improved sense of national unity, rights, etc., were in fact the driving forces behind the original desire by the many global citizens, led by the five big global agencies [UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP and the World Bank] to create the Education For All Forum in 1989. The Forum, in 1989, recognised the central role of education in human development and promised that within a period of ten years, all of the world's children will be provided with the opportunity "to develop their full capacities". The promise included universal access to good-quality primary education, an end to gender inequalities in education, the development of opportunities for continuous lifelong learning and, through this, the elimination of adult illiteracy, the enhancement of the learning environment for all, the provision of better training and retraining for teachers and providing sensitive policy framework and adequate resources to make them all happen.

In Dakar at the tenth anniversary of that Jomtien declaration, reading between the lines, the global picture presented was somewhat shameful. Almost on every aspect targets were not met at the global level. In the year 2000 for instance:

- some 135 million children of school age were still not in school, most of them girls (against the Jomtien count of 100 million);
- another 180 million children started primary school but will drop out before they complete four years of education; the vast majority of them even before they have acquired basic literacy skills (against the Jomtien count of 100 million); and
- In excess of 860 million adults were unable to read or write (900 million in the Jomtien count).

Evaluators who met in Dakar were of the opinion that even these numbers understate the problem. In

much of our poorer communities the quality of the education provided continues to be abysmal. Schools in large parts of Africa, Latin America and South Asia are crumbling buildings without a roof, with no access to clean water, a lack of toilets, and classrooms without blackboards, chairs, tables, chalk and books. Teachers who are not trained, and in many cases not regularly paid, teach millions of children. Dakar participants identified that:

- In Pakistan, less than half the government schools have access to safe water and fewer than 70% have no latrines. In fact 15% of "schools" have no buildings;
- In Nepal, surveys show that around 60% of schools have leaking roofs and fractured walls;
- In Tanzania, textbook availability can range from one book to every four children to one per twenty;
- In Zambia, 25% of classrooms lack a blackboard; about 30% of children do not have pencils, one quarter do not have note or exercise books;
- In Peru, fewer than 5% of schools in highland areas have access to water, drains and electricity, few primary school children have textbooks and teachers have little or no support materials; and
- In Yemen, more than half the schools need urgent repair of one kind or another.

The availability of the basic elements of instruction are matters that those in most developed countries take for granted. While many parents in these countries plan to link their children to the Internet and encourage them to explore the world of information and knowledge without inhibition, millions of children in the poorer communities are not in a position to develop their potential for want of a pencil a simple notepad. In as far as poorer communities are concerned, while few children escape one or another form of deprivation, the brunt of the burden is borne by girl children and women. Of every three children out of school, two are girls and out of every three adults who are illiterates, two are women. This cycle of female illiteracy is therefore expected to continue well into the next generation and beyond. As Amouzesh Omeed, an International NGO based in the USA, described it, "At the heart of the education systems in the developing world is a pattern of gender apartheid which distributes opportunity not on the basis of inherited rights, but on the basis of inherited chromosomes."

Does this mean that the world simply stood still in responding to the call at Jomtien? The answer is a very cautious "No." Some things did happen. Jomtien helped to put educational deprivation on the global radar screen. It goaded the world's nine high-population countries (Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria and Pakistan), which account for as much as 70% of its illiterate population, to reverse the negative trends of high population growth rates and low literacy. Further:

- children enrolled in school rose from 599 million in 1990 to 681 million in 1998;
- East Asia, the Pacific, the Caribbean and parts of Latin America are close to achieving UPE;
- the number of out-of school children has dropped by about 11 million;

- pre-school enrolment has increased by about 5%; and
- world-wide, 87% of young people are literate.

These successes, while laudable, raise the question of whether they could have happened even if there were no Jomtien. Although we cannot be certain, many outside of governments or other international and donor agencies strongly believe that, as a collective, humanity failed to live up to its promises to the poor, marginalised, underprivileged, un-reached, rural and isolated populations. Educational deprivation continues to exist in a significant way in most parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America. The denial of education to millions of young children and adults is not just a tragedy in its own right, but it is also a blight on those governments that, on the one hand, signed off on conventions such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and then continue to deny their people the most fundamental of all the rights - education. Some would argue that at the heart of the inability of governments to provide for education is a lack of resources. But this is not so according to a UNDP study on Human Development in South Asia. That study concludes by pointing out that:

- Vietnam, for example, with per capita income of US\$1208 (1994 PPP\$) attained an adult literacy rate of 94% while India with US\$1348 only managed 52%;
- in India itself, the state of Kerala with a per capita income of US\$1017 (1993 PPP\$) has a literacy rate of 90%, while Punjab with more than double Kerala's per capita income has a literacy rate of 58%; and
- Pakistan, in comparison with India and Vietnam and with a per capita income of US\$2154, has less than a 40% literacy rate.

It is not resource availability but political will and proper resource management that may, in fact, be the problem.

So where do we go from here?

The Dakar meeting renewed pledges to achieve equality in educational opportunities for all people. This time, the world and its leaders have given themselves 15 years. During this period we as inhabitants of the global village commit to:

- expanding current provisions of childhood education especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children;
- ensuring that all children, particularly girls and others in difficult circumstances, have access to free and compulsory primary education of good quality;
- ensuring the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes;

- achieving 50% improvement in levels of adult literacy; and
- eliminating gender disparities in access to primary and secondary education

These goals are not different from Jomtien but perhaps there is a hope that the lessons of the last ten years can be effectively put to use to help this renewed undertaking. The lessons learnt indicate a need to:

i. Get unequivocal political commitments especially from states that have so far been recalcitrant: These commitments must include the compulsory enrolment of all children in primary schools in the shortest possible time. In addition to this commitment a further undertaking to address the huge backlog of illiteracy be also addressed. The international community has a moral obligation to ensure that this happens - after all; they are co signatories to the conventions relating to the rights of the child and fundamental human rights.

ii. Improve the quality and relevance of education: The level of student learning achievement is extremely low in most poor communities, with irrelevant curriculum, inadequate supply of textbooks and other learning materials, poor teaching and other support, and low level of school completion. Countries also need to spend more than they currently do to ensure improvement in quality. The U.S., for example, spends around US\$5130 per capita pupil while India spends about \$12; Canada spends around \$5038 while Pakistan spends about \$8; and Britain spends around \$3553 while Zambia spends \$30 or less.

iii. Provide more and better teachers: There is an urgent need to improve both the supply and training of teachers. In most Sub-Saharan countries, a large proportion of teachers need professional training as well as content upgrading. Most of those teaching at the primary level would have finished no more than ten years of schooling and training themselves. Pupil/teacher ratios also need to improve from present levels (e.g., 64:1 in India; 71:1 in Bangladesh) as well as teacher supply (Nigeria alone will need 40,000 new teachers per year for the next 20 years to meet its UPE needs; South Asia has no more than 66% of its total needs.)

iv. Remove all gender barriers: Gender gaps are large and persistent at every level of education. Prolonged, persistent and aggressive methods have to be adopted to remove all gender disparities and barriers. We need to understand the reasons behind these gender gaps (such as poverty and religious/cultural traditions) and find ways around them. Having more women as teachers, learning subsidies for families who rely on girl children for income generation, single sex schools, appropriate curriculum, and making school facilities gender friendly: several experiences show a dramatic increase in girl's enrolments when these supply side constraints are overcome.

v. Allocate sufficient resources: Political commitments and will must be found to make additional funds available to support the EFA targets. One study in South Asia found that by spending less than an additional one percent (about US\$1.15 billion) of their combined GNP, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Maldives could ensure UPE in the next five years. This money would enable 65 million children to be enrolled and 2.05 million teachers to be trained.

vi. Mobilise adequate resources: To achieve the targets set by Dakar one can estimate a required investment of around \$7 to \$8 billion annually for the next ten years. Oxfam, the international charity, put this in context that this money represents about:

- four days' worth of global military spending;
- seven days' worth of currency speculation in the international markets;
- less than half of what North American parents spend on toys per year; and
- less than the annual amount that Europeans spend on computer games and mineral water.

If there is a global commitment to the cause, the resources needed to support it must and can be found. Debt relief and reduction; increased and improved aid for basic education; reform of lending and structural adjustment policies of the international financial institutions and International Monetary Fund and imposing stringent monitoring of how aid money is utilised can all help. As many leaders in Dakar admitted, finding the money was not the challenge but finding the will to do so was.

A great part of the responsibility to fast-track these changes clearly rests with the countries concerned. As sovereign nations they have the primary obligation to educate their citizens, eradicate their poverty, ensure a healthy standard of living and preserve their knowledge, culture, freedom and rights in perpetuity. But it is also a challenge to the rest of the world. As UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, said in Dakar, "it is also a test for all of us who call ourselves the international community." The international community's involvement in these challenges is especially critical during this period of great uncertainties first created by the revolution in communication and information technologies that is changing everything about and around us, second created by the HIV/AIDS pandemic that has had such a devastating impact on many communities and third the impact of the "new" globalisation that is exacerbating even further the rift between those who have and those who have not.

The progress of the first part of the next century in terms of human development may perhaps 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. As we begin this new attempt at providing education for all of the people of the world at the start of this new decade, we may recollect Robert Frost in a slightly different context:

But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.  
And miles to go before I sleep.