

Guarantee minimum quality

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(After all have stood up), “We hereby commit that we shall try from whatever position we are in and wherever we are located, to ensure the rights to education for all our citizens. We shall not fail and demand that the goalpost not be shifted again from 2015”. With that request to all I thank you all.

Introduction from UNESCO

Dr. Malama Meleisea, Director & Representative, UNESCO, Bangladesh



Thank you Chair. Through you I want to thank our partners who have organized today's meeting which is the last of the three public events to commemorate 'Global Action Week' for 2007. I said it's the last of our public events, but it is of course the beginning of our renewed efforts in order to honour the commitment that we have just made.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, I thank you very much for giving me an opportunity to be here and to be with you and be part of this collaboration effort. I was fortunate to be here during the commemoration of 'International Mother Language Day' and having heard and seen events during that time, and having heard the historical background of that particular commemoration, I would have been very surprised, indeed shocked, if you chose to conduct this meeting in English. So I am very happy that you have given the opportunity to people to speak in either Bangla or English.

I just had a quick look at the list of participants and what an impressive and illustrious list of people in terms of their careers, in the past and now! Their presence has given us a lot of encouragement. And it has boosted our hopes, that what was decided in the last two thematic workshops, and what will come out of today's meeting, will be pushed by people with lots of status in this country, and lots of stakes to make their voice heard, in government and non-government organizations.

Given the combined experiences and knowledge of our participants, I don't think it is necessary for me to go into all the details of what human rights and education is all about. You have been part of these efforts long enough to know what it involves, and you know very well what the expectations are internationally, for member states in UNESCO and United Nations generally and their obligations to achieve them. You have the copies of the various relevant conventions available from us. Or, if you have not already got them, we will be very happy to provide all those copies to people who need more.

As you know the conventions, which protect the human rights, generally go as far back as 1948 to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Since then - and up to now - there are some 7 or 8 conventions which are specifically related to the rights on education. There is one that is particularly relevant to the event we are commemorating today that was passed in 1960 I think, which Bangladesh is not a signatory to it yet. We hope that this gathering will help, if help is needed, the government in order to have it ratified. It is the Convention against Discrimination in Education. It will help to facilitate the kind of work which the Bangladesh people and government have to do in the next 7/8 years in order to improve access and quality of education by 2015.

By way of concluding I want to say just two things. The first one is that the right to education asks all states to make sure that everybody regardless of their gender, religion, socio-economic class and so on, has the right to have access to education. I think we still have a fair way to go with that here in this country - although Bangladesh is of course not the only country which is in that situation.

There is also the human rights-based education approach. Once you are in school then you have to make sure that the content of what you are taught in the school is human rights-based, so that each student learns about human rights, and learns about participating in a democratic country, as a democratic and free citizen of that country. So we need to not only make sure that they get to school, but that the quality of what they are getting in school is of high quality. In that way human rights and human rights-based education can be sustainable.

Talking about sustainability, you will have heard of several development stories about projects here and from abroad. One of my favourites is a project in a small island country to build roads right around the island. When the road was completed everyone - the developers, the road building company and the people - was happy. But what they did not mention is that by the time the road was completed, sections of the road where they started building had already disintegrated.

The issue of sustainability is a very important one, not only to achieve the indicators in the project - but to make sure that the results are sustained, throughout the period of implementation and beyond. So that's the pledge from UNESCO - to be a willing partner to work with you all in trying to achieve the objectives of education for all. With

these few words, I thank you very much again for the opportunity to speak and wish all the best for the deliberations to follow.

Realities and Challenges

Dr. Manzoor Ahmed, Director, BU-IED

Thank you, moderator. Distinguished colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, there have been many discussions on political and economic issues. But as far as I know, there have been no such discussion recently on educational issues involving policy makers and civil society. There may have been discussions within the government, but we do not know of them. I will speak briefly on “where we are” and what we need to do.

What is being presented here is drawn from three thematic discussions held on last Wednesday and Thursday (25th and 26th April, 2007) as a part of the Global Action Week. We organized three forums on Preschool and Primary Education, Secondary and Technical Education and Non-formal Education, Literacy and Lifelong Learning. All three, held at the Spectra Centre, were lively and free discussion where 100 or so people participated in each. Based on these discussions and other recent research, we are presenting before you a listing of major problems and priorities for action, as we understood them.

Firstly, on 'where we are,' we need to accept that access to quality primary education is a human right. In this respect, at this moment of time in 2007, 50 percent or more of the children do not or cannot complete their primary education. And at the secondary level that number is 80 percent. Those who enrol in class six, more than 80 percent cannot reach class ten and pass the SSC examination. So a large number of people remain excluded. The cumulative number of deprived people including children with disabilities, urban slum dwellers, indigenous people, the people from chars and haors, and those who are the poorest, constitutes the majority of our total population. This is the situation in primary and secondary education.

Regarding literacy, there are debates as to where we are. What is being claimed by the government may not be acceptable to many stakeholders. Different independent sources indicate an adult literacy rate of 40 to 50 percent based on a simple definition of literacy. But if we talk of 'functional literacy', meaning literacy skills that can be used in work and life, then the rate will be much lower. Gender gap in literacy remains large, as is the gap between rural and urban communities. Literacy rate will be a major factor, should we fail to achieve the MDGs and EFA Goals.

If we look at the education scene as a whole, we shall see that the current education system is further widening the existing socio-economic divides. Once upon a time education was a vehicle for social mobility. The poorer people could expect to change their lot by pursuing education. But today education is intensifying the social divide. We have the mainstream primary and secondary education, the Madrasa system, and the English Medium schools, being run commercially. All these different types and their varying qualities are aggravating social discrimination further.

During the last 10 -15 years the education system in our country has expanded greatly, but the quality of education has fallen. The management of education is highly centralized and there is a great influence of partisan politics, which played its role in unplanned expansion. These two factors along with lack of resources have caused the lowering of quality in education.

Education is a very large social enterprise - the largest public service in the country. Specialized knowledge and professional skills are needed for its proper management. There are many specialized technical functions of education, i.e., assessment and examination, curriculum, and macro and institutional level planning and management, where it is necessary to have professional skills and professionalization. This we do not have in our current structure; the Human Resource Management policies and practices in the education system do not permit a professional approach. We have been talking about this for many years now, but had there been a 10-year plan of action pursued seriously, we could have seen some changes. That has not happened and it is not happening now.

Another big problem lies in the process of policy making, continuity in policies and their follow-up. These have been always on an ad hoc basis. Each government comes and sets up an education commission, which presents a report but it is not followed through.

Given this current situation, we need to consider what should be done and can be done. We have a list of 7 points.

We do not think it is realistic to imagine that all the different streams of primary and secondary education will merge into one uniform system. There will be Madrasas, English medium schools and main stream Bangla medium schools. Yet, there must be a minimum quality and some core curriculum standards. There may be diversity in the mode of delivery, but whichever stream a child enters, he/she is entitled to minimum quality standards.

Secondly, there is a great need for decentralization in terms of local level planning, management and control and utilization of resources. Along with that, there is a need to promote responsibilities, delegation of authority and accountability at the school or institution level, which is not a very easy thing to achieve. We suggest that, in order to do

so successfully, we need to try this out in a few Upazilas in each of the six administrative divisions. Academic and research institutions and NGOs engaged in education must be involved in this experimentation and trial of a major decentralization of management initiative.

Thirdly, we do not have clear understanding of the criteria and rationale of public resource allocation for education. The goals in respect of both quality and equity must be served. These aims must be kept in view while allocating public resources through a transparent process. In most countries, a capitation formula, based on student population in each area, is used for public resource allocation. This formula is applied by taking into account needs and differences in economic development of localities. We need a policy of this kind and its implementation should be through decentralization at the local level. Only passing an order towards that end will not do, rather, arrangement to do that effectively through experimentation must be made.

Technical and vocational training issues have been a neglected area. We suggest that each community might have a community learning centre which the community would own, and there would be arrangement for different life-long learning opportunities, skill development and improving literacy skills in these centres. These will cater to training of basic skills needed for improving livelihood and quality of life. Besides the basic skills, a higher level of vocational and technical skill development opportunities is necessary, which is currently not done very effectively in the public sector.

The public sector institutions are highly centralized, devoid of quality and are based on uniform curriculum and syllabus everywhere. We need to develop a flexible arrangement responding to the local labour market, local economy, and overseas labour market and requirements of employers. The programmes should be planned and managed in collaboration with the business and private sector.

Professional capacity building and professionalism are lacking in educational institutions, and support institutions, such as, the directorates, boards of education, curriculum authorities, and teacher training institutions. The human resources policies should allow people to work professionally and acquire necessary skills. It is not helpful when people are posted for a short period on deputation and they keep moving to different positions.

Let me cite the example of NCTB. I doubt whether there is a similar arrangement anywhere in the world! The curriculum board should be such that people will be placed there with necessary professional skills or they should develop the skills and continue to work there for life or at least for a long time. They should acquire necessary skills and apply these persistently in their work including research, guidance, preparation of educational aids, and overseeing and monitoring implementation of the curriculum. This is a professional field of work - employing a college professor or people from the Administrative services on rotation will not work here and it is not so in any other country. Unfortunately, there is no sign of the kind of change necessary in sight or an appreciation of the need for change.

We also need the continuation of policies, periodic evaluation of progress in policy implementation, consensus-building on policy goals, and prioritization of issues. We need to consider if we need a permanent statutory National Commission. Some form of this exists in many other countries. In India they have a National Advisory Board. A similar body exists in China, Indonesia and Thailand. There is an overall National Education Law in many countries which embodies the basic principles, “do's” and “don'ts” regarding education. The rules and regulations of implementation are made in light of that law. We may also consider such a law, but if a permanent national commission functions properly, continuation of policies and periodic evaluation would be assured.

Lastly, in order to ensure a coordinated and comprehensive effort in educational and human resource development, a single National Ministry of Education would be appropriate. Although the forming of the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, separate from the Ministry of Education, was well intentioned, the results thereof have not been good according to our experience. So we need to consider reverting to one National Ministry of Education, concerned with policies and strategies in a decentralized structure of education planning and management.

These are ideas placed before the roundtable for consideration. There are ongoing development activities in education, such as, PEDP-II in primary education. In secondary education, there is a Secondary Education Sector

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