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UNITY IN DIVERSITY : THE FUTURE OF ADULT EDUCATION
IN ASIA AND THE SOUTH-PACIFIC REGION

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The world today is at a critical juncture. Events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union on the one hand, and the recent Gulf war on the other have created a scenario of a uni-polar world where global capitalism seems to be the only functioning economic order appropriate for the last decade of the 20th century. We have reached a stage today where the world, and our region in particular, faces some serious challenges for the future of our civilization. Let me elaborate these challenges and the likely role that adult education can play in response to them in the future.

Challenges

The first major challenge is the rapid internationalization of economies. Globalization of markets and capital has become the only path to development and progress. Countries of the region have become economically interlinked to each other and to the global economic order. Economic globalization is also resulting in political globalization on the one hand and cultural homogenization on the other. Jeans, Pepsi Cola, and rock music are some of the showpieces of "modern" culture spreading slowly in all the countries of the region.

The second challenge is the daunting presence of poverty and deprivation in many countries of the region. The economic variation in countries of the region can be seen by such examples as Japan on the one hand and Bangladesh on the other. Yet the persistent presence of poverty, hunger, malnutrition, deprivation, dislocation in many countries of the region has reached chronic and acute proportions. As a consequence and partly due to other reasons, the response of national policy makers and decision makers is to take an apathetic posture towards problems of poverty. The poor have been ignored in considerations of developmental policies. The only feasible response currently utilized by national decision makers and other regional bodies is to take palliative measures and distribute welfare, food and other subsidies to the poor. The transformation of the economy, polity and social relations in order to overcome poverty is no longer the main focus of national and multi-lateral decision makers.

The third challenge is the challenge of ensuring "common good". The global capitalist economic order and a welfarist and charitable response to the problems of poverty and the poor are resulting in individual and privatised perspectives of well-being, quality of life, standard of living, etc. The philosophical and political concept of ensuring "common good" has disappeared both from the debates on social transformation and from the planning of strategies in national and multi-lateral decision making structures. It is not even clear how one can establish elements of a national consensus and a regional framework for the "common good".

The fourth challenge in the region is the growing restlessness and associated violence with questions of ethnic identity. In region after region, country after country, minority groups, subgroups, and other ethnic formations are raising questions of their belongingness and identity in the national and regional mainstream. In some cases, these questions arise politically but in others through violent means. But the challenge of ethnic identity is more visible in the countries of this region than any where else.

Role of adult education

What then is the role of adult education in the face of such challenges? In my view, the most important contribution of adult education in the coming period in the region is to continue to address the concerns and problems, and the hopes and aspirations of the poor themselves. Under the pressure of a global capitalist economic order and the hurried response to problems of development in many countries of the region, adult education is being called upon to play a limited, technical role. Adult education is being utilized to promote preparation of a working class of the future in building their technical competence and vocational skills. Important though it is, this technicalizes the potential contribution of adult education and undermines its philosophical and political role. Adult educators like us from this region must ensure that our vision, our aspirations, our capacities, our institutions continue to remain responsive to and linked to the struggles of the poor and not get co-opted into a technical profession preparing white and blue collar workers of the future economic order.

The second role for adult education in the region is to create a climate of tolerance and mutual appreciation. Respecting the differences in religion, caste, culture, language, perspectives, gender is perhaps a major requirement

of individual and collective human functioning at this juncture in many countries of the region. Adult education has the possibility to contribute methodologically as well as philosophically towards elaborating ways in which people in our countries and region can learn to respect other's point of view, their experiences, their modes, styles, aspirations and value the differences. And forge within that configuration of differences, a consensus around desirable elements of common good.

A third contribution of adult education in the region in the coming period is to strengthen the possibility of a sustainable life style. The problems of environment, degradation of natural resources, pollution, destruction of a natural balanced regenerative habitat are essentially problems of life-style. Unless we - as individuals, families, communities and nations - come to terms with the question of a sustainable life style consistent with our natural ecology, the problems of environment and pollution will not go away. Adult education, therefore, has a significant role to play in elaborating and promoting the elements of such a sustainable life style consistent with the different ecological environments.

And finally adult education can help in regaining a sense of indigenous cultural identity among communities of our region. The most devastating consequence of a uni-polar world is the homogenization of cultures. The socio-diversity inherent in the diverse and varied cultural mix of our region is being slowly but surely eroded and destroyed. Our region has been the crucible of many profound elements of human civilization. The great and vigorous cultures of Japan, China, Indonesia and the Indian subcontinent continue to inspire, even today, other peoples in different parts of the world. Yet, our own people, children and youth, poor and rich, rural and urban, are beginning to discard our cultural heritage in the race to become "modern". Our region has the potential to provide cultural and moral leadership to the world at this critical juncture. And adult education can contribute to strengthen our appreciation of, and capacities for rejuvenating, our popular knowledge, folk culture and traditional wisdom.

The challenge for us adult educators of the region, and our colleagues and institutions, is to shape our practice to become relevant to our people. And we hope that ASPBAE as a regional mechanism can help make that possible.

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