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EDUCATION FOR ALL

AS DETERMINED BY THE FEW ?

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EDUCATION FOR ALL

As Determined by the Few ?

During the past year or so a major world initiative has been taken by four sponsors the UNDP, UNICEF, UNESCO and the World Bank along with a host of other bilateral and multilateral funding agencies from the North, to lead to a World Conference on Education For All to be held in Thailand in March, 1990. The World Conference is intended to bring together heads of States and Governments, Ministers of Education and Planning and Finance from all the countries of the world to become signatories to a World Charter on Education For All and a Framework for Action to meet basic learning needs. An Inter-Agency Commission set-up to coordinate this process has been operating from New York for the last 10 months and has been responsible for the production of drafts of the Charters and the Framework. Besides, a background paper entitled "Meeting Basic Learning Needs: A New Vision for the 1990s" has also been put together by the Commission.

In this brief, note based on our experiences in examining these documents, debating and discussing them in several forums, the issues raised by many independent educationists, researchers and non-governmental organisations have been briefly outlined.

1. Utilitarian vs. Humanistic

The most fundamental concern that has been raised so far relates to the very definition of what education stands for and what it aims to accomplish. The approach in the Charter and the Framework seems to indicate a narrow economic and utilitarian view of education. Perhaps this has been influenced by the World Bank, its own approach towards human capital formation and development where education seems to be essential for improving the skills, and thereby the productivity, of the human work force. This comes across in the manner in which the Charter and the Framework have been drafted so far, the language they use and the emphasis they place.

It has serious implications for those of us who have been concerned about education as a larger humanistic experience in enhancing the capacities, the critical faculties and the comprehensions of our people. Besides, the Charter and the Framework underplay the political aspect of education which is reflected in the manner in which educational systems have been structured in our societies.

2. Transformative vs. Adaptative

The second related issue is the manner in which education has been portrayed in these documents implying the use of education to enhance the adaptation and assimilation of the people in the "national mainstream". It appears that this controlling and socialising aspect of education has been predominantly emphasised. This aspect of education, which attempts to perpetuate the status-quo and restricts the possibilities of the people to question the existing system has been in operation throughout history and is also characteristic of the contemporary dominant system of education in many of our countries. The Charter and the Framework seem to give an explicit orientation to this adaptation role of education, thereby reducing the transformative potential of education, education for liberation, education for the possibilities of strengthening democratic forces in our countries.

3. Education vs. Ignorance

A major weakness of the current Charter and Framework seem to be the hints at linking ignorance with illiteracy. The documents seem to imply that Education For All will bring about enlightenment and wisdom. It, therefore, seems to ignore the fact that many of the illiterates are wise, knowledgeable and learned, and that many of them possess skills, competencies, ideas, technologies which have been subsequently found valid and usable by the literate world. It also seems to ignore the fact that much of the destruction of our environment, much of the continued socio-economic marginalisation has been done at the hands of those who

are the so called "educated", that education does not necessarily become equated with wisdom, with knowledge, with values and attitudes towards a more egalitarian, just, and humane society. It is not merely a question of education, but the kinds of education, the values underlying that education, and the process by which the education occurs that is important in our societies.

4. Political not Techno-managerial

The main thrust of the range of strategies which have been outlined in the Framework for Action seems to be at improving techno-managerial aspects of delivery of education. Focus on materials production, curriculum development, testing accomplishments, strengthening managerial structures, training of teachers and supervisors etc. seem to predominate the discussion of the Framework. There is no recognition, explicit or deliberate, in the documents of the fact that Education For All is essentially a political decision, that each of our countries and nations may or may not want to take; that providing Education For All of a quality which is equitable for all, which does not distinguish between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots, is essentially a decision to be taken on the basis of political will and determination; and that the fact that Education For All has not been in existence so far in many of our countries is not because of mere weaknesses in techno-managerial aspects but because there has been no political support in many of our countries to create conditions and possibilities for providing Education For All.

5. The Link with Underdevelopment

The documents seem to create an impression that once the goals of Education For All have been accomplished, socio-economic, cultural and political inequalities in our countries would disappear. The Charter and Framework seem to create an impression that disparities in education are the fundamental reasons for other socio-economic disparities. In fact, the logic is distorted and perhaps contradictory to the existing realities in our countries. In fact, the current disparities in educational provision, the quality and access are rooted in the socio-economic and political

inequalities in our societies. And that this seems to be the major obstacle to the accomplishment of Education For All in our countries. In order to, therefore, reach the goals of Education For All, other interventions in restructuring the socio-economic relations in our societies may be necessary, and that the two may not be pre-conditions for each, but may need to be carried out simultaneously. The documents seem to ignore this and create an impression that Education For All may in fact be the panacea.

6. Gender Justice

A major concern in Education For All needs to focus on the 70% of those who are presently denied access to high quality education the girls and women in all our societies. The documents make only passing and superficial reference to the needs of focusing the thrust of Education For All to the women and girls in our societies. It is important to recognise that denial of education to women and girls in our societies is rooted in the larger question of gender injustices, patriarchy and exploitation of women and the structures which support those injustices. Therefore, the question of providing education to women and girls in our societies has to be situated in larger context of the question gender justice and the two can not be separated from each other. It is here that the role of women and girls, their social-political status, their productive and economic contributions and the need for enhancing support services need to be recognised, if serious attempts at providing Education For All to the women and girls has to be made in our countries.

7. Other Marginalisations

Similarly, the documents seem to ignore the fact that a large number of tribals, scheduled castes, the poor, those below the poverty lines as defined by our governments, the minorities, a large number of those who are otherwise socio-economically and politically discriminated against in our societies are the ones which are also deprived in respect of education. And thus Education For All may require specific sets of strategies to deal with such oppressed and marginalised

sections of our societies and that these educational strategies may need to be rooted in the larger set of strategies to deal with their overall situation of oppression and marginalisation.

8. Literacy and Education

The documents seems to underplay the importance of Literacy in Education For All. There is a tendency to focus on wider learning needs at the exclusion of giving priority attention to Literacy.

Literacy For All has to be given primacy in Education For All. And this becomes all the more important in the countries of the South, particularly in South Asia. Without overcoming the massive problem of illiteracy, Education For All may become an elitist venture. This becomes crucial in view of the fact that 1990 is International Literacy Year - the year of rededicating ourselves to the task of literacy.

9. Centralised vs. People-Centred

Another major concern in this entire process of planning for World Conference, preparation of the documents and Regional Consultations is the manner in which it has been convened so far. It is highly centralised process of planning the educational agenda for millions and millions of people across the world. In this entire process, where are the people? Where are the people whose educational needs, whose basic learning needs are to be met by this initiative? Where are the people who are presently deprived from access to high quality education? Where are the women and the girls, the poor and the marginalised in this process?

It is important that we recognise that the context and the process of education need to be closely linked to each other, that an educational experience which is likely to be liberating for our people needs to be planned in a manner that puts people in the centre. Therefore, the involvement and participation of the people themselves, their forums, their organisations

and institutions in this entire process of Education For All is crucial. Who will determine the basic learning needs of our people? The people themselves or will it be determined in New York, Paris or New Delhi? This is a fundamental question and is not merely a question of instrumentalities.

Who has stakes? The manner in which the documents have been prepared, the entire planning process has been undergoing and the references that the Charter and the Framework seem to make, it appears to be a stake of the sponsors and their co-sponsors. The governments, the educational community, the non-governmental organisations working at the grass-roots and other levels, the people themselves so far do not find any stakes in Education For All. In fact, the references to the teaching community, to other administrators of schools and professional are such as if they are primarily and largely responsible for the denial of Education For All. It is important that the parents, members of the communities, teaching community and other professionals are involved actively in the deliberations leading up to the planning and implementation of Education For All. By leaving a large segment of the Society which has stakes in education outside this process, such an initiative may not find roots and "owners" in our countries.

10. Resource Mobilization

A major thrust of these documents seems to be to emphasise that greater resource mobilization is needed if Education For All has to be accomplished. This seems to be proposed in two ways. First is to adopt strategies for making current provisions of education more cost-effective, economical and efficient. The second is to draw on resources from other sectors of society, beyond the government, as well as tap further international source.

This is a major question in these documents. The documents, however, fail to recognise or analyse why sufficient resources in many of our countries have not been made available to education so far. It seems to imply as if there has been a shortage of resources, while the real situation is that the resources have been prioritized differently in our countries, and

education has not been a high priority. Many of our countries have been experiencing major resource depletions through increasing economic crises, debt and debt-servicing burdens. Similarly, a large number of developing countries in recent years have got entangled in arms race and their own defence expenditures have been mounting at an alarming rate. Perhaps Education For All can mobilise a large amount of resources if the countries were relieved of their debt burdens and if defence expenditures were drastically reduced. It is here that a serious questions about prioritising the use of resources in our countries has to be raised. It is here that the demand for conversion of debt to be used in Education For All in the countries of the South should be raised (as has been raised by our Latin American and South-East Asian colleagues) or a serious demand for major reductions in defence expenditures has to be raised (as has been raised from the Central and South Asian Consultation held in Dhaka in December 1989).

11. New Colonisation

And finally, the entire process, the manner in which the documents have been framed, the language of the Charter and the Framework seems to hint at the possibility of new forms of colonisation of the countries of the South. One of the major intended outcomes as proclaimed by the sponsors of the World Conference is likely to be increased and coordinated international funding support for countries of the South involved in implementing Education For All.

This is a serious issue because huge amounts of coordinated international funding may create conditions for the educational agenda, educational process, learning materials, and training of our teachers and others involved in provision of Education For All getting determined by such international donor communities (and "experts" appointed by them); as if those sitting in the North have all the answers for the Education for All of the countries of the South. It is, therefore, of great importance that countries of the South examine this issue carefully, that the World Charter on Education For All does not become a Charter for subjugation, domination and control over educational content and pedagogy of the children and the adults of the South from the experts and the institutions of the North.

So,

It seems that all of us concerned with education of our children, of our colleagues, of our families, of our communities must get involved in the wider debate on this process of Education For All; that the documents prepared by the Inter-Agency Commission be widely discussed, debated and critiqued, and that in each of our countries a citizen's initiative is launched to examine the issues related to Education For All. It is important that the Framework and Plan of Action does not tie our countries down to a time table which is externally determined and imposed, largely linked to the availability of funds and expertise, and not rooted in the political and economic realities of our countries. Education for All needs to be a concern for all of us, and in order for it to become that concern, our active engagement in debating and discussing the ideas that are being proposed is a preliminary first step.