

Achieving Education for All in the Asia-Pacific Region

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1. INTRODUCTION: THE QUEST TO ACHIEVE EDUCATION FOR ALL

The Education for All movement has gained considerable momentum throughout the world over the past ten years, as countries work increasingly closely together to stamp out illiteracy and so empower individuals and their communities and help create a better quality of life for their citizens. This is to be expected, for as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has noted the attainment of basic literacy and numeracy skills has been identified repeatedly as the most significant factor in reducing poverty and increasing participation by individuals in the economic, political and cultural life of their societies (OECD/DAC, 1996). This realization is not new, and is not limited to organisations like the OECD. Many development agencies such as the Swedish International Development Co-operative Agency (SIDA, 2001), the World Bank (1997, 2000), the Department for International Development in the United Kingdom (DFID, 2000), and non-government organizations such as Oxfam (Watkins, 2000) strongly share this same view.

More than 50 years ago, the nations of the world, speaking through the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, asserted that “everyone has a right to education”. Yet world-wide, and particularly in the Asia-Pacific region, the current provision of education remains seriously deficient. The situation is so serious that many governments and members of the international aid community believe that more decisive and better coordinated action must be taken if education and schooling are to be made relevant, to improve qualitatively, and to be universally available to all. Education as a fundamental right for all people, women and men, of all ages, world-wide is regarded as crucially important to the welfare of humankind. The reason is that effective education can help ensure

a safer, healthier, more prosperous and environmentally sound world, while simultaneously contributing to social, economic, and cultural progress, tolerance, and international cooperation. It contributes to economic, social and political development, to rising income levels and to improved standards of living. Sound basic education is also fundamental to the strengthening of higher levels of education and of scientific and technological literacy and capacity and thus to self-reliant, sustainable development. In addition, as the *Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century* (Delors Report, 1996) has so persuasively argued, education is not just a human right but is also fundamental to the survival of our human societies.

The term 'education for all' does not just concern itself with primary education for all, but is concerned with six key target dimensions, these being:

- expansion of early childhood care and development;
- universal access to completion of primary education;
- improvement in learning achievement;
- increase in adult literacy rates;
- expansion of provision of basic education and training in essential skills required by youth and adults; and
- increased acquisition by individuals and families of the knowledge, skills and values necessary for better living and an improved quality of life.

Despite notable efforts by countries around the globe to ensure the right to education for all, the current reality is that, worldwide: (a) more than 100 million children, including at least 60 million girls, have no access to primary schooling, while millions more attend school but do not acquire essential knowledge and skills; (b) more than 960 million adults, two-thirds of whom are women, are illiterate, while functional illiteracy is a significant problem in all countries, industrialized and developing; and, (c) more than one-third of the world's adults have no access to the printed knowledge, new skills and technologies that could improve the quality of their lives and help them shape, and adapt to, social and cultural change.

At the same time the world faces a wide range of other daunting problems which adversely impact on the ability of countries to strengthen and upgrade education and schooling, most notably: (a) mounting debt burdens, (b) the threat of economic stagnation and decline, (c) rapid population growth, (d) widening economic disparities among and within nations, (e) war, (f) occupation, (g) civil strife, (h) violent crime, (i) the preventable deaths of millions of children, and (j) widespread environmental degradation. Some argue that these problems constrain efforts to meet basic learning needs, while the lack of basic education among a significant proportion of the population prevents societies from addressing such problems with strength and purpose (*World Declaration on Education for All*, 1990a). However, it may also be argued that for many developing countries it is not only a lack of resources, but also a matter of government priorities, where a greater proportion of GNP is spent on so-called 'weapons of

war' (such as armies, tanks and armaments) than on 'weapons for peace' (schools, health care and clean water).

Whatever the root causes of these problems, over the last decade they have led to major setbacks in improving basic education in many of the least developed countries. In some other countries, economic growth has been available to finance educational expansion but, even so, many millions remain in poverty and are unschooled or illiterate. In certain industrialized countries, too, cutbacks in government expenditure have led to the deterioration of education in terms of access, equity and quality assurance.

As a result of such problems, in order to ensure everyone has a better opportunity to exercise their right to education, governments, along with international aid organizations and members of civil society, decided in 1990 to band together at the World Conference on Education for All (EFA), in Jomtien, Thailand, to make a concerted effort to achieve education for all (EFA) by the end of the year 2000. At this international conference on EFA, some 1,500 participants comprising delegates from 155 governments, policy makers and specialists in education and health, social and economic development from around the world, met to discuss major aspects of education for all. Representatives were ambitious in their goals, in that they agreed to take combined action to universalize primary education, massively reduce illiteracy, and to work together towards making basic education available to everyone, by the end of the twentieth century.

The *World Declaration on Education for All* (1990a) and the *Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs* (1990b), adopted at Jomtien, foresaw the need for an end-of-decade (2000) assessment of progress as a basis for a comprehensive review of policies concerning basic education. The World Education Forum (Dakar, Senegal, April 2000) was the first and most important event in education at the dawn of the new century. Unfortunately no region of the world was successful in achieving the goal set at the Jomtien conference of achieving EFA by 2000 and so, by adopting the *Dakar Framework for Action*, the 1,100 participants of the Forum reaffirmed their commitment to achieving Education for All, this time by the year 2015.*

2. CONTEXTUAL FACTORS: DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION

The region of Asia-Pacific, which is home to almost 60 per cent of the world's population, is outstanding for the vast range of diversities that encompass almost all aspects of life, whether geographical, socio-economic, cultural, political or developmental. In this region there are countries of vast landmasses (China,

* In addition, six years after the Jomtien Conference, the Mid-Decade Meeting of the International Consultative Forum on Education for All, in Amman, Jordan (June 1996) brought together some 250 decision-makers from 73 countries, including ministers of education, and multilateral and bilateral agencies and non-governmental organizations. Their aim was to assess the advances made since the Jomtien Conference, and to take stock of progress and shortcomings to enable adjustments to be made prior to and as a run up to the end of decade EFA evaluation.

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