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A Copernican revolution

Editorial

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Ten years ago, the World Conference on Education for All held in Jomtien (Thailand) pledged to guarantee five years of primary education for every child in the world and to halve the adult illiteracy rate by the year 2000. These were ambitious objectives.

The World Education Forum to be held at Dakar in April will take stock of what has been done to achieve these goals during the last 10 years. In absolute terms the number of children not enrolled in primary schools and the number of adult illiterates have slightly declined. Because of demographic growth, the decline is more pronounced expressed in relative terms.

But figures are only part of the balance-sheet. The Jomtien Conference maintained that education is not only a right but also the key to all development. This conviction is now universally accepted, and so is the urgent need for schools to reach out, especially to all those still excluded by traditional forms of education. New partners (communities, NGOs, local civil and religious authorities and the private sector) are proving to be invaluable. Above all, objective analysis of the state of basic education which emerges from the country reports prepared for the Dakar Forum will allow a very precise diagnosis of the situation to be made for the first time.

A radical change of course

Paradoxically, the failures that have been recorded during this decade of action have taught a key lesson: more of the same will not be enough; different approaches will have to be adopted. Unless there is a radical change of course, education for all will remain a vain objective both in quantitative and qualitative terms. Basic education will only become accessible and relevant for all if there is a "Copernican revolution" in schools and schooling.

It is a truism that the capital on which every society draws to shape its future consists of the knowledge at its disposal and its capacity to extend and transmit that knowledge. In the age of the Internet and globalization, however, it is

important to emphasize the growing contradiction between the new demands made by "knowledge societies" and the immobility of the major systems whereby knowledge is acquired.

These systems are chiefly based on a single period of time (whereas education should be a lifelong process) a fixed place (one to which many potential learners lack access), a specific group of actors (thereby neglecting the contribution that other segments of society can make), uniform content (whereas education should affirm cultural diversity), and a single source of funding (whereas public

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spending on education is not keeping pace with the inevitable increase in the cost of basic education and lifelong education for all). These structures, programmes and methods are increasingly being overtaken by the radical developments that are changing the face of all societies.

The contours of the revolution we shall be required to carry out are starting to take shape. The purpose of education can no longer be reduced to the transmission of learning or the mastery of job-related skills. We must not forget that "Education" literally means "drawing out", enabling learners to achieve their full potential. To lose sight of this approach, to stress the "all" in "education for all" to the detriment of "education" would lead to the growth of a new kind of illiteracy and an increase in the disparities and inequalities against which education should be the most powerful weapon. ■