

## HIGH-LEVEL GROUP ON EDUCATION FOR ALL

### ADDRESS BY KAILASH SATYARTHI

CHAIRPERSON OF THE GLOBAL MARCH AGAINST CHILD LABOUR  
PARTNER IN THE GLOBAL CAMPAIGN FOR EDUCATION

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Mr. Director-General, Honourable Ministers, Sisters and Brothers, let me thank UNESCO for giving me and my fellow partners in the Global Campaign for Education this opportunity to speak frankly and openly before the High Level Group.

I would like to applaud the leadership provided by Mr. Matsuura in bringing us all together, which is not an easy task. The speakers yesterday and today brought us hope. If this hope is translated into action, I am sure it will help in shaping the future of the world.

There is no reason to be pessimistic if we compare the 18 months post-Dakar with the 18 months post-Jomtien. But this is not to say that everything is going well.

One should not get the impression that a revolution has come and everything is on track. To achieve the EFA goals we should be courageous enough to recognise the obstacles created by internal contradictions and external conditionalities. These are the effects of terror and insurgencies, natural calamities, political instability, racial, caste and gender discrimination, difficulties in effective governance, and, above all, the inadequacy in resources.

We should not be shy to admit the harsh realities to find a better solution.

Only last week I was staying with a family friend in Washington and I saw the two teenage children were discussing in depth the issues of Afghanistan and the Taliban. I curiously asked, "What did you know about Afghanistan before September?". They smiled and said, "Sorry, frankly speaking we never bothered to even know where the country was before."

I thought today the whole world, the international media and leaders everywhere are engaged on the issue of terrorism. I asked myself how much money are we compelled to spend on bombs and food packets and what not in combatting the evil of terrorism today. Had we spent a small sum supporting the people of Afghanistan through meaningful education, the Taliban and the terrorist camps would never have been created.

Today we are also talking of reducing social spending due to the ongoing situation, but let me tell you again a word of caution. If we leave any country or any community deprived of education, we are responsible for their denial of access to the mainstream of the global economy and global knowledge, and that is going to become the greatest danger to world peace.

Yesterday's truth was that you cannot sleep in peace if your neighbour is hungry, but today's truth is you cannot even live or work in peace if your neighbour is kept uneducated. We are living in an era of knowledge capitalism. Globalisation has brought many prospects to the world, but it has created a power troika where the power of state, market and knowledge are married together. The only weapon the poorest of the world can effectively use is the power of knowledge, the power of education.

Education could be seen as a program, a project, a social welfare measure, a charity, or a public service, as this is a centuries-old popular perception, which is interpreted and reflected in various forms.

But the children I work with and live with, the children who have been victims of slavery and prostitution, bought and sold like animals, many of them even born in slavery as their parents were slaves, education is the key for their liberation.

Sometimes education is life itself.

It is too late for Shiv Shankar. He was engaged as a domestic child servant in New Delhi. Twelve year old Shiv Shankar had not been fortunate enough to go to school. He was a forced labourer. He has never been paid any wages and was compelled to work day in and day out. He was beaten up and tortured and even sexually abused. One afternoon, his mother was informed by his employer about the boy's illness. When she reached the master's place, she could not find anything other than the dead body of her son.

The local police and employer forced Shiv Shankar's father Rameshwar to give a thumb impression on a blank paper.

The poor father cried for an investigation and justice, but in vain. My organisation took up his cause and held a demonstration at the police station, insisting that the employer be brought to justice. When we brought Shiv Shankar's body for cremation, the manager asked his father to fill up some forms and sign them. Rameshwar gave only his thumb impression and started crying, complaining to me that he has been forced to put thumb impressions on a number of papers when the boy was initially employed. Then again, when the dead body was taken from the employer's home and finally from the mortuary. In the course of the judicial action,

we found that many fake affidavits were prepared by the employer in connivance with the police, which ruined all possibility of fighting the case.

Rameshwar said, "If my son was able to write to us when he was alive, or if I was able to read and write, I would not be forced to see this day." It is too late for Shiv Shankar, but not for his younger brother and sister. Education and only education can protect them from such an ill fate.

It is not too late for Annie, whose older sister Patricia was sold by her employer to a brother in the red lights districts of Manila. The young teenager spends her late evenings with her customers. Patricia told me, "I am saving money with a dream that although it is too late for me, I want to send my sister to school, not to the night club."

It is also not too late for Jose's son. Jose has been working as an indentured labourer on a sisal plantation in Brazil. He could never pay off his debt to his employer, as he could never calculate his wages. He feels it is too late for him, but not for his son.

Education is liberty, joy, freedom and the future for Shiv Shankar's sister and brother, for Annie, and Jose's son.

If I don't bring the sense of urgency to this house, I would not be honest to the children whom I work for, who are dying every day and every moment. I am witness to the death of their dreams and emotions. For them the pre-condition of success of any EFA goal lies in the sense of urgency.

It also lies in a strong human rights perspective to deal with this issue. It is not only since our deliberations yesterday that we recognised education as a fundamental human right, but it has been recognised time and again in national constitutions and international conventions.

It was recognised as a human right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted over half a century ago. It was clearly and unequivocally upheld as a right by all 191 countries that have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. And it was again re-affirmed as a right in the Dakar Framework for Action.

But I and my colleagues in the Global Campaign for Education see a very serious inherent problem. When we deal with other human rights, our strategy, approach and mechanisms are different, and that is why those rights become non-negotiable. Is it not a mockery that we find endless excuses on the pretext of a resource crunch, or an inadequate infrastructure, to deny the right to education? The right to education must also be non-negotiable.

If we treat education as a welfare measure, quality education remains the privilege of only those who can afford it, with just a little bit left over for the poor masses. Moreover, economic constraints and political priorities can easily affect budgetary allocations at the national and state levels. Similarly, the shrinking support from international donors, or other conditionalities restricting social spending can result in serious reductions in basic education spending.

Unfortunately, we still see access to free, quality education treated as less than a right.

There are a number of pre-conditions or key elements for the success of efforts to make education a universally respected right. To describe them briefly, they are:

A) The strong urge and ownership from the common people

In my opinion, this is the most important factor to generate and sustain political will and to ensure transparency and accountability. A very pro-active approach using the mass media, folk communications, local civic bodies, religious institutions, trade unions, teachers and NGOs is essential. It is not necessary that this is carried out only by governments, but all who are concerned for and committed to the EFA goals must take it up.

B) Broad, deep, genuine and sustained participation of all stakeholders at all levels, including the local, district, sub-national and national levels

It has been noticed that in EFA structures, stakeholders' participation is short-term, limited and sometimes very vague. In a number of countries the governments feel civil society organisations are their critics or even threats, whereas in other countries, these organisations are weak and ineffective. If they are not equipped with proper information, responsibility and the power to act in collaboration and coordination on a long-term basis, one cannot expect more.

C) Clear allocation of resources at the national and international levels and a check on the use of those funds

Whatever good intentions, innovations and creative ideas EFA partners bring to the table, if they are not supported with timely and adequate local or external funding, they will lose enthusiasm and interest after their wasted efforts.

D) Genuine commitment and action for the elimination of child labour

We in the Global March movement strongly believe that free, quality education is the most effective preventative measure and alternative to child labour. On the other hand, the use of child labourers as the cheapest and most docile workers, due to the greediness of employers and the easy temptation for poor parents, is both the biggest obstacle to the enrolment of children in schools and a major cause of drop-out. It is necessary to design a clear, time-bound strategy to achieve the elimination of exploitative child labour.

E) Effective mechanism for monitoring all EFA goals at the district, national and international level, with clear responsibility and authority

Such an effective mechanism has to be developed with wider participation, transparency and responsibility, linked with a certain amount of authority. But it should not be externally imposed and could be evolved at the local, sub-national and national levels and then attached to the international ledger-keeping or tracking.

F) Systems for recourse, redress and complaint where the children, parents and communities who have difficulties in accessing or completing basic, quality, free education could easily go

We know and therefore should not have any hesitation to admit that there are several socio-cultural factors and a biased mindset against girls, victims of HIV/AIDS, and other vulnerable groups in many of our countries. These factors may affect negatively the enrolment and completion rates and the quality of education in schools. If children and parents want to exercise education as a basic human right, it is not always the school teachers in the village who can solve the problem. It would not be the police or the courts where they could practically go. Other institutions must be empowered and equipped to provide speedy recourse.

G) Concrete, structured and consistent coordination between various ministries and departments dealing with different aspects affecting education (finance, labour, gender, social welfare, etc.), along with civil society actors and the UN agencies involved in these different areas

I wanted to underline, this particular issue because if we are not able to generate enough concern and commitment which finally leads to cooperation among various ministries at the national level and the departments at local levels, the EFA process remains fragile, weak and sometimes even conflicting. The coordination amongst them is essential for the effective utilisation of resources, for a sustained political will, and for achieving concrete results. Similarly, a number of civil society actors who are not directly engaged in the delivery of education but are deeply involved in such areas as gender equity, HIV/AIDS, child labour, disability issues, ethnic communities, minorities, refugees, and disaster management must also be involved in the process.

Undoubtedly, the present EFA structures have yielded important results in bringing various actors together at the initial stage to develop good national action plans

But the fundamental question is, "What after the plans are in place? Or even after external or internal funding is committed but without effective monitoring?" Here I would like to propose a strong, alternative enforcement and monitoring mechanism.

We have to evolve more effective structures which can meet the pre-conditions for EFA success that I have listed. Dealing especially with this issue from a human rights perspective, we can learn from the experiences and models we have in practice to protect and promote other human rights in a number of countries such as South Africa, Brazil and India.

We have highly effective National Human Rights Commissions and other arbitral structures which are quasi-judicial bodies that can also address the socioeconomic and cultural aspects of various human rights protected under constitutional law, such as juvenile boards, family courts, women's commissions, minorities commissions, etc.

Similar structures, such as National Commissions for Education could be established. I am not talking about a big bureaucracy, but a coordinated efforts of various agencies to ensure the right of education for all. The National Commission for

Education should be authorised and made responsible for the enforcement of existing laws, constitutional provisions and international treaties for education. They would also be responsible for monitoring the national EFA plans and be a place for recourse and redress. Mandated by the President or Prime Minister, such commissions could be composed of four key components, including the judiciary, representatives from various ministries or departments, civil society, and independent experts.

Such commissions will keep the EFA momentum alive as their primary task, and share the burden of Education Ministries in a progressive and effective way. Such commissions need a very modest infrastructure or bureaucracy as most of the members would be co-opted from the different fields as mentioned.

Operationalising education as a right will definitely have to be dealt with in a legal framework of action, as well as a development issue. Therefore, it would be appropriate that national commissions be headed by a sitting or retired judge of the Supreme Court appointed by the Head of State of those countries.

Such commissions are not mandated to interfere with or duplicate the routine work of education departments and ministries, but they will act as reinforcing agencies. I would underline again that the reason for me to propose this mechanism is based on the encouraging outcomes of commissions appointed to defend other rights.

While recognising that the heart of EFA lies in national action, it must also be supported by the strongest possible efforts at the sub-national or district levels.

For this purpose I would like to add the proposal of District Level Vigilance Committees on Education. Such committees would again be constituted of the officials from various departments at the district level, together with highly respected individuals, parents, village leaders, and civil society representatives, including especially teachers. These vigilance committees should be headed by the District Magistrate and be mandated for overseeing the actual success of EFA plans at the grassroots level.

I had the privilege to personally interact with common people and stakeholders, officials, and local NGOs across almost all of India during the first half of this year, when my organisation coordinated a nation-wide people's march for education.

The most promising sign was the poor people's willingness and thirst for education if it is really free and meaningful. On the other hand, concerned citizens and organisations were often found complaining about the performance and quality of education, but it was hard to find that such people were really engaged with a deep sense of ownership in finding solutions. Most of them were not even aware of the budget, the available resources, or the spending on basic education in their own district.

That they have not been meaningfully involved in improving the quality of schools, it does not mean that they had no concern or interest. The problem was that they had no platform. The people see the problems but they have no place where such issues could be addressed or where they could intervene. District Vigilance Committees

could be the appropriate answer for such situations because these committees would help in keeping track of the progress toward the 6 EFA goals, as well as being able to keep an eye on income and spending. I would also like to underline here that this won't cost too much.

If District Vigilance Committees are established with a certain amount of responsibility, ownership and authority, it is more a translation of social concern into effective monitoring and action. Such involvement will also widen the sense of ownership among the masses, as well as interest the local media and politicians.

The committees should hold their meetings at regular intervals to review progress and report to the National Commission for Education. Such structures may not be universally appropriate and their composition, roles, responsibilities, sharing and levels of authorities may vary from country to country, but the need to meet the pre-conditions of EFA success with sustained effective participation remains common for everyone. We cannot generate effective political will without sustained mass support.

It is not necessary that only the Presidents or Prime Ministers or top government officials can make education a reality in the lives of poor people. It could even be an illiterate person who could sensitise others to learn reading and writing.

These are not my words, but the feelings of Kalu, which he expressed to President Clinton, exactly a year ago in Washington. I need not say, who Mr. Clinton is, but Kalu is a 14 year old boy who was lured from his native village in India to work a thousand miles away weaving carpets. He worked as a bonded labourer, a virtual slave who was not allowed to see his parents. He was forced to work without rest or proper food. He was beaten up when he cried for his mother.

Kalu was rescued by my organisation two years ago and helped to begin a new life as a student in a village school. Kalu showed himself to be a brilliant student who stood first in his class and won the chance to meet Mr. Clinton. He was very excited when he met the President. Kalu asked him to work more for the liberation of children like him and to ensure quality education. Mr. Clinton applauded young Kalu's concern and regretted that he would no more be the president after a few months.

The smart Kalu responded spontaneously, "Sir, it is not necessary to be the President of America to work for education. One can work in any capacity." Mr. Director-General, ladies and gentlemen, Kalu's words are a challenge to all, to those who find excuses and compromises. Education is non-negotiable and the right of everyone who is born in this world. Free, quality education for all is certainly achievable and we collectively are going to see in the near future that it is achieved.

Thank you very much.