

Education: Bridging the Digital Divide



The Right to Education

From Theory to Practice

When a state tries to implement the human right to education as it is formulated in international instruments, certain problems arise ... The following are examples of obstacles that need to be overcome in order to move from rights to action

(Second article on the Right to Education series By Katrien Beeckman, Associate Expert at UNESCO-Dakar. The opinions expressed in this article are those of its author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Organisation).

Interpreting the Conventions

The first problem is that the vague and general articles of the Conventions do not enable us to precisely define the contents of the right to education or the concrete obligations incumbent upon member states. An example is free primary education. While the incompatibility of direct school fees with this right is obvious, the same cannot be said of indirect fees, such as purchase of school uniforms or textbooks. Indeed, a case-by-case analysis is required. When those fees are mandatory and out of proportion with parents' incomes, the Committee monitoring the implementation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights will most likely conclude that the right to education has been infringed.

The Price to Pay

Another problem is the financial burden to be borne by states when implementing the right to education. It is obvious that setting up an education system, as defined by international law, is impossible to do overnight. Therefore, every state should, to the maximum of its available resources, progressively ensure the full enjoyment of the right to education. Thus, it is impossible to apply the same yardstick to industrialised and developing countries. The stringent context of Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs) has often been acknowledged by Human Rights Committees as an obstacle to the full realisation of the right to education.

The serious social and economic consequences of education budget cuts, such as high dropout rates and teacher layoffs, have often been expressed as subjects of serious concern. However, the Committees have pointed out that SAPs do not absolve states from providing social protection to the most vulnerable groups of society.

What Course of Action?

Finally, when we talk about the human right to education, we raise the issue of its violation. Here again, the implementation of the right, which is essentially social in nature, is problematical. An individual whose civil and political rights have been infringed, take for instance the right to privacy, can seek justice from a court. The chances of an illiterate child, forced to toil in the fields, to successfully claim her right to education are more theoretical than real.

The only supervision of the implementation of the right to education is carried out by the Treaty monitoring committees, to whom the states are obliged to report on a regular basis on the progress achieved and the difficulties encountered.

This is not an easy task. For, while the indicators developed by certain international development agencies may to some extent be useful for assessing the achievement and application of the right to education, they do not embody the fundamental human rights values, such as human dignity and the principle of non-discrimination.

A few schools in countries as far afield as Brazil and Ghana have been getting a taste of information that exist beyond classroom walls. They are involved in a programme that seeks to connect them with the internet revolution sweeping through the world.

Run by the Alliance for Global Learning (AGL), an organisation supported by the International Education and Resources Network, World Links for Development and Schools Online, this initiative was launched last year to enable students in the developing world to have access to the plethora of resources in cyberspace.

By June this year, AGL expects to have connected 300 schools in nine countries through its programme. Besides Brazil and Ghana, they include school from South Africa, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Peru, Paraguay, Egypt and the Palestinian territory.

And over the next five years, AGL plans to spread its web further "to directly impact over 3,000,000 students in developing countries".

The Alliance hopes to link the students and teachers around the world using new technologies to "improve education, provide collaboration opportunities and build global awareness."

It is one way, the Alliance says, to address the "shocking reality of digital-divide", the disparity between countries where people have easy access to infor-

mation technology and countries where people have been largely cut from this revolution.

And during its first year to bridge this gap, what this organisation has pursued in the selected schools is to provide computer labs and internet connectivity. Furthermore, it also works with teachers and students to foster "peer-to-peer collaboration projects" and to guide the school-based computer labs in becoming "resource centres for the surrounding community."

Such initiatives to use the internet to guarantee quality education have been welcomed by a broad spectrum of educators.

Globalisation and the impact of information technology are leading to a new "knowledge economy where services and information are crucial", observes Stephen Marquard, the technical director of SchoolNet, South Africa, an organisation which promotes and implements information and communication technologies.

In his view, students need to be familiar with information tools from an early age to be competitive in this new economy when they leave school.

A report published by the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) echoes similar views. "Information and communication technologies can be used to support the interactive sharing of ideas and informa-

tion. Such dialogue is critical not only to the support and motivation of the learners, but, more importantly, to their overall growth and development," states the report, titled "Towards Open Learning Communities".

According to Tom March, a United States educator, an internet-based course of study offers both teacher and student content that, on the one hand, appears familiar. It looks "a lot like what traditionally grows in classrooms."

But in other ways, he remarks, "the fruit borne of these trees taste unlike anything educators have chanced to sample before. In other words, educators will recognise old friends like references, resources and lessons, but the breadth, depth immediacy, passion and interactivity available in the Web-based brethren open up an entirely new way to educate."

Such possibilities, in fact, were recognised by the 155 governments when they met 10 years ago in Jomtien, Thailand, for the World Conference on Education for All.

The promises that stemmed from that conference included a pledge stating a need for an "expanded vision," which would surpass "present resource levels, institutional structures, curricula, and conventional delivery systems."

According to the British-based Centre for Global Education, over 75 million Westerners have access to the

Web compared to 700,000 Africans. Furthermore, 48,000 of the 50,000 African internet hosts (computers with permanent internet connections) are in South Africa.

As last year's UN Human Development Report pointed out, moreover, South Asia, home to 23 percent of the world's population, has less than one percent of internet users.

Regards working telephones (a prerequisite to access the internet) the report revealed that 40 percent of people living in developing countries "have never made a phone call."

These facts are not the only realities that advocates of internet-based education need to contend with during their push to enable students from the developing world to access information in cyberspace.

There are also the criticisms raised by national education leaders about the content available on internet. "Technology is a double-edged sword. We in Africa can't accept it wholeheartedly without calling into question many of its pitfalls," says Aicha Bah Diallo, former minister of education in Ghana.

As she sees it, the internet offers educational messages, help-lines, vital information but also "racist and socially unacceptable matter."

For her, such technology needs to have a sense of purpose if it is to benefit people in the developing world.



Programm for Friday, 28 April

9:00-10:30 Plenary Session

*Panel discussion on Theme IV:
'Promoting education for democracy and citizenship'

Invited speakers:

Graça Machel, former education minister of Mozambique;
Timothy Balding, Director-General, World Association of Newspapers
Chairperson: Ingemar Gustafsson, SIDA.

11:00-12:30 Plenary Session:

'Fulfilling our shared commitment to Education for All'

* Statements on the strategic role of each agency in carrying out the proposed Framework for Action for education in the early years of the 21st Century by the Forum's five Conveners, Director-General WHO, Chairman, Preparatory Committee, Copenhagen

+5, Chairperson: Dr Kasama Varavarn, Thailand

13:00 Lunch at the Centre

14:30-17:30 Plenary Session:

'Taking off in the new millennium: The new EFA alliance'

*Statements on education for all in the new millennium by invited speakers (President of Mozambique, H.E. Ms Maria Minna, Canada, Director-General, UNESCO, others to be confirmed) representing each major region and the multilateral, bilateral and non-governmental organisations
* Concluding statements on behalf of the host country and by the chairperson of the EFA Forum Steering Committee
* Approval of the Framework for Action
* Formal closing ceremony Chairperson: Mr Errol Miller, (Jamaica),
Co-chair, EFA Forum Steering Committee