

GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION MEETING  
HELD AT UNESCO HEADQUARTERS/PARIS  
28 – 30 JANUARY 2015

PRESENTATION  
BY  
STEVENSON SEIDI  
UNESCO MONROVIA ANTENNA

The situation in Liberia, in respect of the Ebola Virus Disease, is improving evidenced by the fast pace at which the disease is leaving the country. The Liberian government must be credited along with the international development partners and countries empathetic to Liberia since the outbreak of the Ebola Virus Disease. This West African country was burdened by its own post conflict peculiar situation which has now been compounded by the onslaught of the Ebola Virus Disease. Though the situation appears encouraging, let it not delude us into basking in early relief and joy-making. We are still not out of the woods and are cautioned to derive and implement measures that will ensure that there is no re-occurrence of this life threatening menace.

It is worthy of mention that the disease has taught us many lessons with diverse challenges that deserve immediate attention. The virus exposed the weakness of the Liberian health system, unconsolidated communication and reporting system, the unpreparedness of our education system to address school health issues, i.e. school health education, sanitation, safe drinking water, etc. Thank goodness that when the disease struck, schools were already closed or else it could have been a different story than what we are experiencing now. The time is now to safeguard the future against any such unfathomable menace.

For more lessons learnt from this epidemic, we have experienced the fragility of the entire system including the socio-economic frailty of the country. Prior to the dawn of the EVD, there were numerous challenges, namely, 60% of the school age children being out of school, 50% of the schools in operation had no access to water, about 25% of the adolescents and young adults were out of school and had no employable skills, 73% of the children in school were well over-aged, 40% of the adults (parents and guardians) are illiterate, overcrowded classes due to lack of space, and about 45% of the teachers are still either under qualified or untrained. Now the ebola has introduced a new dimension of orphans representing 22% of the 8,402 people who contracted the EVD, and 18% of the total fatalities as at 18 January 2015. This is a cause for concern.

However, all is not lost yet, but much needs to be done to salvage what is left of the damage done by the ebola virus. The Government through the Ministry of Education is hatching some ambitious post-ebola recovery plans that need the support of us all including the international development partners to continue the pace of assistance or even more to the Liberian Government's recovery efforts. As can be seen, there are many issues to address stemming from improvement of infrastructure, strengthening of the health and educational systems, enhancement of food security and school feeding and nutrition, support to literacy education, and Technical Vocational Education for the youth who make up more than 60% of the population.

Particularly for the education sector, there is a dire need to institute meticulous safety protocols and sanitary measures in all the schools, strengthen the School Health Program in all schools, install anti-ebola materials including thermometers in all schools, provide refresher training to teachers and parent-teacher associations as a measure to forestall and pre-empt any reoccurrence of the ebola virus. The school health program has training manuals, curriculum, and a policy that need to be revised to reflect content on Ebola and other related infectious diseases. The 1,500 teachers of the school health program need to be trained to provide the appropriate instruction that could equip students to safeguard themselves against diseases.

Support should be provided to community radio stations that could be used to promote EVD and health messages in communities, as well as speak to behavioral change. They should also include the continuous promotion of messages about HIV and AIDS. It is strange that these days in Liberia, much is not heard about this pandemic as if it has ended. This is dangerous, because the infection still affects many persons. There are more than 7,000 persons subsisting on ARV in Liberia. The radio stations should be challenged to carry such programs in simple Liberian English and the local vernaculars for ease of comprehension mainly by the illiterate population of our society.

Let me conclude by reiterating UNESCO's mission to build peace, eradicate poverty and promote sustainable development and intercultural dialogue through its five core mandate areas which put the organization in a unique position to provide support for a multi-sectoral Ebola response, of course, with the support of donors. The teething challenges enumerated earlier are a pointer to conflict if not addressed in time.

Let me quote the Director General in her excellent remarks on her last mission to Iraq, "Education is a human rights imperative for you and for all Iraq – it is also a development imperative and a security imperative. We cannot let you and an entire generation of young Iraqis to be deprived of their right to education, because this would throw a shadow over the future of the country as a whole." I am afraid this also applies to post-conflict Liberia that has been bedeviled with the Ebola virus. The time is now to save the situation.

Thank You !!!

