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Education in the Context of Poverty and Inequality

According to the 2005 Human Development Report, extreme inequalities in opportunity and life chances have a direct bearing on what people can be and what they can do in terms of human capabilities. With the widening gap between rich and poor, and the growing inequality between and within countries, most of the world's population are restricted in what they can do or become if they are poor, ill, illiterate, uneducated or discriminated against for any reason.

For people living in poverty, education is empowerment. It offers the possibility for inclusion into the larger social fabric, but it is often associated with training for jobs and capacity building to break the cycle of poverty. It is of course legitimate to hope for a better life, a bright future, and to improve one's own conditions of living.

Speaking from my own experience, as a young woman who was born and educated in Cameroon, the way out from the stark realities to fulfilling the dream is not always easy and requires a lot of commitment, determination and perseverance.

CONTEXTUAL REALITIES

I can still hear the encouraging voice of my mother, telling me at a very early age, "Education is your first husband; no matter what happens you must go to school." At that time, I could not really make sense of those words, but as time passed I gradually unpacked those words. Even now, they continue to inspire me to understand local realities and help to move beyond them.

To compare "education" to "husband" within the context of a patriarchal African setting is a subtle reminder of my gender and status in the traditional setup, while at the same time referring to the privileges and wonderful opportunities that education could offer to any girl child.

Access to education has contributed to my formation and shaped my perception of human beings as persons with dignity, irrespective of sex and class, against the backdrop of traditional beliefs that a woman exists only through a man.

My mother believed that having an education would enable me to blossom into full "womanhood." I would be empowered to run my own life - not subjugated to, dependent on and waiting for someone else. It was therefore out of question that I would not go to school because of lack of money or any other reasons.

Hearing those words time and again forced maturity on me. I had to be responsible, hardworking, do my homework and perform well at school. I also had to be accountable, as I was aware not only of the efforts to send me to school but also of the hopes and expectations for me. I graduated successfully from primary and secondary school, and from university with a degree in arts.

During all those years, I hardly questioned the purpose of education because I thought its ultimate goal was to get a job. However when, like many others, I was faced with the sad reality of not getting a job, I started to ask myself, "What for?" "What was my education for if I cannot get a job?" At this point, I discovered anew the importance of informal education through the SCM and its contribution towards holistic formation.

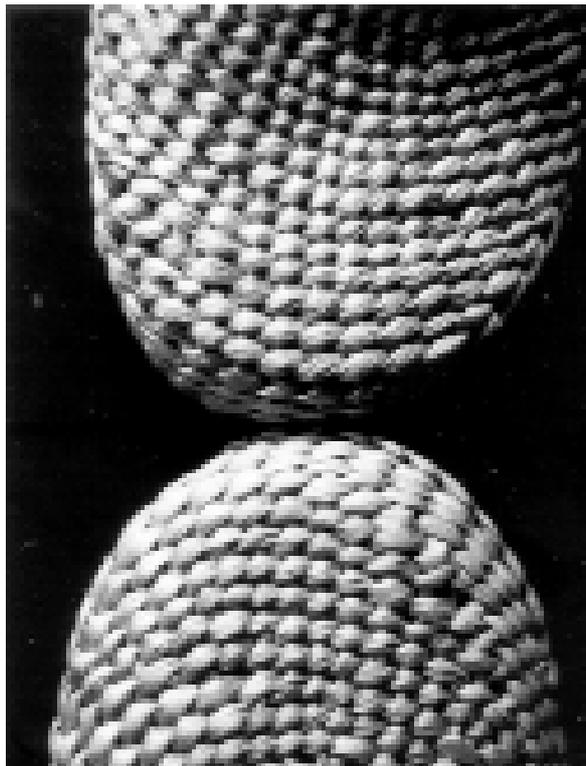
PUTTING A VALUE ON EDUCATION

Education is often seen as an economic benefit to the individual and the community. In this sense, education is supposed to provide employment, which in turn contributes to sustaining the extended family; ensuring that later in life children will care for their parents.

Based on these expectations, some families invest all their income in the education of their children because they believe it is the way to a better life. Others even go to the point of putting all they have on the line for their offspring's education. They put so much into education (which is of course proper) and have such high expectations that they run the risk of being disappointed when their children end up with no jobs. This brings into focus questions about the purpose of education within the context of poverty and inequality.

In Cameroon, girls and boys have equal access to education, without discrimination at any level. Only primary education is free. For the girl child, education is one of the key components leading to autonomy. Ironically, the higher up you go, the fewer girls you find because they drop out along the line from primary to tertiary education for many reasons.

Often, after the first degree, most girls may find themselves in a situation where they have either to look for a job, go for vocational training to get easy access to the job market, or get married simply because they get very little or no support from their families if they want to pursue post-graduate studies.



It is silently implied that, "Your level of education is enough for a woman." The psychological pressure girls go through at this particular time has a tremendous impact on major decisions for the future.

There exists unspoken competition between arts students and science students and those who go for vocational training, because of the scarcity of jobs. The former often appearing to be deemed less bright and intelligent. The



current trend is to give emphasis to vocational and scientific fields of education, because people may get specific training and are therefore more likely to find a job upon completion of formal education.

How can people not be disillusioned with the educational system, when after putting all their efforts, means, energy, strength and resources to go through a formal education, they get "nothing" in return?

In a heavily indebted poor country (HIPC),

deeply marked by the effects of the structural adjustment programmes imposed by international financial institutions (IFIs), the disengagement of the state as the main job provider, and the absence of adequate structures to take over, it is imperative to question the purpose of education.

THE WAY FORWARD

Having gone through an educational system that overemphasises the utilitarian component, I think it is high time to take some insights on the purpose of education, in light of the *Report to UNESCO by the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century*.

The report highlights the importance of education throughout life as the "heartbeat of society." It is an ongoing process for people at any stage of their lives in order to meet the challenges posed by a rapidly changing world.

This is particularly relevant in less developed countries, where education is a unique tool of survival, and people must be equipped to cope with the pressing needs of their milieus. Education throughout life therefore appears to be based on four pillars: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be.

"Learning to live together" was identified by the commission as central to the other pillars. It is achieved through "developing an understanding of others; their history, traditional and spiritual values, and on this basis creating a new spirit. Which, guided by recognition of our growing interdependence and a common analysis of the risks and challenges of the future, would induce people to implement common projects or to manage the inevitable conflicts in an intelligent and peaceful way."

The interdependence of humanity is interesting when looking at consumerism, wealth and its benefits on the one hand and lack, hunger, poverty and its disadvantages on

the other; the gap between 20 percent of the world's population as "haves" and the 80 percent "have-nots."

I have been living in a Geneva for two years now and it is always heartbreaking to see the "happy few" dispose of food, books, and many other useful, basic tools that people do not have access to at all in other parts of the world. How can we be responsible and accountable to each other as human beings when knowing that our actions have an impact on other lives around the globe?

"Learning to know" or "learning to learn" is a lifelong process, a combination of a sufficiently broad general knowledge with the opportunity to work in depth on selected subjects. At this juncture, we inevitably need to talk of access to education for all, equal opportunities for both boys and girls, and basic literacy skills.

The year 2005 was meant to be the year to achieve parity in primary education within the framework of Education for All (EFA). Without access to education, girls are denied the knowledge and skills needed to make choices, to advance their status, and even to protect themselves against disease such as HIV/AIDS.

"Learning to do" is more than training for jobs. It is the acquisition of skills and competencies, which enable people to deal with a variety of situations and to carry out teamwork. It is also entails alternative methods of study and work and value-learning experiences of young people in different informal social contexts.

This particular pillar resonates with faith formation (which I mentioned briefly earlier) in the Student Christian Movement, which provided me with the space to give a new meaning to and have a balanced view on formal education.

"Learning to be" focuses on how to better develop one's personality and be able to act with greater independence, judgement and personal responsibility. In this regard, education must also provide people with the opportunity to use their talents and gifts, as well as enhance the development of other potentials such as memory, imagination, reasoning, aesthetic sense, physical capacities and communication skills.

Education goes beyond the acquisition of knowledge to include other forms of learning. The shift in thinking of education as a release from poverty to education that improves the quality of life is crucial to the sustainable development of the third world.

As it is true that education is one of the only means for economic and social advancement, it is also obvious that for as long as it remains accessible to a very small minority, the gap between rich and poor will remain and all people, especially women, will remain disempowered.

The education of the girl child is related to the empowerment of women, and through them to the development of society. A good-quality education will enhance women's capacities and prepare them to seize opportunities in the public and private sectors. This is important to transform some of the societal attitudes and behaviours that discriminate against girls and women.

Suggested Reading

SCHREINER P. – BANEV E. – OXLEY S. (eds.), *Holistic Education Resource Book: Learning and Teaching in an Ecumenical Context*. Münster, 2005.
 DELOIS J. et al, *Learning: The Treasure Within*. UNESCO, Paris, 1996.
 United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2005*. <http://hdr.undp.org/>
 EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005/4, *Gender and Education for All: THE LEAP TO EQUALITY*. UNESCO, www.efareport.unesco.org/.

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