

Education for All. Will It Ever Happen?

World Education Forum - Dakar, Senegal, (April 26 – 28, 2000)

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Introduction

From April 26 to 28, the World Education Forum was held in Dakar, Senegal. The Forum was convened by four United Nations agencies - UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP and UNFPA - along with the World Bank. Assembled at the Forum was an army of parliamentarians, bureaucrats, and policy advisers from over 180 countries. Joining the invasion was over two hundred non-governmental agency representatives, from all regions of the world. At issue was the global education crisis. Over 110 million children have no access to primary school. Another 150 million leave school without being able to read or write, thereby adding to the ranks of the currently 872 million illiterate adults. And yet ten years previous, at the first education forum in Jomtien, Thailand, world leaders promised education for all by the year 2000.

Arriving in Dakar, one soon realizes why it was an appropriate venue for the World Education Forum. As the clouds parted and the Dakar skyline came into view, one is faced with the sites of a poor city. Many of the cinder-block buildings were roofless and the majority of streets appeared unpaved. Prior to landing the plane flew over a large compound filled with junked city busses, all covered in Senegal's famous red dust. Undoubtedly the matter of finding the finances to support an education for all would prove to be a major dilemma facing the Forum's delegates.

As we departed for the hotel accommodations I soon witnessed my first signs of the upcoming conference. Billboards at regular intervals, some in English, others in French, displayed a long line of people with the probing caption, "WILL THEY NEVER LEARN?". The billboard went on to challenge the Forum delegates to "Take Action Now". My original thought was that they must be official conference billboards and it wasn't until later in the week that I discovered that the billboards were put there by the most active global NGO coalition, the Global Campaign for Education (GCE).

The Global Campaign Demands a Global Action Plan.

Launched in October of 1999 the Global Campaign for Education united Education International (representing over 23 million teachers and education staff worldwide), Oxfam International, Action Aid (a leading U.K. development agency), the Global March against Child Labour (a major southern NGO), and dozens of national NGO coalitions in developing countries. The binding element for the GCE was a deep concern about the lack of official action to achieve a quality education for all. "It's time", said Ellie Jouen of Education International at the Campaign's launch, "that governments and the international financial institutions recognise education is a fundamental human right and that the provision of quality education for children, young people and adults is a core responsibility of the state. Governments must provide the resources needed to achieve education for all".

From October 1999 right up to April 2000 and the World Education Forum, the Global Campaign mobilised public opinion on the need to hold governments accountable for the promises they made at the first, 1990, education summit in Jomtien, Thailand. In a millenium letter to all heads of government the GCE challenged the governments to fulfil their promise to provide free, quality education for all people, in particular girls and women. It was the GCE's position that a quality education for all was indeed an achievable goal. What was needed was a framework for action that combined strong political will with the necessary resources.

The GCE adopted and lobbied in support of a Global Action Plan (GAP) for education. Initially proposed by Oxfam International, the GAP estimated that an extra \$8 billion in new finances would be required annually, over the next ten years, to achieve education for all. The governments of the developing countries would be expected to mobilise half of this amount through public expenditure reforms, including progressive taxation, or through reductions in military-spending and other costly areas. The GCE contended that no less than 6% of a country's GNP should be spent in support of basic education.

The remaining \$4 billion must come from the international community. Here the NGO Global Action Plan proposed that a mixture of increased aid, debt relief, and private capital support. With reference to the OECD aid budgets, the GCE argued that the proportion of aid allocated to basic education must be increased from the current average of 2% to 8%, that overall aid budgets be increased, and that low-income countries receive an appropriate share. The GAP also called for the reform of International Monetary Fund and World Bank structural adjustment policies to ensure they support rather than undermine free, quality education.

Heading into Dakar the Global Campaign released their 'bottom line' position. Dakar, they stated, will be considered a success if it achieves, among other things,

- an unequivocal commitment to free and compulsory education for all by the year 2015;
- an agreement on clear and time-bound targets that are nationally owned and allow for the engagement of civil society;
- a commitment to a global action plan with clear resource commitments by governments and donors;
- a commitment to improving equity in the quality of education (eg more money should be targeted towards poorer rural schools);
- clear commitments made to improve the quality and nature of aid to education;
- a clear commitment made to strengthening adult literacy;
- innovative responses to ensure that children in families affected by HIV/AIDS do not their access to an education;
- the democratisation and decentralisation of the present Education for All structures and mechanisms; and
- a commitment to a mid-term global review, 2006, and a possible official UN conference.

Dakar: The Successes and Failures.

For two days prior to the official World Education Forum, NGO representatives from around the world assembled at the International NGO Consultative Forum on Education for All. Over 200

people representing local, regional, national and international agencies, were gathered together. Funded by UNESCO and the Education for All Forum, this consultation had two important functions: (1) to allow the NGOs to submit their comments on the proposed Draft Dakar Framework of Action on Education for All, and (2) to select three delegates who would officially participate in the World Education Forum's Drafting committee, along with five delegates for the Futures Committee.

The message from this assembly of NGOs was clear. World governments had to do more than produce a document full of vague promises and pledges in support of basic education. This was recognized as a major failing of the first Education for All Summit in Jomtien, Thailand. The 1990 Summit had set for itself the goal of education for all by the year 2000. However, this target was not supported with a meaningful plan of action. There was little to ensure the goal would be reached. The NGOs charged that to simply move the timeline and target date forward to 2015, the latest agreed upon time line for Education for All, in truth, guaranteed nothing. To maintain the status quo, the Global Campaign contended, would result in 75 million children remaining out of school in the year 2015.

The NGOs identified many weaknesses in the Draft Dakar Framework for Action. They were especially concerned about a lack of clear objectives. The NGOs were looking for a commitment of new resources. The NGOs wanted mechanisms and structures that would ensure the participation of civil society. The Draft document was short on benchmarks and timelines. While finely crafted and eloquent there was little on which the members of civil society could hold governments and the multilateral agencies accountable. This resulted in many textual changes being proposed and adopted at the NGO Forum. It would then be up to the NGO official Drafting and Future Committee representatives to negotiate for their inclusion in final Dakar Framework for Action.

In the debate about the official committee selection the consensus was that regional representation was critical. For the Drafting Committee, of the three chosen one represented the African delegates, another the Latin American and the third the Asian delegates. The delegates subsequently proposed that the NGOs request a fourth seat on the official Drafting Committee and that person was to be a representative from one of the International NGOs.

For the Futures Committee (i.e. the group responsible for laying out the proposal for post-Dakar follow-up) the NGOs agreed on 4 regional delegates - Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Middle East - plus one delegate representing the international NGOs. Similar to the situation with the Drafting Committee the NGOs adopted a resolution that appealed for an extra seat. After a day and one-half of intense but friendly discussion the NGOs were ready to take their place at the official Forum and to seek a more concrete and transparent Framework for Action.

The World Education Forum (April 26 -28)

The official forum opened with two keynote speakers: UN Secretary Kofi Annan and President Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal. While the former spoke about how NGOs have made "remarkable contributions towards education", specifically recognising the Global Campaign for Education, he invited the NGO community to join in the battle for education. "Today, I say to the NGO

community: we cannot win the battle to educate girls without your expertise, your energy, and your expansive search." President Wade, in his speech, focussed on the theme - the time for research and study was over and the time for action was now.

Following the opening session Global Campaign representatives persuaded Mr Annan, along with Carol Bellamy of UNICEF, to leave the lavish Hotel Conference Centre to meet with over 1600 Senegalese students who were rallied outside of the security gates. Complete with a rousing brass band the students held up banners that read, "Education is Freedom" and "We want to learn too". The students ended their rally by holding up in unison a thousand yellow cards, as if to signal a final warning symbol to the gathered delegates and dignitaries.

Throughout the three days, the more than 1,000 conference delegates heard speeches from all four UN convening agencies. As in Kofi Annan's opening speech, the work and achievements of NGOs was recognised time and time again. Interspersing the plenary presentations were a series of more specialised sessions. Topics included, "Providing basic education in situations of emergency and crisis", "Promoting basic education and democracy: the role of the media", and "After primary education, what?". These sessions were intended to provide an opportunity for dialogue; however, time restrictions and an over ambitious agenda resulted in a series of presentations with little time made available for discussion.

Other keynote speakers at the Forum included Ms. Graca Machel, Development Ministers Clare Short from Britain and Eveline Herfkens from the Netherlands, and James Wolfensohn, the World Bank President. In his speech Mr. Wolfensohn challenged the delegates to "place education squarely at the core of the global and national development agenda". His closing remarks were of particular interest to NGOs as he called for a "fast track action plan" for those countries committed to achieving education for all goals sooner than the targeted date of 2015.

Canada's Role at the Forum

The head of the Canadian delegation to Dakar was the Honourable Maria Minna, Minister for International Cooperation. As one of the closing speakers, Minister Minna spoke on behalf of Canada and ten other bilateral donors including the United States, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Sweden and Norway. To those countries who demonstrate a commitment to education, Minister Minna stated, "we should be prepared to consider additional assistance to make the goals they establish attainable". Minister. Minna was warmly applauded when she stated, "But let's be frank. Without an educated, healthy society - free from disease and exploitation - there is no real hope to move forward in development. And without this social development - there will be no economic development".

Minister Minna also announced that she has introduced a fundamental shift to programming in the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). Basic education has become a key part of CIDA's social development agenda - along with protecting children, health and nutrition and fighting HIV/AIDS. The Minister came to Dakar prepared to prove that this verbal commitment to making basic education a priority for CIDA would be matched financially. While in Africa she announced several new CIDA programming initiatives in support of quality basic education -

\$50 million for Senegal (over 10 years), \$10 million for Uganda (over 5 years) and \$13 million for Mali (over 5 years).

The Dakar Framework for Action is Adopted

As the three days came to close, it became clear that the final Dakar Framework for Action would remain vague in terms of commitments and timelines. The NGOs huddled one last time on the closing afternoon to consider a response. NGOs requested an opportunity to present our views to the plenary. Speaking on behalf of all the NGOs Tom Bediako, from Education International - Ghana representative, and a member of the Global Campaign for Education, was allotted five minutes.

NGOs present at the Forum welcomed the following:

- a renewed commitment to a free and compulsory quality education for all;
- no country with a viable plan will be thwarted through lack of resources;
- a global effort based on country based plans;
- the acknowledgement of the need to increased resources through aid and debt relief;
- the need to prioritise girls education;
- a commitment to a genuine partnership with civil society; and
- the promise to urgently implement education programmes to combat HIV/AIDS

However, as Mr. Bediako stated, the Framework falls well short on time bound commitments and it is weak on financing. "We had hoped to see a target of 6% of GNP for education spending, as recommended by the Delors Commission, and 8% of aid to be spent on education. It lacks mechanisms for transparency and accountability". Mr Bediako concluded his commentary by focussing on the proposed global initiative, "the language on the proposed global initiative is vague and lacks detail. We are struck by the contrast between the obligations being taken by the southern governments, and the absence of comparable commitments by the northern governments and multilaterals".

The day after official World Education Forum closed, representatives of the Global Campaign for Education gathered to reflect on the week's events and to plan ahead. There is certainly a clear interest to continue the campaign and to broaden its base. The steering committee has agreed to develop a new advocacy strategy in preparation for future international opportunities to advocate for a quality education for all at Okinawa (G7 in July), Geneva (WSSD+5 in June), Prague (annual WB/IMF meetings at the end of September), the Beijing Review (June) and Millennium General Assembly (May) in New York.

The firmly held belief is that education must be an issue of prominence at the next Group of Seven Summit in Okinawa, Japan in mid-July. There are hopeful signs that this could happen. Gene B. Sperling, Assistant to the US President for Economic Policy, said in Dakar "Just as the G-7 was the catalyst for expanded debt relief last year, so it should consider taking the initiative on basic education and health at its summit this year in Japan. We will strongly encourage that action on the results of the World Education Forum be a serious topic on the agenda G-7 meeting in Okinawa." Tony Blair has also said that he wants to table education at the next G7 summit.

NGOs did not get everything we wanted at Dakar, but the world community is moving in the right direction. The success was based upon many factors. Probably the most important one was that a group representing hundreds of organizations, agencies and coalitions, from every corner of the world, was able to come together and work as one. The governments and international financial institutions were all lobbied. They now recognize that the world does care that over 100 million children never see the inside of a classroom and nearly a billion of adults cannot read or write.

Here in Canada, NGOs and other organizations must also make use of any and all opportunities to advocate for a quality education for all. (Note: This fall the Commonwealth Education Ministers are meeting in Halifax.) We must continue to push for increased aid and debt relief in support of basic education. Canadian NGOs should take their cue from the Global Campaign and look to build and maintain links with strong allies such as Teacher Associations, national and provincial, right across the country. Together we should be able to do our part to support and strengthen the global campaign for a quality education for all.