Structural Issues in Education for Alliance of Civilizations

Access to primary, secondary, vocational and higher education is a basic public good that is universally recognized, and has a high priority among the Millennium Development Goals (See http://www.undp.org/mdg/ and monitoring of the goals http://ddp-ext.worldbank.org/ext/GMIS/home.do?siteId=2). Achievement of mass literacy among the populations of all societies is a dream that could only be realized in modern times. It is a difficult challenge whose main assumption is that nearly everyone is not only able to learn, but obligated to do so—obligated to themselves, to their families and to their society or nation. Religiously speaking, the quest for knowledge is both a right and an individual as well as collective duty. From a worldly or secular perspective, there is certainly no disagreement over the need to place education as a top priority, and obstacles to advancement must be identified and overcome.

Access to Educational Opportunities

Providing the means for universal access to education remains a challenge for the wealthiest nations in terms of fairly allocating resources for this public good among segments of their populations. Providing universal access to education by the governments of the poorest nations often seems an insurmountable challenge in the face of basic needs for nutrition, housing, and health care that are unmet; geographic and infrastructural inequalities hinder equal access to their populations.[1] In several world regions where Muslims form the majority and significant minorities, average figures for literacy range between 68% and 75%, with figures for female literacy that hover near 50%. In the most developed regions of the world, official literacy figures near 100% conceal higher rates of functional illiteracy among some segments of society and uneven distribution of educational resources among localities, which point up inequities between rural and urban populations, unequally served geographic regions, and between upper and lower class neighborhoods in the cities, which may correlate to ethnic enclaves. Beyond the need to ensure basic literacy, however, it is becoming increasingly clear that nations whose populations are not more broadly educated will lack the means to meet the challenges of internal development or external competition, and will fall even farther behind. Providing access to the highest level of education each citizen can achieve is a matter of national well-being and even survival. Existing educational facilities and traditional assumptions will not be adequate to meeting these needs.

Infrastructure

The structural reasons for these inequities may be fairly simple but have proven intractable. Research in a cross-section of countries with lower literacy rates indicates that rural areas are inadequately served with primary schools, and those that exist may be too distant, too poorly equipped with teachers and learning supplies, or two crowded. Girls may not be attending for such reasons as lack of toilet facilities, security, or transportation. The curriculum is not perceived to serve the needs of the students, nor

---

[1] See UNESCO Institute for Statistics International Literacy Day 2005 Fact Sheet, retrieved on 2/10/06 at http://www.uis.unesco.org/file_download.php?URL_ID=6264&filename=11287105911UIS_factsheet_06_ EN.pdf&filetype=application%2Fpdf&filesize=38892&name=UIS_factsheet_06_EN.pdf&location=user-S/

does such education develop competitive candidates for well-paying jobs. While rural children may have alternative work in the local economy, poor urban children may have few alternatives for work that would sustain a viable future, but low attendance and rates of completion indicate the need for an overhaul.[2] Child labor competes with school, and it may be necessary to find alternative ways of scheduling school to increase the likelihood of children attending, in addition to safety issues. It is worth recalling that agricultural labor patterns still influence the school schedule in industrialized countries, though only because tradition has replaced the original reasons for doing so. The access gap may be closed by means of a combination of high and low-tech measures. In remote areas, satellite communication may be used to bring educational programming for adults, and classroom remote hook-ups for school-age children. Locally recruited teachers may provide support to local students, who would not need to be as highly trained as the teachers broadcasting the remote programs. In rural areas of the US, such computerized or televised classroom resources are used to compensate for teacher shortages in rural communities and to provide enhanced quality programs to students scattered in remote areas.[3] It will be beneficial to invigorate and update efforts toward increasing the availability of distance learning toward sustainable literacy both for teacher training and direct schooling in rural and underserved areas, for adults and children. A few such programs and research efforts include UNESCO (http://www.unesco.org/education/e9/initiative.shtml and http://www.unesco.org/education/efa/global_co/working_group/Background%20paper.pdf), "Distance Learning is International" (http://www.gwu.edu/~connect/distance.html), and the **id21 Education** initiative (http://www.id21.org/education/e4cy1g1.html) .

With existing technology, two-way communication between geographically remote students and teachers is possible, including online submission of student work, teacher-provided instructional materials, and feedback. Such programs can contribute to closing the access gap in primary education, but they may also be applied to increasing access to secondary school education, improving adult literacy, and many types of training. Attempting to meet the challenge of universal education opportunity through bricks-and-mortar development alone within a critically urgent development timeframe, nor is it likely to result in a sufficient quality of instruction at any level.

Language

In the developed countries, where immigrant populations present linguistic challenges to the education system, programs to improve access to the language of the host country must be implemented as an issue of equitable access to education. In countries where large numbers of immigrants reside, instruction in the dominant language for speakers of other languages must be a legislatively mandated program in public education, although community-based, informal programs may supplement these. For adult learners, many religious institutions and community adult education programs provide at least basic instruction in English, and public extension programs and

---

[2] For example, International Crisis Group, "Pakistan: Reforming the Education Sector," Asia Report # 84, Islamabad/Brussels, 7 October 2004, retrieved at http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=3574&l=1 .

[3] For example, a consortium of public schools in South Dakota have developed a virtual school program to provide access to excellent educational opportunities in underserved areas of the western state, retrieved on 2/11/06 at http://www.sddial.org/ilc/vschool/ . Home schooling organizations have also linked students to online learning in private initiatives. Public and private schools alike routinely utilize online learning opportunities such as links to ongoing scientific and other activities, such as the Jason Project at http://www.jasonproject.org/ .

community colleges have remedial English programs that prepare pre-college students to pass the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). In Europe, the language education issue is more complex. Simultaneously, Europeans strive to preserve their heritage languages, bind Europe together across linguistic lines, become fluent in globally important languages, as well as linguistically integrate the many immigrant populations in their countries. It is a tall order, and innovative programs such as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) with bilingual instruction or more in content areas seek to accomplish active language learning across the curriculum.[4] Among the linguistic issues that affect access as well as causing economic hardship and discord between states and minority populations, the suppression or elevation of certain languages through the education system is a source of great bitterness that also reinforces inequities and contributes to the intractability of long-simmering conflicts. As a matter of global economic competitiveness, increased efforts to encourage mainstream students to study foreign languages and learn about the world, and these may also include efforts to learn the language and culture of major immigrant groups.[5]

Access to higher learning and vocational training

While no global consensus has been reached on a right to higher education, statistics show that in both developed and developing countries, education beyond compulsory schooling—or post-secondary education in more developed countries—is a matter of diminishing percentages of attendees at each progressive level of schooling (see footnote 7 for citation). The traditional education systems of most countries have been designed to act as progressively finer-screened filters that allow fewer and fewer students to attain the next higher level. Whether intentionally designed to do so or not, education systems have been effective at ensuring that a small percentage of students gains access to higher education, and that those who do get through are sluiced into fields of study according to certain distributional principles. In many developing countries, this is accomplished through exit examinations, with access to programs based on policies based on the economy and grades, with guaranteed employment of graduates. Students whose achievement during their early secondary years was inadequate were not permitted to move into university preparation tracks. In the most benevolent systems, such students found vocational training opportunities awaiting their exits from school. In less fortunate circumstances, their publicly funded education simply ends, dumping them unprepared onto an already narrow job market.

The arrival of the digital age and globalization of economies is changing this calculus and creating calls for broader access to post-secondary educational opportunities. Students may no longer have to accept being shunted into careers based on their test scores and bureaucratic decisions. The need for digital literacy among ordinary workers and citizens, and the global demand for a more versatile and flexible workforce is engendering a re-thinking of higher education from the most traditionally elite institutions to reaching into all tiers of workforce development training. The Task Force

---

[4] See Eurydice: The Information Network on Education in Europe, " Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) at School in Europe," retrieved on 2/10/06 at http://www.eurydice.org/accueil_menu/en/frameset_menu.html
[5] The education department of the Asia Society formed The National Coalition on Asia and International Education in the Schools as a broad-based, informal coalition of leadership groups that share a deep interest in promoting the close ties between international affairs, cross-cultural understanding, economic development and education reform, of which language instruction is a major goal; retrieved on 2/11/06 at, http://www.internationaled.org/national.htm .

on Higher Education convened by UNESCO and the World Bank published its report *Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise* (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2000)[6], making recommendations emphasizing the necessity of providing funding, improving governance, and reforming the educational focus of higher education in the developing countries. Putting the shoe on the other foot, economic dislocation and contraction of the middle classes in developed countries are also placing strains on the ability of qualified students to obtain access to higher education opportunities, and vocational education is experiencing lags in providing training appropriate to the changing nature of the workplace and changes in demand across important sectors of their economies.

In western Europe, figures for higher education measured in 1995 range between 35% and 50% or more of the population recorded as enrolled in higher education. North Africa and the Arab countries range between 5% and 35%, with the majority of countries in the MENA at 15% to 35%. In South Asia, the figures are lower, between 15% and below 5% (Pakistan and Afghanistan) with all but southern Sub-Saharan Africa below 5%. Most of eastern Europe is on a par with the wealthier Arab countries.[7]

Structural Issues and the Clash of Cultures

Conflicts arise from multiple causes, and avoiding conflict requires attention to potential elements feeding into it. The sense of insecurity that pervades both Western, developed nations and developing, Muslim countries is informed by a sense of cultural malaise in response to other factors. People who fear for their economic and national survival, who fear unthinkable global Armageddon, whether from war or ecological catastrophe, look to groups in their midst or beyond and often see in them the realization of their fears. The root causes of the malaise may be more reliably traceable to the perception of threats to their existence or way of life. People who take to the streets in violent reaction to seemingly incidental causes are not reacting purely to such an incident in the absence of other issues. By the same token, the public in Western countries may be wishing away those strangers in their midst out of more deeply felt threats to their economic future. To the extent that improved education is part of the solution, improving access to education at all levels—both in developing and developed countries—is a necessary condition for resolving the more fundamental issues that often appear in the mask of cultural conflict. It is certainly not the more educated segments of society that take to the streets in violent protest, though certainly some of the intellectual fathers of these incidents on both sides may certainly be counted among the privileged and educated elites.

Summary of Preliminary Recommendations:
- Encourage efforts to make primary through secondary education universal, both by giving priority to education expenditures, and by focusing those expenditures on innovative methods of overcoming long-term obstacles (see IT initiatives above)

---

[6] The report can be retrieved at http://www.tfhe.net/report/downloads/download_report.htm .

[7] *Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise* (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2000), pp.12-13, retrieved at http://www.tfhe.net/report/downloads/download_report.htm.

- Invigorate and update efforts toward increasing the availability of distance learning, such as the E-9 Effort (http://www.unesco.org/education/e9/initiative.shtml), "Distance Learning is International"(http://www.gwu.edu/~connect/distance.html), and id21 (http://www.id21.org/education/e4cy1g1.html) both for teacher training and direct schooling in rural and underserved areas, for adults and children.

- Support the recommendations of task forces on higher education, both fitting programs to economic opportunities in the job market, and creating tiered programs tailored to 1- and 2-year certificate programs, as alternatives to 4-year degrees, in consultation with employing institutions. These programs can help staunch the flow of educated migrants from developing countries and improve economic and social integration of immigrant communities in developed countries.

- Finding ways to increase access to higher education in developed countries with large immigrant populations through language remediation, second-chance programs and modular education programs such as distance learning in higher education.