UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
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Some weeks ago, John Kenneth Galbraith, in a searching analysis of the state of the world following the harrowing and destructive Gulf War, expressed the view that more far-reaching steps had to be taken to increase solidarity and the assistance habitually provided by the rich countries to the poor. In his view, such assistance had to be primarily focused on the areas of education and culture. He added that it had to be remembered that there were no literate peoples that were poor and no rich peoples that were illiterate.

The strength of the future lies in education and the possibility of having access to it is the essential prerequisite for genuine participation in the life of the modern-day world. The wealth of tomorrow’s world will chiefly come not so much from mines, the land or factories as from schools, universities and research centres.

Recognition of the fact that education is the key to progress and likewise its most effective agent is tantamount to acknowledging that literacy continues to be the fundamental means of acquiring knowledge and of expressing ideas, information and knowledge.

It is an incontrovertible fact that, in this day and age, both culture and technology are predicated on universal literacy. We live in a culture based on the printed word. In the present-day world, there is no society which functions exclusively with an oral culture and in which illiterate people are not at a disadvantage. They all need literacy in order to live alongside and maintain relations with other people who are literate and to satisfy the basic need of human beings to express themselves, speak their minds, and read so as to be able to understand, or else for pleasure or for information. Literacy can no longer merely be regarded as a tool connected with the encoding and decoding of signs. The idea of literacy has gone beyond simple mastery of reading and writing techniques. In its proper connotation, literacy represents the possibility not only of reading words but of understanding the world and taking part in its transformation. Knowledge and participation, in that order, are the two pillars of genuine citizenship. If people do not take part in the life of the community because they do not know how to or are unable to do so, then they do not count as citizens.

This broad view of the concept of literacy has brought realization to the international community of the enormous gap existing between recognition of the value of education and the real-life situation in our education systems.

Here the statistics compiled by UNESCO clearly point to the decline of basic education in recent years. Many industrial countries are experiencing serious problems as regards the quality and functional nature of the education provided in primary schools. Surveys conducted in those countries show that between 10 and 20 per cent of the population do not have an adequate
command of the basic mechanisms of reading and writing, calculation and problem-solving. There are serious shortcomings in science and technology training and in knowledge and awareness of ecological problems.

In the developing countries, the situation is even worse, in that, over and above the qualitative problems, a very high proportion of the population does not have access to schooling or pupils attend school for only a limited number of years; even when they do stay on for a theoretically adequate length of time, they take only scant advantage of the education on offer. In two thirds of the developing countries, expenditure per pupil in primary education has been on the decline since 1980. Teachers' salaries have also fallen significantly in real terms; this has led qualified educators to move to other types of employment and has compelled many teachers to seek a second or third job, resulting in a lowering of standards and detracting from the reputation of the teaching profession. There has also been an alarming deterioration in the provision of equipment, textbooks and professional supporting services, in spite of the efforts which governments, families and teachers themselves have been making to find imaginative solutions to the shortage of financial resources.

We are under a moral, political and economic obligation to end this pattern of decline in basic education, especially in the developing countries. Humankind cannot allow itself to enter the twenty-first century with so high a proportion of people being debarred from basic cultural practices. It is our duty, and the duty of every one of us, to ensure that, in this final decade of the century, basic education can be truly universal and can play its part as the cornerstone of development.

The United Nations Declaration designating 1990 as International Literacy Year has provided a considerable incentive for developing new and imaginative strategies aimed at overcoming absolute and functional illiteracy in individual countries. Taking advantage of modern technology and different forms of social and political participation is imperative if these problems are to be tackled effectively as a matter of urgency.

As stated in the World Declaration on Education for All, approved by the Conference held at Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990, serving the basic learning needs of the entire population requires more than a mere recommitment to basic education as it now exists. It is necessary to adopt an expanded vision which will include making the most of the new possibilities resulting from the convergence of the increase in information, knowledge and experience, and the unprecedented capacity to communicate.

Strategies for action have to open up basic education programmes and teaching methods to the life of the community. One of the most effective strategies for improving the quality of education is to offer every child or adult education which will take into account the patterns of the culture in which they live and their own specific abilities and skills.

The decision taken by the international community to devote one year to literacy work represented a collective response to two crucial issues: the first is recognition of the fact that, in the world today, with its fast-developing science and technology, there are almost one thousand million people who cannot read or write, notwithstanding the fact that reading and writing are fundamental human skills. The second is that the whole range of national and international measures to tackle illiteracy have quite clearly proved inadequate. International Literacy Year in 1990 made it possible to set up a wide-ranging collaborative network devoted to promoting literacy work. It drew public attention worldwide to the grave predicament represented by
illiteracy and to its economic, social and cultural implications. It was instrumental in getting governments, intergovernmental agencies, non-governmental and voluntary organizations, and the media to recognize the fact that education is the decisive factor in our development as individuals and societies - and will continue to be so to an even greater degree in the future. It likewise instilled a greater awareness of the urgent need for co-operation and solidarity between peoples and States in securing the right to literacy training and education for every child, woman and man throughout the world.

The results of International Literacy Year will be apparent in the course of the present decade. One of its main impacts has been to demonstrate that, at the present time, while technology has exceeded our wildest dreams, there has been no improvement in the essential quality of human life. Economic growth and progress are necessary ingredients, but they are manifestly insufficient for bringing about improved standards in the quality of life. The equitable distribution of the benefits accruing from growth, the strengthening of values, and knowledge of and respect for other cultures and approaches are increasingly key factors in the success of development strategies. We now know that there can be no future that is worth living, no life that is creative and free, in the absence of education that will encourage participation, providing people with the tools they need to carry out their duties and exercise their rights as citizens, workers and consumers.

The specific functions of citizenship are undergoing rapid change. The challenges faced by citizens in modern societies are growing increasingly complex. Science and technology are constantly modifying the way in which we live and decision-making calls for greater inputs of information and wider control of the rules under which that information is circulated.

All the available studies concur in pointing out that the society of the future will be one where information and knowledge, and the ability to produce them, will play a crucial role. It is accordingly imperative for those abilities to be fostered democratically on a worldwide scale, as a means of ensuring growth, but also as a factor in the regulation of society and as an impediment to the possible emergence of a new breed of enlightened despots, a risk that will clearly be run if knowledge is concentrated in the hands of the few.

From this stage onwards, educational contents at all levels have to include those elements that go to make up our major commitments to the future. These are knowledge of the fundamentals of health and nutrition and of the ways in which each individual can collaborate in and contribute to the conservation of the environment; the slowing-down of population growth; the possibility of securing and engaging fully in daily work; and the unimpeded exercise of human rights and cultural identity.

These contents, taken together with basic learning needs, will not be completely meaningful unless they are applied - whether in school or through community groups or the media - by means of approaches which set out from the proposition that knowing words or understanding their meaning is not enough. Knowledge has to be related to everyday life and to the changes occurring in it. This step represents a qualitative leap forward both in the individual condition of the people being given an education and in their social environment.

The fourth Meeting of the Intergovernmental Committee on the Major Project in the Field of Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (PROMEDLAC), of which Brazil is an active and committed member, has just been held in Quito, Ecuador. The main conclusions of this meeting concern the need to ensure - through binding State agreements - the continuity of
educational policies beyond the normal periods of government office; to recall that education is the responsibility of everybody and hence of the State, but also of civil society and its institutions, and the media; and to recognize the loss of drive and the spent force of an education model incapable of reconciling quantitative growth with satisfactory standards of quality and equity. It is urgent, therefore, to embark on a new stage of educational development.

The presence of 27 Ministers and Vice-Ministers at the Quito meeting and the evidence they advanced show that ten years after the launching of the Major Project in the Field of Education in Latin America and the Caribbean, the political will that is the prime requisite for forging ahead in the struggle to achieve better and more widespread education still exists.

However, the challenges with which we have to contend have assumed overwhelming proportions. One of the most perverse effects of the economic crisis that weighs so heavily on the Latin American region is the enormous growth of poverty and destitution. The figures compiled by ECLA show that, in 1989, 44 per cent of the population, or 183 million people, were living on the poverty line; 88 million among them were destitute. The impact of this on education is dramatic and is reflected in the drastic reduction in public expenditure on education, the decline in the quality of educational services and in the working and appointment conditions of teaching staff, the continued high rates of repetition and academic failure, and the increased difficulty experienced by adults living in poverty in becoming literate and in sending or keeping their children at school.

For all these reasons, it is essential to develop strategies - and assign them priority in national budgets and also defend them as such before the international and national funding agencies - that will reconcile the current expansion of coverage with basic standards of quality and efficiency for all. In other words, it is essential to develop and resolutely implement a new style of educational development, in the conviction that this is the only way to sow the seeds and prepare the ground for a future of greater freedom and justice.

This represents a particularly daunting challenge for countries like Brazil. The country's researchers and the Federal Government itself acknowledge that a high proportion of the population is illiterate and that almost 80 per cent of the people do not have access to primary education or the possibility of completing it. Yet Brazil is a country displaying extraordinary drive and creativity, reflected, in the field of education, in the important measures constantly being taken by both the State and non-governmental bodies to introduce sound educational innovations, and in the emergence of leading educational figures of international reputation. May I dwell for a moment on what the world of literacy owes to Paulo Freire and what UNESCO owes to the distinguished Ambassador and Permanent Delegate of Brazil to our Organization, my dear and deeply regretted friend José Guillerme Merquior. Let these two examples suffice to demonstrate the wealth and potential which Brazil enjoys in the shape of its teachers and educationists, the political determination of its authorities, and the resolute conviction of its President in successfully tackling the major problems we have mentioned.

The new Brazilian democracy has drawn up a Constitution which attaches special importance to education and provides for funding mechanisms guaranteeing not only that a substantial volume of resources will be allocated but that they will serve a useful purpose. It also spells out the need for decentralizing a significant percentage of resources for allocation to the states and municipalities. The decision to transfer responsibility for basic education to the municipalities is a particularly important step, since that is where citizenship is primarily exercised. Accordingly, the Literacy and Citizenship Programme provides for the convening of
municipal assemblies for the purpose of drawing up action plans on the basis of a local analysis of the situation; this will enable the best possible use to be made of municipal resources and potential in giving priority attention to the population in the 7 to 14 year age-group and bringing children and young people not attending school into the system.

This Programme and the reality of the situation call for educational modernization strategies which, along with decentralization and the development of information systems, will provide for the strengthening of negotiating and joint policy-making capacities, both within and outside the education sector, by seeking new alliances between political representatives and between State agencies, and new forms of relationship between the Federal Government and state and municipal authorities, and between the latter and the private sectors, non-governmental bodies and universities. The challenges of the short-term economic situation will have to be faced in the implementation of the activities that go to make up the Programme, without losing sight of the need to start, as of now, fixing major targets in the medium and the long term.

Mr President,

The contemporary world is going through a period of far-reaching political, ideological and conceptual transformation, of changes in attitude and the pace of living, against a background marked by globality and growing complexity, by the tremendous development of science and technology, and by the demands of competitiveness, skills and quality standards. Recent events, such as the freedom won by peoples in Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America, and the continued existence of war and its sophisticated methodology of death and destruction, involve and affect our status as citizens of the world. We need no longer ask ourselves whether there are funds enough to provide literacy training for one thousand million people or to prevent the death of 14,000 to 20,000 children a day from hunger, lack of drinking-water or sheer ignorance. The funds are there for the provision of treatment, for food supplies and for cleaning up the biosphere. There are, indeed, ample funds available. With only one third of the current expenditure on armaments or one half of the gains from the trade in narcotics, it would be possible to ensure the conservation of the planet. But if this is to come to pass, then we have to do away with the culture of war and really embark once and for all on the road to peace.

We shall succeed in coping with the challenges of a more competitive world only to the extent that the guidelines and measures adopted for purposes of social and economic development make it possible to bring out, develop and upgrade the potential of the vast majority of its peoples.

The exercise of full citizenship is contingent upon the enhancement of the individual abilities of every human being, the habitual practice of discipline and clear-sighted thinking, the strengthening of the innermost being, the discharge of duties, and the exercise of rights in a responsible manner. Education is the key to this state of well-being. It is the very foundation of democracy. And parliament is the supreme means of ensuring that public freedoms are guaranteed and that the doors are opened wide on a future with fewer inequalities and a greater sense of justice and solidarity.