

Education for Human Development

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Since 1990, when member states of the United Nations created the International Consultative Forum on Education for All, the achievement of universal basic education has been given high priority by all governments, including the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. Unfortunately, however, thousands among us still manage to live only peripheral lives, virtually at the borders of survival. Indeed, it would seem that schools in many cases tend to stunt the development of many of our future adults. Few of us, as educators and teachers, seem to think seriously about what kind of education would really empower our children, our adults, and our people. None among us seems to have asked how schools can be made to relate to our people and their lives, or what the country has done or can do for them? It seems that we have never tried to understand what human development means for our people. While Vision 2020 is daily being sold to the nation, the “small” man remains featured as abstract statistics in sophisticated official documents, and only vaguely acknowledged as the bulk of our human capital.

The late Asian social commentator, Mahbub ul Haq, in assessing the situation in South Asia, emphasised that people, rather than production, should be the focus of planning. He believed that for this to happen some basic questions should be addressed, including the following: 1) What kind of human resources exist in the country? 2) How are we really educating our people and in what manner? 3) What inventories do we have of the different knowledge bases and traditional skills in this country? 4) In what ways are our people’s knowledge systems and skills being affected by present market trends? 5) How does educational development differ demographically, between communities, ages, and gender? 6) What are the social and cultural attributes of the different people who inhabit our country? 7) What are their expectations, their dreams, and their aspirations? and 8) What are the conditions under which our people survive?

After 42 years of independence, how many development or education plans have we ever produced that reflect any of the concerns raised by these questions? How many of our plans have seen people only in terms of abstract aggregates, and not in human terms? It seems, then, that we cannot talk about human development, if we have no knowledge of the people we wish to develop. Indeed, what do we really mean by human development?

To my mind, human development in modern societies should be synonymous with helping individuals pursue meaningful lives in which they are able to cope with the political, economic, social, spiritual, and technological imperatives of modern living. Unfortunately, for many of us development is seen only in terms of economic progress. Surely, such a perspective is limited and myopic.

If we have to talk about development for our people, we must reflect on and brainstorm about how we, as a community, plan to:

- create and sustain political structures for ensuring meaningful participation by all in the governance of our country in general and the community in particular;

- organise ourselves to maximise our human, natural, and financial resources to provide a high and acceptable standard of living for all;
- ensure that our country becomes an arena for productivity, creativity, innovation, caring, warmth, and respect for all who have cause to communicate with, visit, or live in it;
- provide the opportunity for all to access and benefit from an ideal ideology and faith, which is now recognised as being essential to the existence, inspiration, and development of our people;
- stimulate the consciousness and literacy of all with respect to the importance and relevance of common and laudable ethical standards, enterprise, thrift, agriculture, environmental management, science and technology in the everyday lives of citizens—young and old.

Progressive educational planners advocate that human development is possible only if: (a) planning for education begins with a vision of a new society that offers all in it the opportunity to lead valuable and valued lives; (b) there is a commitment to the process of social transformation made possible through an understanding of what the education system can do and how it will operate; (c) there is an expansion of human capabilities through individual action as well as public activism; and (d) we recognise and accept the empowering role of education and not see it only as a form of certification to access the “good life.”

According to the research literature, most countries have been persuaded that education and human development may be best achieved by way of decentralisation and community participation. Increasingly authorities are realising that highly centralised state systems have unwittingly generated a poor quality of education, and that decentralisation requires a new management culture built on faith and freedom, not on suspicion and control. Indeed, several developing countries now believe that capacity building must go beyond the development of technical skills and knowledge, and must aim at changing the attitudes of people at all levels, while consciously promoting democratic processes.

Against this background, it seems that our major concern as educators and teachers must be with how we can improve our professional practice, not as individuals working as isolationists in our own little worlds, but as a cohesive group of professionals committed to the same cause and understanding our obligations, specifically to our stakeholders and in a more general way to our society.

There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that we have to undergo a radical change with respect to how we: (a) see our tasks as educators; (b) develop programmes for educating the old, young, and challenged in our schools; (c) select and apply effective pedagogical and training methods for developing our people; (d) allocate the required resources (human, material, and financial) for human development; and (e) provide the necessary structures and policies for facilitating desirable human development.

Beyond doubt, we cannot continue as we have been going. We must see human development in terms of national development, and must ensure that no one in our society is left behind.

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