

Education, development and poverty reduction

PROFESSOR KADER ASMAL, MP, MINISTER OF EDUCATION (SOUTH AFRICA)

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY DEBATE ON THE WORLD SUMMIT FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
Cape Town, 15 August 2002

As I am sure you will appreciate, the development of Africa is currently enjoying a high profile at a global level. The United Nations Millennium Declaration of September 2000 affords special attention to the development needs of Africa. This perspective was re-affirmed at the G8 meeting held recently. The World Summit is no different. During the next few weeks the theme "people, planet and prosperity" for our continent will be in vogue.

However, while we celebrate this focus, we must also bear in mind that notions of development are contested. Conceptions of development are shaped by many contradictions, challenges and more importantly opportunities. We therefore need to ensure that the real developmental needs of both our continent and the developing world are at the forefront of the Summit deliberations.

Central to this is championing the important relationship between education and development. As Africans we must assert that education is key to confronting the multiple challenges of social dislocation, environmental degradation and poverty eradication. We must assert that education is a vital process to attain human development goals and to place the African continent on a pathway of sustainability.

Members will no doubt appreciate that no country or region has successfully developed without adequate levels of human capital. Investment in education is therefore a critical. However, many make the mistake of reducing the role of education to simply that of economic development. This narrow interpretation misses the necessary contribution that education makes to the development of values such as good citizenship, justice, tolerance, and sensitivity to the environment. This broader understanding is fundamental to ensuring that the development, which flows from economic growth, is both sustainable and comprehensive.

Despite the importance of this link, investment in education on the continent has steadily declined through the adoption of policies laid down by external financial agencies or through complete lack of will. This in turn has reduced our institutional capacity to sustain the quantity and quality of output in the production of intellectual capital.

Many African universities, once proud centres of excellence, have been unable to keep pace with technological innovations or sustain the up-to-date library and information systems vital to produce cutting-edge research. Enabling environments in richer countries continue to draw promising intellectuals away from the difficult and sometimes incapacitating realities of many universities on the continent.

Public schools have suffered similarly in terms of resources and skilled personnel. Illiteracy rates remain high at 33.4 per cent for men and 52.7 for women in sub-Saharan Africa. Wars deny education to young boys forced into fighting at an early age. Gender inequities, that privilege male children in terms of attitudes, opportunities and economic duties, prevent and discourage girls from receiving education. More than half of school-age girls in 22 countries do not even receive an education.

Given our economic realities, it is inevitable that we will require a capital injection to raise the level of investment in education, to turn this situation around. But we plan to generate this injection primarily through investment that leads to growth, not handouts. We are unequivocally opposed to aid dependency. This is what our flagship programme, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), is primarily about. For our continent to reclaim control over its own destiny through ensuring that development takes root in all its facets.

Honourable members, given the magnitude and complexity of the challenges we face, it will be an act of profound foolishness if we believed it is "business as usual" for education and training on the continent.

We know that the investment in all our people is no longer a luxury. We also know that we can no longer think about education as a process that ends with a final qualification. No education qualification, whether it is technically or academically oriented, can be sufficient given that the way we do business, the way we produce things and the way we trade is constantly changing. The world has shifted from education and training for lifetime employment towards lifelong learning for lifetime employability and productivity.

Our future prosperity depends on people who can think, who can access and apply knowledge to take advantage of existing opportunities and create new opportunities for employment, increased earnings and improved productivity.

We must ensure that we create conditions through policy, law and a collective ethos that facilitates human development. Education and training is the vital weapon in our arsenal to achieve all of these things.

The challenges we face are not a simple. We need to ensure that all the different elements of education and training cohere in a manner that promotes both quality and responsiveness. Quality is not possible unless the outputs of the education and training system are consistent with what is required in the economy and wider society.

However, it is not all doom and gloom. Indeed there have been many notable achievements in education since the Rio Summit ten years ago.

For example our country's Human Resource Development strategy attempts to squarely deal with the dual challenges of quality and responsiveness. Through this strategy we will continue with our efforts to improve the foundations of human development through early childhood development programmes, general education in schools as well as adult education and training for both unemployed and employed adults. The sustained improvement in the Matriculation results confirms that the schooling system has indeed been placed on a sound footing. Further, strategies related to Whole School Evaluation and School Effectiveness are intended to ensure that these improvements are consolidated, sustained and deeply rooted in the system.

We will also work on securing a supply of skills, especially scarce skills, from the higher and further education and training bands of the National Qualifications Framework. The issue of school leavers who neither proceed to higher education nor join the employment sector remains a serious challenge for the country.

We have embarked on comprehensive programmes for the restructuring of the Further and Higher Education Institutional landscapes. These measures will result in an improvement in the efficiencies and responsiveness of these institutions and, thereby, enhance their contribution to the HRD strategy of this country.

We will increase the number of employers and workers who participate in quality lifelong learning. The learnership system gives employers an incentive to undertake more training. The system also intends to lay a basis for expanded self-employment by exposing more people to skills and work experience as a precursor to later entrepreneurship of their own.

Our research and innovation strategies will be strengthened. We need to "grow the future" by understanding current trends and exploiting the opportunities that we see or that present themselves. Innovation and research is intended to convey this sense of urgency - that South Africa can 'design its own future' and take steps to move from where it is to where it wants to be with careful research and development strategies and by unleashing the creativity of its citizens.

Indeed, honourable members, these achievements in education are not only confined to South Africa, but they also have taken root throughout the continent. In this regard, we have introduced a wide range of strategies and programmes within the formal and informal sectors to improve access to education and enhance the quality of education at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Regardless of many setbacks, twenty out of fifty-three countries on the continent have now succeeded in achieving universal primary education.

Furthermore, Africa continues to produce many renowned political leaders, researchers, scientists and other specialists. And, despite being less equipped to participate in the global exchange of information and expertise, many educational institutions still produce high standards of learning and persevere with research at the cutting-edge in various fields.

The international community too has made great strides in establishing a widespread consensus for a global agenda for education and training since Rio.

The Dakar Framework for Action, adopted in 2000 at the World Education Conference provides a convincing tool to ensure that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality as well as achieving a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy and equitable access to basic and continuing education.

As South Africans we can feel proud that in just 8 years we have already achieved, indeed surpassed, many of the targets set out in the Dakar Framework. We have met the target of universal participation in primary schools and we have the second highest participation rate in secondary schools in Africa. We have one of the highest participation rates for girls in education at all levels of the system. Furthermore, our literacy rate is the highest in Africa and among the highest within developing nations.

These achievements notwithstanding, at the World Summit we need to go beyond the Dakar Framework targets to develop secondary and higher education. The strong emphasis on basic education, though unequivocally correct, has unfortunately had the unintended effect of diverting investment and attention away from secondary education and training, rendering youth unemployable. Equipping youth with the necessary skills necessitates curriculum and policy review in secondary education with the view to improving relevance, especially with regard to improving employability of school completers.

With respect to higher education, research and development capacity is essential to forge a programme that seeks solutions to local problems. Furthermore, the context of knowledge production is extremely significant for reflecting and nurturing indigenous knowledge systems. The enormous contribution of, for example, African indigenous knowledge systems will be lost to the world unless we have credible and vibrant higher education institutions on the continent to facilitate knowledge production in context and to sustain the emergence and nurturing of a cadre of African intellectuals, which would otherwise fail to reach critical mass.

In conclusion, the future of the continent is in our hands. All the natural resources in the world and any amount of increased foreign direct investment may amount to very little unless we develop our key asset - our people.

Our collective task is to - painstakingly, but resolutely - forge the elements that will constitute a true African Renaissance, breaking current cycles of poverty and ushering in a new period of economic and political stability in countries throughout the continent. Even though the challenges are enormous, we have never before been better equipped to rebuild Africa. The launch of the African Union testifies that we have achieved a critical mass of common purpose to constitute and make real the African Renaissance.

We now need to devise ways of responding to these challenges, as well as to the particular education objectives of NEPAD - for universal primary education, for increased access to secondary education and higher education, for improvement in curriculum development and relevance. Importantly, I believe that these challenges are not unique to Africa - they are challenges that people throughout the developing world all share.

This, honourable members, is the spirit that needs to inform our agenda at the World Summit.