

Report of the workshop on education

Friday, July 21, 2000

Mr. José Octavio Bordón, Minister of Education for the Province of Buenos Aires and ex-President of the International Commission on Education, Equity and Economic Competitiveness in the Americas of the Program for the Promotion of Educational Reform in Latin America (PREAL), recalled firstly that the theme of education was dominant at the Second Summit of the Americas, held in Chile in 1998, at which the Heads of State and Government made specific commitments. Among other things, they made a commitment to guarantee primary education for 100% of the young people and secondary education for 75% of them. Although objectives have been set for education in multiculturalism and for increased cooperation, he considered that we are still very far from having reached these goals. Moreover he warned us against a strictly quantitative assessment of progress and underlined the major disparities on the qualitative level between the various countries of the Americas.

He then expressed the hope that we give education the essential role that it ought to play in development, while keeping in mind that development is precisely one of the conditions that gives access to education. He linked this set of issues with an ethical debate on the role of Parliaments and governments for the achievement of a more equitable society. The political leaders must therefore ensure that the essential conditions for an adequate education are brought together to guarantee equal opportunity for all. Among other conditions, he identified nutrition, health, cultural structures and both public and private investments, complemented by financial support from international organizations. He added that the new technologies constitute a new language to be learned and new tools to be mastered.

The progress achieved at the global level since 1990 is mitigated, as reflected by the fact that 120 million children of school age still do not attend school and 150 million people can neither read nor write. These sombre statistics must also encourage policy makers, in setting educational objectives and strategies, to identify the obstacles and the ways of overcoming them.

The gaps in wealth and the iniquities between the countries of the hemisphere are of course reflected in education levels. One important concern is the fact that poverty prevents education from being the key tool to improve the living conditions of the population, and confines them to a vicious circle: that of poor schools, with poor teachers, for poor children. In addition, in the age of new technologies, the gap will continue to widen if all young people of the hemisphere do not have access to the language of data processing, which is unfortunately the case in the Americas.

Since it takes at least a decade to achieve substantial progress in education, political leaders must arrive at a solid consensus, reaching beyond party lines, to ensure that the objectives and programs outlast governments. In order to offset the major gaps between the different countries, the developed countries must increase their cooperation efforts and manifest greater solidarity toward Latin America, if the objectives set in 1998 in Santiago (Chile) by Presidents Clinton (U.S.) and Cardoso (Brazil) are to be met, for whom education should be the key instrument of integration, a tool made available to peoples, to change the course of history.

The second guest speaker, Mr. Cristovam Buarque, President of *Missão Criança* and former Governor of the Federal District of Brazil, argued that in order for education to be an effective tool for the achievement of greater social equity, it is not sufficient to educate only children and the poor. The most important thing is to educate the elite of the country, namely policy makers, senior government officials and the leadership of society, in order that they may finally realize that the elimination of poverty is accomplished not only through the increasing of wealth. Indeed, while it is true that on the individual level, poverty exists in opposition to wealth, this antithesis is not directly transferable to society as a whole, and this is precisely because wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few without our having as yet arrived at an equitable distribution of growth, which has nevertheless been occurring in the Americas in recent decades.

He deemed it essential for parliamentarians and other social leaders to be fully aware of what is meant by “being poor”. He proposed a definition which, over and above the mere question of low income, also includes the lack of the six following items: food, a habitat with potable water, access to education, to an adequate health care system, to security and justice and to a public transportation system of good quality. According to him, if a person has access to all these items, regardless of his or her salary, the person is not poor; however if a person does not have access to these items, the person would need to be very wealthy in order to obtain them. He therefore recommends aiming toward “non-poverty”, somewhere between wealth and poverty, in an effort to concretely combat the excessive concentration of wealth, at the centre of the problem of iniquities that characterize our societies.

Given what he calls the “falsehood of development”, namely the illusion that the rich employ the poor to bring them out of poverty, whereas they actually do so to get rich at their expense, he proposes to mobilize the poor and the excluded populations so that they may produce what they need to improve the education of their children and break the vicious circle in which they are caught. Concretely, he proposes to extend the *Progres*a program to the greatest possible number of poor families in the hemisphere. Inspired by the system of post-graduate bursaries which make it possible for many graduates from rich families to continue their education, the *Progres*a program pays a monthly amount to the mother of a poor family in order for all her children to attend classes and to have the opportunity to obtain a basic education. Considering that in Latin America and the Caribbean there are some 22 million children who do not go to school or who work when they are still of primary or secondary school age, such a program, which has borne fruit in Brazil and in Mexico, does not eliminate poverty, but creates favourable conditions to enable young people to one day escape poverty. The fundamental objective is to ensure that all young people successfully complete all of their primary and secondary-level studies and that all children of poor families actually attend their classes. The monthly bursary is in fact only paid to the mother if all of her children have attended school and have not been absent for more than two days per month.

Mr. Buarque recalled that in order for education to be a motive force of equity, the leadership must finally realize that the pathway to reducing poverty is not the same as that which makes it possible to increase wealth; while the solution to social problems depends on the economy, it does not reside entirely in the economy. He therefore proposes that the *Progres*a program be implemented in various places throughout the hemisphere in order to complement the Recommendation on Education, which he judges to be too general.

The third guest speaker, Ms. Patricia Gudiño, is Executive Director of the College of the Americas (COLAM), which devotes its efforts to building cooperation between the universities of the Americas through networks of training and research aiming to assure the countries of the Americas of the benefits of the current integration process, while preserving their cultural diversity. The COLAM's Inter-American Research Chair on Parliamentary Approaches to Continental Integration has as its main objective to develop a program of research leading to a better understanding of the role of Parliaments in the economic, social and cultural integration process of the Americas. The COLAM aims, in particular, to increase academic participation with a view to achieving the objectives of adequate primary and secondary education for all young people of the hemisphere, in the wake of the Plan of Action of the Santiago Summit.

Since 1997, the COLAM has contributed to reinforcing academic cooperation by creating networks of training and research devoted to the improvement of education programs, by developing continuing training in the private and public sectors and by working to reinforce intercultural understanding and democracy in the Americas. Strengthened by the support of a large number of universities, the COLAM never designs its programs in a national or bilateral context, but rather from an inter-American viewpoint. It fosters a multidisciplinary approach and places much importance on new information technologies in the treatment of themes of hemispheric interest. It currently includes four basic programs: one which deals in particular with young academics aged 18 to 25, one which constitutes an inter-American network for continuing training focusing on the needs of the regions and local areas, and two others focusing respectively on research chairs and on management.

Because of the relevance of the many hemispheric themes discussed during the seminars held in various countries, the links with civil society, the mobility of students and the educational and technological transfers encouraged by the COLAM, the participants have given very positive assessments of them. According to them, this networking of hemisphere-wide research allows for a sharing of intercultural experiences on a high level which would not be possible if the students were isolated in their own countries, notwithstanding the existence of Internet links that foster communications. Furthermore, the frequent exchanges between researchers of the COLAM and legislators of the COPA contribute to more clearly defining the parliamentary strategies for the Americas, and to give concrete support to the continuing training efforts in the public and private sectors. The challenges of the COLAM are therefore not only academic and financial; the College aims to mobilize the academic community, the public, private and parliamentary sectors and civil society with a view to integrated participation of all sectors in educational projects, which are a key to sustainable development.

During the discussions, it was stated that the Network of Women Parliamentarians of the Americas had decided to follow up on the proposal of Mr. Buarque and to implement pilot projects on the model of the *Progres*a program in a few other countries of the hemisphere, taking care to recall that education works when it is progressive, universal and continuous. Among other obstacles to equal opportunity in education and particularly to the improvement of the economic conditions of women, the sensitive issue of the increasing number of teenage pregnancies was raised, a problem that greatly undermines the continuation of studies in the case of young women, and all too often confines them to domestic roles. In addition, it was pointed out that the problem of financing education does not result primarily from the foreign debt of countries, since most often the financial resources would be available, were it not for corruption, inefficiency on the part of the leadership and fiscal misappropriations that increase inequities. However, the erasing or refinancing of the debt as well as the reduction of the budget devoted to armaments remain the means considered to make additional resources available for education. It was also suggested that efforts be devoted to paying not only the financial debt to the banks, but also the social debt toward the children, the poor, women and the ecology. However, in order to succeed in this, parliamentarians must seriously reorient priorities to truly enhance the advancement of education and to ensure that the privatization of education resulting from globalization and technological progress does not exclude a further percentage of the population of the hemisphere. The responsibility of parliamentarians is therefore at the centre of both progress in education and the equitable sharing of the advances that are likely to occur in this field over the next decade.