

Turning the Monster on Its Head: Lifelong Learning Societies for All

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A decade has passed since the Jomtien Conference of 1990 and the initiation of the campaign of “Education for All.” A true assessment of EFA leads us to the following embarrassing and shocking conclusions about the lack of comprehensive progress in our education systems:

- Literacy has not been achieved. Equity goals have not been realized. The ‘unreached’ have not been served in any systematic manner.
- Education for all has not been attained. In fact, education for all has collapsed into “schooling for all” – the blind leading the blind for most of this decade!
- With the exception of South Africa, still emerging from the depths of Apartheid, very little fundamental redesigning of Africa’s education systems has occurred. Institutional structures remain fossilized and unresponsive, the realities in and values of local communities are still not taken seriously, and the link between education and the wider developmental efforts has never become clear.

This lack of progress has less to do with financial constraints and more to do with an absence of courage and creativity. The truth is, Jomtien failed to foster a systematic dialogue on models of transformation of education. The ‘problem’ in education was only defined as an issue of access, and the System – which in reality is the problem – was posited as the locus of the solution. And therefore, we ran around chasing our tails for ten years, wondering why things never seemed to change.

I believe that without a serious understanding of our education system, and the overwhelming emphasis on literacy that accompanies it, we will find ourselves repeating and deepening these tragic mistakes in this next decade. First, we must realize that the education system is not only structured to continuously expel and stigmatize its rejects, but it also severs all ties with them, with traumatic consequences for learners of different age groups. It routinely excludes African indigenous systems from its perimeters, especially in the areas of early childhood development, life-skills, value education, and other competencies, causing major lapses and further distortions in the life of those human beings that go through it. Finally, its rigid entry and exit points remain a problem for communities engaged in full time productive work in other domains of life. While they may expect flexibility and sensitivity from the system, they certainly do not get it. Even matters as simple as the utilization of school premises on evenings and weekends for community service are still not addressed satisfactorily.

Our discourse around literacy has been equally problematic. Instead of looking at literacy as a continuum in different modes of communication, from the oral to the written, we equated being ignorant of the western alphabet with **total ignorance**. We had no qualms in pitting what is not written as thoughtless, as a weakness, and at its limit, as primitivism (Hountondji, 1997). Instead of letting literacy serve an organic function and enable our societies to engage in the critical but active re-appropriation and authentication of our cultures and knowledges (i.e. to strengthen what we have), it was our absolute conviction

that learning the alphabet was not a cultural matter. Instead of putting literacy as the service of a complex range of African knowledges – in botany, crops, animal husbandry, climatology, medicine and midwifery, philosophy and pedagogy, architecture and metallurgy, and other knowledges that were completely subjugated under the forces of colonialism and modernity – we arraigned literacy as the new supreme force. It stood there aloft, talking to itself on its lonely hill, unable to reconnect its objects with their umbilical selves, or to link them to their new alien selves.

We wanted so badly to eradicate illiteracy – to purge, scrub or vaccinate our people clean of something we had clearly equated with illness – that we did not bother to listen ourselves. Nor did we hear the distinct echoes of social Darwinism in our impatient voices, as we waved carrots and sticks in the bid to rapidly attain modernization and to get just the right quantitative numbers on our billboards in order to secure our places at various banquet tables. We forgot that it was the same social Darwinism, embedded deep in the groins of development practice, that had in the first place belittled us, non-Western peoples, and sent us to the back of the queue (Esteva, 1992). We forgot that it was part of our responsibility and obligation to our people to resolutely urge the West to abandon its superiority complex and its intolerant and exclusive assumptions about the gross ignorance and backwardness of all others (Luyckx, 1999). As the class that could read and write, we forgot that we were to turn this pressure on its head and to return humanity to the center, to drown out the jingles of individualism with an overwhelming chorus of human solidarity and an ethics of responsibility to the “Other,” which is our gift of heritage from this continent. We forgot that we were to become crucial links in re-contextualizing global processes and creating globally-oriented, indigenously-rooted futures.

When we finally shifted focus to link literacy and societal development, we found ourselves tongue-tied, mired in a narrow functionalist paradigm, and unable to find conceptions of learning that *did not stigmatize*, that *enhanced*, and that *grew from what was there* — because we had been taught (and had learnt well) that **there is nothing there**. For years, we helped make deeper the ravine between the oral and the literate. Now, challenged by new trends in thinking globally, we are trying to find a bridge between the two. The search today is to create learning societies that start with respecting what we do have. From “Education for All,” we must therefore move to “Lifelong Learning Societies for All.”

Although debt servicing, Structural Adjustment Programs, wars and strife continue to wreak havoc on the pillars of governance, society, economy, and the education system alike, I believe that there is enough to go by in terms of political will. We have African Heads of State, through the OAU, committing to an African Decade for Education. We have African Ministers of Education, through COMEDAF and MINEDAF, reiterating a wish for a different kind of system that is more holistic, more Africa-centered, and that promotes values indispensable to the continent’s development. We are thus challenged to transform the education system in Africa, keeping the following in mind:

- We have faced (and are still facing) a *crisis of cognition*, which has left us repeatedly falling back into the safety of minimalist tinkering with change, instead of pro-

actively innovating deep inside the system in support of Africa's development. We must acknowledge that the repeated failures to achieve Education for All arise from problems within the education structure and because of the system's inability to re-configure itself for the provision of lifelong learning for all human beings.

- In the context of globalization, there is also growing realization that Africa must develop at a pace it can determine and understand — not at gunpoint. In fact, if 'Development' has been responsible for the legitimization of ecological ruin and spiritual subjugation of most of humankind, then we must also posit a notion of learning societies that is capable of interrogating Development, rather than being its drowsy and compliant bedfellow.
- Africa is neither a 'lost continent,' nor a continent in distress incapable of raising itself. It is time for Africa to say "yes" to itself and quit behaving like a poor shadow of colonial Europe. We must see this transformation as the beginnings of the African Renaissance — Africa's rebirth — where Africa regains its confidence in its cultures and knowledge systems and sees these as the foundations for systemic transformation and creation.

The regeneration of lifelong learning societies would go beyond serving the interests of Global Finance Capital. Instead, it would be a cultural action to lead towards new basic structures that will be more cooperative, more humane, and more ecologically harmonious. Its time dimension would be infinite, and its identity would derive fully from the combination of the formal, non-formal and informal — the latter translated to encapsulate the indigenous learning pedagogies. It would be clear about the level of knowledge an African child already brings to the school or to the early childhood development center, about the contribution to early childhood development made by African learning systems, and about the progressive loss and/or integration of communities' knowledges. It would not be terrified of genuine democracy, including participatory evaluation of school performance undertaken by parents standing in all the three facets of lifelong learning (formal, non-formal, and informal). Lifelong learning societies will not further the genealogical death of Africa, but rather, they will contribute to its rebirth.

As agential citizens and guerilla intellectuals, researchers, and technocrats, we must remember that never again shall we wilfully sell our people cheap, nor aid in the systematic process of making them lose their life spaces and their words, their parameters for interpretation and their truths. We will acknowledge that the education systems inherited from the colonial period must be challenged and transformed, which means redefining the goals, content, structures, methods, approaches and values of education, as part of a mould-breaking strategy. We shall also endeavour to make literacy socially, culturally and economically useful, by defining *well before the fact*, precisely what aspects of culture, knowledge and latent resources, literacy is going to help unearth and how it is going to help recast African societies as legitimate locations of human imagination (Dias, 1993). Ultimately, our quest is to make literacy and education serve the goals of humanity, and especially of the African Renaissance. It is time to turn this monster on its head and make it serve the objectives we want – and not the other way around.

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