

**Higher Education and Development**  
by  
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**Keynote Address delivered at**  
**the Higher Education Conference organized by**  
**UNESCO and the United Nations University**  
**on the theme of**  
**Pathways towards a Shared Future:**  
**Changing Roles of Higher Education in a Globalized World**

**Tokyo, Japan**  
**August 29, 2007**

**FIRST DRAFT ONLY**

## **Introduction**

Your Excellencies Mr. Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO, Dr. Hans J.A. van Ginkel, Rector of the United Nations University (UNU), and Professor Konrad Osterwalder, incoming Rector of UNU.

Honorable personalities from Japan and from around the globe, Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a considerable privilege and a great honor for me to have been invited by the Director-General and the Rector to participate in this major international gathering on “Pathways towards a Shared Future” for collective and critical reflection in order to take action. It is also a special pleasure to be back to Japan within six months of my attendance at the Fourth Japan Education Forum that was held in February this year, also in Tokyo. I thank each of you in the audience for listening to my talk.

This address is structured under four broad headings. In the introduction, I raise a few issues about human capital and globalization in order to localize my views and perspectives. In the second section, I recall some of the basic major conceptual discussions around development and its policy and philosophical implications for the mission and roles of higher education. In the third section, I discuss some general trends of education and socio-economic situations and finally in the fourth section I refer to the need for a renewal in commitment to invigorate higher education, especially in

developing countries with a particular focus on Africa, in the efforts to achieving sustainable development on a global scale followed by a few concluding remarks.

## **I. Introduction: General Issues and the Global Context**

According to the classical definition of human capital theory, the higher the level of education of an individual, the higher his/her chances for socio-economic attainment. Similarly for nation-states, the theory stipulates that the higher the aggregate level of educational achievement, the higher the level of socio-economic development. This was the foundation for the high hopes and expectations during the decade of development that was declared in the 1960s by the United Nations. Based on the assumption behind this paradigm, the individual and the nation-state, as the two units of analysis have been also the foundations for the conceptualization, design, and implementation of policies geared toward development through the use of education. I argue that in the current context of globalization with its promises be they real or deceptive, global climate changes that spare no geographic location, and the major migratory patterns of people in search of better life experiences, the concept of education for development must systematically take seriously into consideration the “global village”. The recognition of this global world is not in contradiction with the need to recognize and deal with local realities, knowledge systems, assets and challenges. This paper analyses some of the key issues that have been associated with the higher education and development of higher and global trends of socio-economic indicators since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This analysis and the current educational and socio-economic predicaments as indicated by the

increase of the relentless and abject poverty, old health challenges and HIV/AIDS pandemic, and a widespread sense of physical and social insecurity, etc. constitute the basis for reflecting on the challenges and possibilities for the renewed role of an invigorated higher education, especially in developing countries with a particular focus on Africa, in promoting sustainable development on a global scale.

## **II. Revisiting the Role and Mission of Higher Education for Development**

The debate on development has consistently been an important guiding thread in the national and global agendas since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially since the 1950s, a period of discovered or renewed faith in the role of education in attaining development, as articulated in various academic disciplinary discourses. The United Nations system has been playing a major role in giving a full meaning to the dialectical relationship between theoretical articulation of concepts such as development and their practical and social applications in this debate in the specific case of education, especially higher education. UN regional economic commissions for Latin America and the Caribbean and Africa and UN ECA Asia contributed to the thinking in part by analyzing development and under-development as ontologically linked, with the critical notion of resources as zero-sum commodities. This notion of conflicting interest has been the history. But history is not destiny in the world of social actors shaping the future. The major question is: given the weight of this history and the illusion of key players who think that the past course can/should be pursued to preserve their exclusive interests, how to break the cycle of the hitherto skewed and disgraceful tandem of development-underdevelopment at world level and what role can higher education play?

The controversy and the efforts to interpret the concept of development to give to it a universal meaning have been an important part of this debate. Divergence has not been about the substantive content of the concept. Indeed, all nations, people, academics, think tanks, NGOs, grassroots organizations, national and international policymakers, etc. agree that development means substantive and qualitative improvement in the living

conditions of the people in any society. The difference has been more clearly articulated with regard to the assumed universal validity of the indicators of these living conditions. One of the major questions has been: Which parameters can be used for local communities, national realities and global context taking into account the cultural diversity? Which indicators can capture fairly and do justice to all dimensions of development? As mentioned earlier, development implies improved living conditions, structural and qualitative mobility and empowering of individuals and communities.

Another area of agreement is that education plays a critical and indispensable role in enhancing human capability and societal resources to achieve and sustain the qualitative gains. In this case also, the agreement stops here, especially in societies such as the ones that have endured recent imposed external influence, particularly in the context of various forms of colonization until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Which education can facilitate the preparation of individuals and societies in the quest for the competences for development? For instance, the well-meaning and seminal UNESCO publication known as both the Faure Commission Report and *Learning to Be*, was welcome as a key document with a compelling argument that was assumed to meet unanimity precisely because of the consensus and the history showing that education is a basic need for the acquisition of what it takes to propel and maintain the course towards development. But here again, further reading led to disagreement or at least fundamental questions such as: “Learning to Be What?”

These issues and questions are still current and may serve as common thread in the efforts to address the role of education, and especially higher education, in the search for common ground to meet the needs of diverse societies. The challenge is to respond to fundamental questions in the conceptualization of higher education and the design and implementation of policies with common understanding of moving towards generalized wellbeing. In this address, I will emphasize the need to tackle gender equity as one of the centerpieces for a renewed commitment to bring education, especially higher education, back to the development discourse and actions, particularly in Africa, if there must be an irreversible engagement on the path towards sustainable development.

### **III. Trends of education and socio-economic situations**

In their 2004 published book entitled *UN Contributions to Development Thinking and Practice*, Richard Jolly and other co-authors recalled that given the objective role that higher education could play in actualizing individual and societal global development imperatives to foster well-being globally, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserted that higher education shall be “equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.” In a reflective reference to the euphoric engagements of the 1950s and 1960s that surrounded the debate and subsequent adoption of such resolutions, they wrote:

In a world where, at that time, 42 percent of people in Latin America, 63 percent in Asia, and 84 percent in Africa were estimated to be illiterate, these were extraordinary, bold, and forward-looking declarations. It is difficult to imagine similar statements being made

today in a similar context—and if they were to be made in the halls of the UN today, one can guess at the range of dismissive comments that would be directed toward those supporters who were so foolishly pressing for such an unrealistic resolution (Jolly et al., 2004, p. 203).

The question to be asked is whether the resources to actualize such resolutions were beyond the reach of the world or if it was rather the deficit of political will and commitment that lead to the lack of mobilization of the existing resources that could have been sufficient for the actualization of these resolutions. In the world of dominated by powerful players with parochial interest and short-term vision of the world,

Richard Jolly and his colleagues also recalled regional goals such as the 1961 “Addis Ababa Plan” that included ambitious enrollment goals at all levels of the educational systems including higher education level (p. 2005).

Enrollment to higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is relatively very low in comparison to primary and secondary school enrollment and also in comparison to other regions of the world. Higher education is expensive and cost intensive both in terms of infrastructure and resources need. To set up institution and cater to the need of the offspring of the impoverished segments of the populations require significant public funding. Even the existing private institutions rely on considerable subsidies from the state. In spite of different national/institutional variations that make it at times difficult to point to clear patterns, in the case of African countries, a UNESCO report indicates that

countries that have per capita annual income under US \$500 tend to have lower levels of enrollment in education, which is the case for most countries in Africa, especially in Africa south of the Sahara. How can such countries expand their higher education enrollment? Following the economic crises of the 1980s/1990s and the equally devastating Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), public expenditure per higher education student declined drastically, from \$6,300 to \$1,500 and then \$1,000 in real terms (World Bank, 1994). At the same time, generally speaking, African countries have continued some of their initial post-independence public education finance policy of allocating large proportions of their GNP and public expenditure to education, with a large yet insufficient share for higher education.

How to pursue the quest for higher education expansion as a means to solidify the past foundation for future socio-economic development?

In addition to the general problems of funding, there are other features of the African higher education that constitute indicators of hindrance to promote development. Indeed, in Africa there has been a general pattern of wide gender gaps in higher education in terms of enrollment and distributions by disciplinary fields.

In a publication that was based on some of the proceedings of the 1998 UNESCO conference on higher education, and that focused on higher education in Africa (UNESCO, 1998) with twenty-five main chapters written by nearly thirty contributors, four chapters were devoted to “access, equity and gender.” Among them, two authors

(Mlama and Makhubu) presented, explained, and provided supportive evidence, that despite progress made, there are continued obstacles against gender equity in higher education. These authors make a case for more decisive policies to finally close the gender gap. The other two chapters under “access, equity, and gender” broadly presented the single mode Open University of Tanzania (Mmari) and the dual mode application of the World Bank’s project of the African Virtual University at the Kenyatta University in Kenya (Juma). The few data that were disaggregated by gender showed signs of reproduction of past and current patterns of inequality in classical brick and mortar universities in these alternative institutions of higher learning. Based on these cases, albeit preliminary, there was a clear indication of the perpetuation of past gender imbalance in enrollment and distribution by disciplines with marks of unequal value. Thus, in search of new or additional solutions to increase access and eradicate the social ills and anti-development policies and practices with entrenched inequity, the most revealing of them has been gender inequity. Thus, there is a need to have a comprehensive approach to the search for solution to gender-based unequal educational opportunity.

While there has been in the past a justifiable emphasis on access to basic education and combating illiteracy has been consistently in present the articulation of gender equity in access to education, there has been an increasing realization that higher education is one of the vital areas in redressing social inequality of which gender injustice is an accurate measure, and investing in the future through equal distribution of education and commitment to develop the human potential of all.

#### **IV. Actualizing a New Convergence: Renewed Role of an Invigorated Higher education in Development**

In the educational imagination, conception, and structure within the context of the contemporary world, higher education constitutes the last ladder of national educational institutions. In essence, the upper level requires a solid base and intermediate steps. Thus, in our conception, the holistic imperative must remain consistent. The domain of gender equity in higher education offers a good illustration for this point. Indeed, in a multiplicity of manifestations, gender inequity constitutes one of the main grounds of infringement on equal rights to quantitative and substantive education and a persistent impediment for fully unleashing human capability and production of practical and critical knowledge for the goodness of humanity. In this area, it is important to link the initial enrollment to all the obstacles and opportunities on the educational journey toward the upper level of the ladder.

Indeed, in addressing gender equality and other social inequalities in higher education, there is a need to go beyond the question of simple access, especially when it is reduced to basic education and literacy. It is argued that genuine equity must extend systematically to higher education (Mkandawire, 2005; Assie-Lumumba, forthcoming, 2007). Thus, this is an aspect that requires vigilance in conceptualizing, designing, and applying policies of higher education for development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Even if access to higher education is achieved, other key issues persist and constitute a real hindrance to the actual realization of gender equality. Indeed, questions of academic freedom and slow processes of engendering the social learning space, teaching and the production of knowledge are solidly entrenched in institutions of higher learning. Any structural transformation requires systematic policies (Sall, 2000, Arnfred, et al. 2004a and 2004b).

A critical analysis of African contemporary education which originated from colonial policies reveals various historical moments that have been characterized by conflicts, divergence, and convergence in the interpretation, by the different stakeholders, of the goals and the means to achieve the expected results. These differences in the perceived and actual social outcome of education led to unequal commitment of the means to produce the educational output and the subsequent social outcome toward human development. I would like to submit that as the world community, we achieve the most when we have some form of convergence of goals regardless of the multiplicity of perspectives, core beliefs, ideology, and how and where the process for achieving the common goals takes place.

Some historical examples can help guide our reflections and clarify our assumptions. For instance, it is worth trying to understand why and how the Africans who adamantly rejected European education and used various means to resist and trick the Europeans, changed over a few years to demand more schools, and also enthusiastically engaged in massive efforts to build more schools on their own. Colonial military might could not

succeed in bending the Africans' will to accept their European under the condition of divergent educational goals. It was only when there was a convergence of goals, both under colonial rule and in the first two decades of post-colonial period that commitment for mobilization of resources could affect all the educational stakeholders from the community levels (e.g. various forms of harambe model) to international organizations, private foundations and governments of industrial countries. There is a need to work toward convergence of goals to tap in the innovative impulse to creatively find ways for the mobilization of the needed resources.

Based on people's aspirations to development, deep expressions of democracies, and tangible world resources, there are enough resources to boost higher education. But considering the expectations based on past and current realities, the exercises of critical reflection can be just that: reflections. Yet, given the urgency to fix the global imbalance of development and the role of education in general and especially higher education, in the interconnected world, there is legitimacy in the call to search for integrative solutions for sustainable global development. Indeed, the legitimacy of the global system itself and its agencies should depend on their capacities and the dynamics of their philosophical foundation to promote and sustain equality and equity in higher education. Equality and justice at the local level and the global scale are also a developmental requirement.

### **Concluding Note**

Honorable and distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen:

My main arguments are that when we consider higher education, we need to consistently have in mind the dynamic relationship between all the levels of education and that the driving force for the convergence to mobilize resources and to secure commitment at the global level must be the realization that the global village is real. In Africa, the emergence of private universities and the increased use of ICTs do not constitute a panacea. New apparent or real solutions can sustain or trigger new problems. Thus, vigilance and critical predispositions are permanently needed.

Higher education made accessible to more people irrespective of their ability to pay and their ascriptive characteristics can unleash human capability to promote global well-being and social progress. It is a moral imperative that is intrinsically and ontologically linked to our collective well-being in the global world.

I thank you for your kind attention.