

EDUCATION FIRST!



FROM MARTIN LUTHER
TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Education First! From Martin Luther to Sustainable Development

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Hendrik Geyer
STIAS Director
Stellenbosch
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PROLOGUE

Education, its enemies and the future of humanity

Few people in developed countries would dispute the importance of education in our lives and those of our children. We need education in order to be professionally successful, to broaden our horizons, to be able to question the status quo and to choose what kind of life we want to lead. Education even allows us to influence our health. Indeed, education is what enables us to lead a self-determined existence at all. It is fundamental for the complex organisation of modern societies and it serves higher goals such as freedom and justice. Better-educated people become more involved in political decision-making processes, thus helping to further democracy. In most countries across the globe extending education to broad sections of the population by following the principle of “education for all” and seeking the attainment of ever higher qualifications has brought about a marked improvement in living conditions over a period of decades or even centuries. All over the world the prosperity of nations is closely connected with their citizens’ level of education. For this reason modern societies are also called knowledge societies.

However, because education began to spread at different times in different parts of the world and under very different conditions, the extent to which countries have travelled along the road to becoming knowledge societies varies enormously. Not all nations have been equally successful in disseminating knowledge and harnessing it for the good of the community. Western industrialised nations reaped their education dividends early on; emerging Asian nations followed later, but with greater momentum. In other parts of the world, above all in Africa, in parts of Western Asia and in the Arab world, the prospects offered by education have remained largely unexploited. Educational opportunities remain limited. Many children, particularly girls, do not go to school at all or stop their schooling at an early age. The percentage of illiterates is still shockingly high. These countries therefore have little chance of competing globally. Their development is sluggish, decent jobs are in short supply, social change is inhibited and their populations are growing rapidly, for it is a global phenomenon that lack of education leads to high birth rates. The burgeoning younger generations see the success of other countries and feel cheated out of their future.

No wonder then that dissatisfaction is growing under such conditions. And as it increases, so does anger towards those cultures that have been able to benefit from education. In many cases ideological and religious arguments are then advanced to explain the differences between cultures, and backwardness is interpreted as the consequence of oppression, imperialism and exploitation.

When we talk about education in this book, we are not referring to the humanist education ideals espoused in the early 19th century by, for example, the German philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt, but rather to basic cognitive skills – in other words, the “three Rs”: reading, writing and basic arithmetic. Acquiring these skills advances our ability to think abstractly, gives us the wherewithal to acquire and classify other knowledge and makes it easier for us to plan our lives. It enables women and men in all countries and cultures to help themselves as well as others in meeting life’s challenges, and offers people new opportunities to shape their social, economic and cultural lives. Education opens the door to new freedoms.

But these freedoms can also give rise to fears: rulers fear what might happen if people gain more control over their lives; religious leaders fear rational, secular ways of explaining the world; and men fear independent women.

Because modern education and science have their roots in the “Western” world, which was heavily influenced by Christianity, their successful manifestations are often classified in other parts of the world as arrogant, decadent and impure, as the products of a “false” faith. The tried and tested principles on which Western societies are based, such as equality, enlightenment, pluralism and rationalism, are

alleged to be the cause of unbelief. Only believers' own "true" faith is thought to be capable of resolving the dilemmas of the modern world: environmental and financial crises, greed and the capitalist pursuit of profit for its own sake.

Ignorance as a concept

Such arguments provide a breeding ground for the dissemination of absurd and even dangerous ideologies. Often under the guise of religion, proponents of such ideologies combat anything that smacks of "Western" dominance, instead preferring to return to the roots, to the fundamentals of their faith, even though these date from a completely different era. A resistance to modern education, which is regarded as the source of all unbelief, often lies at the heart of their rejection of "the West". In their attempt to curb unbelief, the natural sciences are the first subjects to disappear from school curricula, with religious instruction taking their place. Often, however, the interventions are much more radical than this and hatred of the modern world explodes into terror and violence. In a growing number of countries schools are going up in flames, girls are being excluded from learning and women are banned from public life.

People in the West and a majority of those in other parts of the world find these ideas and the resistance to modern education completely incomprehensible. What reasons are there, they ask, to reject ways of life that have been proven to enable a better existence and to "free the spirit"? Why would anyone want to preserve a society that discriminates against half its citizens and restricts everyone's freedom?

Yet the terrorism of religious fanatics is only one reason why parts of Africa, the Middle East and Asia have experienced little of the global expansion of education. For fanaticism can only spread where the ground is prepared for a culture of ignorance, namely in those countries that have invested little in education, where governments regard universal education as unnecessary, and where in some cases they have even deliberately suppressed education out of a fear that better-educated people will demand greater freedoms and more participation.

Religious fanaticism attracts most of its followers in places where many people live in poverty, where ignorance reigns and where few people are capable of using arguments to defend themselves against the ideology of terror. In these places/regions many tacitly support the fanatics, believing that the enlightened, secular social model may rob them of their identity. Even if the leaders of the so-called Islamic State, Al Qaida or Boko Haram in many cases have a good education themselves, they need an army of ignorant hangers-on whom they can easily manipulate and use as cannon fodder in order to bolster their own power.

Lack of education thus breeds lack of education, and it apparently also breeds a large number of children, because in societies with a low level of education the birth rate is especially high. The gap in development between the better- and worse-qualified sectors of the global population is thus becoming ever wider, so that at the beginning of the 21st century the divide is no longer between East and West, or North and South, but between two fundamentally different educational cultures – a knowledge society and an anti-knowledge society. While for the former education constitutes the source of further progress, people living in the latter are denied the chance of benefiting from education by uninterested governments, while religious fanatics literally destroy any remnant of an education landscape.

This confrontation divides the world much more sharply than the clash of civilisations proposed by the American political scientist Samuel Huntington in the 1990s. After the end of the Cold War era and the bipolar world associated with it, Huntington had expected new lines of conflict to emerge between states based on different cultural and religious traditions, for example, between China as an emerging nation and the United States, or between the Islamic world and the West.

Many of today's crises suggest that what is behind the obvious new conflicts is a lack of investment in education rather than religious or cultural traditions. For in places where education has led to a certain level of prosperity and social freedom, and where birth rates have consequently fallen and demographic pressure has been reduced, states have become much more peaceful and resistant to crisis. This has little to do with culture or religion, for the same social progress can be observed in a range of countries, regardless of whether a majority of the population is Christian, Muslim, Hindu or atheist, as well as in multi-ethnic societies. Where, on the other hand, people's opportunities are limited by a lack of education, social progress stagnates and frustration with a desperate situation is likely to be vented in violence and fanaticism. The lines of conflict in the 21st century run between those who promote education and those who obstruct it. Huntington's clash of civilisations is in reality a clash between different cultures of education. When a "culture" of ignorance gains the upper hand, the future of humanity looks bleak.

Because education leads to greater prosperity and better health, while ignorance leads to poverty, conflicts and high population growth and tends to shorten lives, the two cultures are drifting ever further apart. Thus, unfortunately, the probability is growing that ever greater numbers of people losing out on education will gather under the flag of fundamentalist religion and fuel existing conflicts. The rapid spread of religious terror to more and more countries in the less developed world is an alarming indication that the clash between opposing cultures of education is intensifying – and this is a clash that affects all of us.

Excluding people from education is an age-old political strategy used by authoritarian regimes and dictators to try to stabilise their rule. Precisely because education makes people independent and self-confident, it has always posed a threat to those trying to hold on to power by oppressive means. The elites of the ancient civilisations, from Babylon to Rome, from Egypt to Confucianist China, from the Maya to the Aztecs, were all very happy with a situation in which only a small number of their populations were well educated, while the rest (e. g. peasants, soldiers or slaves) were subject to exploitation and manipulation. These autocratic social models remained the norm until the 18th century when – after a couple of isolated attempts in ancient Athens and later in small countries such as Iceland and Switzerland – the first modern democracies came into being. The “rule by the people”, or “government of the people, by the people, for the people”, as Abraham Lincoln once defined it, could only function once male citizens (for female citizens did not play a role until later) were capable of administering this kind of government in a responsible way. This required a certain level of education.

At some point in history education changed from being an elite to a mass phenomenon and became a successful model. How did this come about? There had been many attempts in this direction, in ancient Greece, for example, in Renaissance Italy, or by the European humanists. But the first real revolution in education based on the principle of “education for all” did not come until Martin Luther’s Reformation.

Luther was convinced that human salvation was only possible through a personal relationship with God, which in turn could only be achieved if believers were able to read the Bible for themselves. But it was distributed in Latin – a language understood only by scholars and priests. That was why Luther translated the Bible into a German vernacular that ordinary women and men could understand. However, because few people were able to read or write at that time, Luther first demanded the establishment of schools – for both boys and girls. He thus laid the foundations for the democratisation of education and for the later economic and political liberation of the people. In advocating individual faith, the Reformation inadvertently ushered in secularisation and individualisation, although neither were consciously planned or desired by Luther, who was in fact concerned only with religious, not secular, liberation.

Even if it took another two centuries after Luther for this liberation to come about, the combination of education and democracy became an unbeatable recipe for success. Greater equality and the acquisition of basic knowledge by as many members of the community as possible advanced the spread of technical and medical innovations, generating opportunities and income for broad sections of the population. They in turn spent the money they earned, boosting the economy

and raising tax revenues. As education and prosperity became widely established in democratic societies, they grew into flexible and efficient economic systems that enjoyed more success and stability than others.

Interestingly enough, the spread of education, enlightenment, political emancipation and prosperity over the centuries followed pretty much exactly the same path as the Reformed faith. What later came to be known as a “Western education” spread through Prussia, the Netherlands, Scandinavia and Great Britain to the United States. The once powerful Catholic colonial powers Portugal and Spain, not to mention Italy, lacked mass movements for education and steadily lost influence to these Protestant powers. The Arab world, too, which until well into the 11th century had been a cradle of the arts and sciences, fell far behind – not least because for 300 years it rejected book printing, the instrument that enabled the dissemination of knowledge to really proliferate.

In the 20th century, as other countries began to adopt the ideals of Western education, religion completely lost its significance. For as the pattern of development of the successful nations became clear, others simply wanted to copy them. As soon as education reached the masses, it unleashed the same power everywhere, regardless of whether the population was Protestant, Muslim, Hindu or atheist. By following this model, the small and once impoverished island of Mauritius achieved the highest level of development in Africa. Japan ended its isolation and became an economic and technological powerhouse. Singapore rose from a malaria-infested swamp to become a high-tech metropolis. China with its billion-strong population recovered within a very short space of time from the worst consequences of the communist planned economy and is now set to become the world’s leading economic power. In every case it was investment in human capital that set development in motion.

The term “human capital” is sometimes seen as having negative connotations, because it is perceived as degrading human beings to nothing more than an economic factor. In fact, though, this term denotes the abilities and skills that people possess to shape their lives. These are concentrated in people’s heads, *caput* being the Latin word for head. Human capital thus refers to the individual resources that each person can call his/her own, independently of ownership of material goods. Only those who possess this kind of capital and decide freely how to use it are able to enjoy the many benefits of education, from earning a higher income to wide-ranging protection from poverty and unemployment, better health, a longer life, and most significantly of all, the opportunity to shape their lives individually.

Knowledge and education are among the few resources that multiply with use rather than becoming exhausted. Open knowledge societies offer the only chance

of finding an answer to the global challenges of the 21st century. How will humanity be able to escape the dangers of population growth and climate change without sufficient education? How will it provide a secure source of food for nine, ten, or eleven billion people? How will it overcome the drinking water shortages that threaten many regions of the world? How will it preserve biodiversity? How will it do any of these things, if not by finding intelligent solutions that are most likely to emerge from a highly educated population?

How the world will continue to develop remains an open question, for we do not know if and when the successful model of education will spread to those countries that so far have benefited little from the education revolution. In this book we therefore describe various scenarios of what the future of humanity might look by the end of the 21st century, depending on the level of investment in education. The scenarios range from rapid, peaceful and sustainable development to total stagnation, to a world with rapid population growth in the poorest regions, to the further spread of conflict and terror, to enormous environmental problems with climate change spiralling out of control.

Despite all the lip service paid to education, currently only between 2 and 4 percent of international development cooperation budgets are earmarked for basic education. Here our ideas need to be revised radically. Just as Martin Luther once campaigned for literacy for peasants and tradesmen, so today all children in developing countries must have the chance to attend school at least until the age of 16. Only then would they be able to set their countries on the path towards sustainable development.

Societies that reject education are in danger of succumbing to the cycle of deprivation, underdevelopment, poverty, terror and chaos. Their internal conflicts will threaten their neighbours and ultimately the rest of the world. Even if at first glance education is a sure-fire success, there is no guarantee that it will also reach the less developed parts of the world and help to solve their problems.

In this book we set out to show how and when education became a successful model for human development and which actors assisted in the process. We outline the benefits to be derived from education for each individual and for societies as a whole. And we show why, despite these benefits, too little is being invested in education and why in many places education is not only neglected but actually suppressed. We make clear what consequences the current clash of education cultures will have for tomorrow's world and why education is the key factor for ensuring the future of humanity.



I

THE CLASH OF EDUCATION CULTURES

Are girls allowed to go to school?
The attack on Malala

On 9 October 2012, shortly after midday, a white Toyota TownAce pushed its way through the noisy, chaotic traffic in Mingora in northern Pakistan. Mingora is the largest city in the long Swat Valley, a region known as the Switzerland of the East on account of its natural beauty and its clear views of the snow-covered mountains of the Hindu Kush. It is inhabited entirely by Pashtuns. The minibus, fitted out with wooden benches and dirty plastic sheeting for windows, had just picked up twenty schoolgirls and three teachers from the Khushal School to bring them home. Crammed together in the muggy heat, the girls were clutching their exam files on their laps, for they were in the middle of their final exams. The bus followed the same route it did every school day, turning right at a military checkpoint, then past an abandoned cricket ground, when it was suddenly stopped by a masked young man. He asked the driver whether this was the Khushal school bus, although this was plainly written on both sides of the vehicle. In the meantime, a second man wearing a woolly hat, his mouth and nose covered by a scarf, had swung himself up onto the tailgate and asked: “Who is Malala?” As several girls turned their gaze to