The return to national languages and cultures

The problems of development in countries of the Third World—particularly in the twenty-five classified as the poorest—and aspects of these problems which relate specifically to education have, for almost two decades, been a major concern both of national political leaders and educators and of the international community.

Trends in education observed during the last decade in many developed countries (France, Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, United States of America, etc.) as well as in some developing countries (Egypt, Iran, Senegal, Tunisia, etc.) have pointed to the fact that, even in those whose system of education was wont to be considered as ‘well run in’ and ‘adapted to the type of society which it served’, some challenging of the basic concept and content of education was inevitable and that fairly radical changes would have to be made. It is not surprising, in such a world context, that these problems should be far more acute in the countries of the Third World in general, and in the twenty-five least-developed in particular.

For if we consider that the essential objectives of a genuine policy for social and economic development should cover both social (raising of the standard of living, satisfaction of social and cultural requirements, involvement of the population in all aspects of the country’s political, economic and cultural life) and human problems (the full development of each citizen’s personality based on the sole criterion of his own ability and potential, freedom of thought and effective freedom of expression within the social framework), the role of education in the broadest sense (as opposed to mere ‘instruction’ or ‘teaching’) is obviously of capital importance.

The role of education is even more crucial when the development model applied is ‘self-oriented’ and not ‘outward-oriented’ to use the well-known terms of Samir Amin. Without wishing to encroach on territory which is dealt with in other parts of this dossier, I feel it should be emphasized that a ‘self-oriented’ policy must be based on popular consensus, which implies not only that the people understand the chosen objectives but also that they support and are involved in the decisions taken.

At all these levels the importance of education, whether for the adult working population or for children and adolescents, is manifest, particularly as regards methods and equipment.

At the political level, no nation can be expected to accept indefinitely goals that are unrelated to its aspirations, its culture and its civilization, all of which are felt to be inseparable from any future which it plans for itself. This is even more true of a nation which has
struggled to throw off colonial domination and win political independence, only to find itself once more dominated economically and culturally by the former colonial power through the medium of certain social strata which have been trained and fashioned by colonial ideology.

From the economic viewpoint, no development is possible either, unless a political choice has been made, but even if this choice is supported by popular consensus, an economy based initially on agriculture or on a few extractive industries (as in most of the twenty-five least-developed countries) cannot advance without a raising of the level of productivity and production, which in turn cannot be achieved without improving the rural population’s cultural level and knowledge of hygiene and ensuring payment of a fair price for agricultural products.

Finally, as regards the productivity of labour and the possibility of increasing agricultural production, it should be borne in mind that no social stratum is more sensitive than the rural population to questions of social justice, looking at them not only from the economic angle mentioned above, but also and above all from the social and cultural angles: equal educational opportunities for all children, equal opportunities for everyone to receive medical care, etc.

**National cultures and languages and a system of education for development**

Before adopting a positive approach to the role which national cultures and languages could and should play in a system of education genuinely directed towards the economic, social and cultural development of the population and involving the effective participation of all in the political life of the country, it may be useful to analyse the present situation, which is highly instructive even if, more often than not, in a negative way.

It is a recognized fact that in almost all developing countries, and more particularly in the twenty-five poorest, despite all the efforts of the nations concerned, which sometimes include allocating nearly 30 per cent of the national budget to education, the situation in education continues to be alarming. Despite an increase in the actual number of pupils and students enrolled in primary and secondary schools (general or technical) and higher education institutions, enrolments expressed as a percentage of the school-age population have remained stationary or are declining. As regards adult literacy, the situation is even more disastrous. In general (and this is confirmed by Unesco’s statistical data as well as by those of the different countries) and within the present educational systems of those countries, the battle against illiteracy both among children and adolescents and among the adult population has already been lost. This is certainly true in Africa and probably also in the other countries which make up the group of twenty-five. Moreover, education is expected to have very little, if any, impact on the economic, social and cultural development of the countries concerned. On the other hand, new social phenomena have emerged which political leaders and society as a whole find more than a little disquieting: the migration of unemployed young ‘graduates’, the increase in juvenile delinquency in urban areas, the change in young people’s attitudes towards the traditional values of their society, latent if not open conflict between the generations, etc.

The reasons for this situation are often analysed in purely economic terms: the heavy cost of education and more particularly of school education at all levels (primary, general and technical secondary and higher education) due

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1. The following costs per pupil in French-speaking countries of West Africa are based on estimates by different experts: primary school certificate, 1 million CFA (approximately $4,000); lower secondary school certificate (BEPC): 3 million CFA (approximately $12,000); secondary school leaving certificate (baccalauréat), 6 million CFA (approximately $24,000).