

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

EDUCATION IN RURAL AREAS

by R.K.A. Gardiner, Executive Secretary,
United Nations Economic Commission for Africa

1. This is not the first time that our countries - the under-developed parts of the Commonwealth - have had an opportunity to consider the importance of rural education or education in rural areas. In the 1920s the example of the Jean's Schools in America was brought to the attention of African countries by the Phelps-Stokes Education Commission and Professor Victor Murray wrote his very thoughtful book about education in Africa entitled, "School in the Bush". In more recent years economic planners have been stressing the importance of agricultural and home extension services as part of the overall development effort. Our modest response has taken the form of Community Development activities. It seems to me that the latest independent African initiative has been taken by Tanzania in the effort of the government and the people of that country to implement the Arusha Declaration. The problems which face us are not new or peculiar. In industrially advanced countries rural poverty and backwardness constitute isolated spots in a relatively prosperous areas are the exception.

2. The economics of most of the developing countries are likely to remain predominantly agrarian and raw-material producing for some time, and, since two-thirds or more of the total population earn their living from the land, the highest priority should be given to developing the rural economy and improving the level of living of the inhabitants of the rural areas. The attainment of even this modest goal will depend upon the development of human resources - from high-level managerial and organizational skills down to the factory hand and the worker of the field. The single most important component of any human resources development programme is the education and training of human minds and hands.

3. If education is to help satisfy some of the current pressing needs of society, it must be deliberately designed as an instrument of economic and social growth. This means that greater emphasis will have to be placed on the investment function of education without totally neglecting what may be described as its consumption function. We have not always defined precisely the objectives of our educational systems for rural areas and, perhaps, we have been able to defend this weakness by arguing that a national educational system is an organic unity. There is, however, no reason why the focusing of attention on the specific needs of the rural economy and the rural population should affect this unity, though it does imply a shift of resources and emphasis.

4. A programme for raising the level of living of the rural population would need to be approached in a comprehensive and integrated manner in contrast to the ad hoc methods of the past. Even to achieve the narrow goal of an increase in the volume of physical production in the rural areas, governments would have to be committed to a number of ancillary measures, because economic development is a complex process involving many inter-dependent variables. Although the proportionate influence exerted by each of these variables on the development process can only be determined rightly within a particular context, we know that the absence of one or other of them in the total mix, does affect the achievement of set goals. For example, the establishment of new industries calls for power supply, transport and communications, credit and marketing facilities, improvement in health and environmental conditions, nutrition, housing, vocational training, and general intellectual and cultural stimulation. Mr. Arthur Hopcraft seems to have caught the problem well when he writes, "The poor countries have neither the material resources nor the human skills in sufficient quantity to carry through some of the policies they begin. People who were bitter in landless poverty, find themselves just as poor on land holdings which they cannot manage, because the instruction and cash credit have not caught up with the politics. All over the poor world young people with education they cannot use, because there are no jobs for them, are beginning to look a more dangerous problem than illiteracy." The evidence of rural poverty and unemployment, together with the unwillingness of youth and able-bodied adults to remain in rural areas under existing conditions, the increase in migration to the already overcrowded towns and cities, and the growing problem of the unemployed school-leaver with little or no training for practical work, show up the failure of education to prepare citizens for useful adult life. The only mitigating factor is that the failure may not entirely be placed at

the door of the educationists .

5. There is a definite relationship between education, income expectation and vocational preferences. Rural employment is notorious for low income returns and children from rural areas cannot be accused of irrational behaviour if they seek better-paid jobs elsewhere. The expansion of employment opportunities has taken place mostly in urban areas, ports, transport centres, and such enclaves as mining communities. Transport systems in underdeveloped countries may be described as penetration routes for the evacuation of raw materials and the distribution of limited quantities of consumer goods. To stem the rural exodus to the overcrowded capital cities, it would be necessary to develop a series of intermediate towns with a modicum of urban amenities to act, in some sense, as social, cultural and economic focal centres for the surrounding countryside. There have been sporadic attempts to institute a more practical form of education related to agricultural and handicraft pursuits but these have never been seriously implemented and the problems inherent in them have not been sufficiently studied. The reasons given are, to say the least, conflicting:

- (1) That dependent peoples preferred to copy the educational patterns of metropolitan countries, and
- (2) That the colonizing powers deliberately held back technical and scientific training from the subject peoples.

These arguments are irrelevant clichés. But it may be admitted that many of the leaders in developing countries had no opportunity to see the kinds of occupation in which the majority of workers and peasants in the industrialized countries were employed and the vocational training they received. Consequently, the educational systems in countries like ours are not yet development-orientated.

6. A practical educational policy cannot be formulated in a vacuum. A nation which advocates such policies must be committed to development. It must above all aim at linking up the different parts of its territory to form a national economy. At present, most developing countries with patches of active areas cannot be described as national economies even though all the progressive pockets are contained in one nation-state. The size of the national market or the national economy is a very important factor in economic development.

7. Assuming that the need to develop a national economy is accepted, then one role of education will be to equip the growing generation with new skills and a new outlook. Much is made of the conservation of the peasant psychology. A poor peasant can ill-afford to take risks, but if care is taken to ensure that new methods and techniques produce positive results, the peasant will accept them and put them into practice. People can and do change, if given the right incentives, and a programme of job training must be matched by the generation of appropriate jobs.

8. This attitude to the development role of education emphasizes the utilitarian aspects and, in the economic circumstance of Africa today, this is not a bad thing. We have to improve the production of capital and consumer goods and our material welfare depends upon how well we can do this. We cannot help being utilitarian in our outlook, for we can only exchange foods and services that have economic value and this is precisely what the transformation of subsistence economies to market economies means. This is not to say that the aesthetic, moral, cultural and religious values of education are to be neglected. Some people hold the view that practical vocational training is devoid of any cultural value. Of this, I am not convinced, but I am sure of the fact that Africa's development will be served by men whose minds can grasp the laws of nature and whose hands can re-fashion its raw materials to minister to human ends.

9. It is important that education should be viewed as a continuous, life-long process, embracing the young as well as the adult population. A psychological climate must be created to make it necessary and possible for all members of the community to participate in the development effort. I am not suggesting that age-old customs and traditions should be abandoned or swept away, but there is the greatest need for a reappraisal of the codes and standards which have conditioned and still condition our actions. Everything must be done to ensure that the communal system which is universal in Africa is not abused. But there is need for a spirit of independence and self-reliance and a willingness to take risks. A system which shelters all indiscriminately can only guarantee equality in poverty.

10. It is necessary to question our present arrangements for the allocation of resources. On what age-group should our limited resources be spent? It might be argued that concentration on vocational and on-the-job training for adults might yield more immediate economic returns than investment in primary schools.

Some authorities have suggested postponing the compulsory entry of children into the first grade to about the age of 8 or 9 so that at the terminal stage of primary school - 15 or 16 - school leavers would be sufficiently mature to utilize their pre-vocational training in productive work. Indeed, the present systems which concentrate on spreading primary education are partly responsible for the wholesale unemployment among school-leavers. The psychological damage which this does is not fully appreciated. Children today do not speak of 'passing' the Standard 7 examination or of having 'obtained the secondary school-leaving Certificate.' Rather they say they have 'failed Common Entrance' or 'failed to secure admission to the University.' By this process we are in fact rearing a nation of failures, since only a minority still gain admission to the University. For economic and psychological reasons, we have to think in terms of investment in an educational complex.

11. Is there such a thing as rural education? The only reasonable answer to this question is that it is a matter of emphasis. Educational services provided in rural areas should be comprehensive in scope, comprising programmes from primary school levels to participation in communal activities such as women's institutes, farmers' clubs and extension work. It should also provide opportunities for attending rurally located high-level institutions engaged in teaching and research in specific rural problems. This implies that careful attention will be paid to curricula and syllabuses. Nowhere in the current educational system in developing countries is there as much attention paid to food production, farm management, marketing and cooperatives, science and its application, mechanical skills, etc., as is done in more prosperous and industrially advanced countries. Too much insistence cannot be placed on the need for the standards of teaching and learning in rural area to be as good as those which obtain in the best urban institutions. Equality in the quality of education should not be confused with identity of curriculum content. The student in a rural school is not a prisoner to his rural environment. At any stage he should be able to transfer to an urban secondary institution; rurally trained science teachers, or nurses, or artisans, ought to be able to work efficiently in urban concerns, and even more important, ought to be able to continue studies in a university or technical institution. So long as the rural population feel caught in a vicious circle of rural poverty, rural education, low income and continuing poverty, most of its members will seek to escape. This is the crux of the problem.

12. It seems to me that we have been unduly preoccupied by the exodus from the rural areas. This exodus is only a symptom.

Unless employment opportunities and prosperity are relatively evenly spread, we cannot prevent people from moving in search of better conditions of life. Indeed it would amount to a denial of their fundamental human right to attempt to do so.