

# *The Role of Open and Distance Education in Providing Access to Learning for Children and Young People*

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Thank you all very much. It's an honor and privilege to address this important gathering on a topic of such great concern to us all.

Over the next several weeks, as you are all too aware, a veritable plague of back to school advertisements will begin to attack our televisions and our stores, tempting our kids with the latest school fashion accessories, from backpacks to hip new laptops. There's always a wistfulness to these ads that signal the winding down of the long days of summer and the transition back to the regimen of school once again. But there's also a great, quiet comfort to the very routine of it all, of going "back" to ***complete something begun***, of continuing that virtuous cycle of learning and leisure that most of us have come to take for granted.

Yet, for millions of other children, these days are no different than any others and there is no school to go "back" to, no progress to continue. While their peers around the world are looking forward to their first day of class, children out of school will be waking up to yet another day of house chores, caring for their siblings, and fetching water or firewood.

Some will be working to help support their families. Others will be taking part in an armed conflict. Others still will be too scared by the violence raging on around them to venture out. Many will be too poor to afford school. And for so many who are ready to learn, there will be no teachers there to teach.

These are the young people I'll be concentrating my comments on today because the sad reality is they represent the silent majority for whom access to education remains most elusive. Before doing so, however, I want to clearly acknowledge that open and distance education holds enormous potential for supporting and enhancing learning in industrialized countries as well, where challenges of equitable

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access and quality, certainly for the most marginalized communities, are not to be underestimated. We must continue to lead and innovate and pilot in these places where resources and expertise are most abundant, mindful always of the potential for a broader global impact.

Education is a basic human right, vital to personal and societal development and well-being. It enhances lives, ends generational cycles of poverty and disease, and provides the means for sustainable development. A quality basic education will better equip girls and boys with knowledge and skills needed to adopt healthy lifestyles, to protect themselves from HIV/AIDS and to take an active role in social, economic and political decision-making as they transition to adulthood. As educated adults, they are more likely to have fewer children, be more informed parents, and ensure their own children start school on time and are ready to learn.

While I have lost track of the number of schools I've visited during the years I've been working with the U.S. Peace Corps, UNICEF, and now World Learning, I do recall a recent visit to a school World Learning is working with in Quito, Ecuador on a project designed to make education accessible to children in the worst child labour situations. There I met Oscar, a sharp 12-year-old, who was just finishing his first year of school after having spent most of his childhood working in his parents' fields, fumigating and harvesting crops. He was thriving in school and had his dreams fixed on becoming an airline pilot. And he knew enough to know that studying his math extra hard would prepare him to succeed. All this after one year of formal school! This is what's at stake: the collective human potential and hope of Oscar and millions of other children like him who have so much to contribute to their communities and their nations.

And yet, while countries around the world have committed themselves, through the Millennium and Dakar Declarations, to the international goals of universal primary education by 2015 quality education remains a distant dream for far too many children across the globe.

To achieve the 2015 target, countries must step up their efforts across the board. The latest figures on enrollment from the 2008 Education for All Global Monitoring Report suggest that 72 million children were out of school in 2005 compared to 96 million in 1999. Yet when attendance figures are factored in, the actual number of children not attending school may still be as high as 93 million.

What will it take to close this inexcusable gap?

Well, it is even clearer to me today than it was eight years ago when I spoke at Dakar that there is no single solution to increasing access to education and improving its quality - but rather, thousands of proven local and national solutions. The key to Education for All lies in the *tapestry of new and innovative partnerships* that have come together over the past decade or so - partnerships involving all sectors and levels of society, from governments and funding agencies, to service providers and civil society representatives - and of course families and children themselves.

You are all part of that tapestry of innovation that we so desperately need to weave in order to get the job done. Open and distance learning is about more than closing the digital divide, as real and concerning as

that is. It's a critical part of closing the human rights divide between those who will grow up literate - with skills, possibilities, and hope - and those who will not.

Clearly, innovation in the delivery of quality education to those on the margins is essential if we are to succeed against the odds. Because even as we make progress and narrow the gap toward Education for All, global trends are pushing back against us. Population growth and urbanization mean that about half of the population in the developing world is under the age of 18. And more than half of the world's population now lives in cities, nearly one-third of them in slums. Providing access to education and accommodating the unique learning needs of migrant children in slums will require many new ideas and targeted models.

Armed conflict and its aftermath continues to ravage many of the least developed countries, leaving in its wake generations of orphaned, homeless, and psychologically scarred children who have never known safety, let alone seen the inside of a school. Reaching these children, both physically and emotionally, will require open and flexible learning environments that are driven more by the context and needs of the children than the content of any standard curriculum.

And the list goes on. The continued devastation of HIV/AIDS on school systems, teachers, and communities; rising global inequality even in the face of economic growth; the emergence of a global knowledge economy raising the bar for us all by demanding new skills and capacities from young people; and the continued, inexcusable gender disparity in education, with still only one-third of countries worldwide providing girls the same basic human right to education as boys.

We can never forget that educating girls is more than a cost-effective investment; more than an economic issue; more than a desirable aspiration that societies should try to provide. Educated girls grow into educated women - women who are more likely to participate in making decisions that affect their lives and the lives of their children. They are more likely to understand the dangers of HIV/AIDS and seek protection. They are more likely to be healthy, have smaller families, and have healthier, better-educated children. And yet we are at risk of failing them and failing the future.

We must be mindful of the global trends that weigh against us and prepare for the reality that the closer we get to meeting our goal the harder our job will become. Achieving success in places least used to seeing it; reaching the most marginalized; providing access to the most historically neglected will require ***new and flexible learning models***, new applications of technology, new learning networks, and much more. It will require us to subtly shift our perspective on the delivery of learning from one of getting kids to school to one of ***getting school to kids*** - where they live, how they learn, what they need to thrive. Open and distance learning can and must play a central role in this unfolding effort.

From Jomtien to Dakar to the MDGs, we've learned a lot about what works, and doesn't, in this area of open and distance learning. For one, we've learned that technology alone isn't going to be the hero in this story, nor should it be cast as a villain. Technology isn't a plug-and-play solution any more than textbooks are a substitute for teachers, or teachers a substitute for engaged parents, communities, and governments. Improving access to quality learning means addressing the full social context of the learner.

For example, a recent Columbia University study of the Euro 200 voucher program in Romania, meant to make it possible for lower-income students to purchase laptop computers, found that the kids who got the computers spent less time on homework and had overall worse performance than those without computers. Does this mean computers can't be an important tool for learning for these kids? Of course not. The researchers also found that the kids receiving vouchers were less likely than other kids to have educated parents at home to guide and monitor their computer use; less likely to be able to purchase appropriate software; and more likely to be ethnic minorities with additional language or social barriers to overcome. So the technology has to come with support and match the learning and social contexts in a way that ensures the right outcomes.

Open and distance learning works when it ensures lifelong education by providing flexible access and multiple entry points to learning, training, and literacy. It works when it complements and enhances the existing capacities of traditional institutions to meet growing needs. India, for example, has been working hard to meet growing demand that would require, through traditional means, the addition of 10,000 schools a year. To address this gap, India in 2004 launched EDUSAT, the world's first dedicated education satellite, expanding virtual access to education for children, youth, and adults in remote areas. In parallel, India's National Institute of Open Schooling has remained a model of open, flexible education, providing access for disadvantaged populations for almost 20 years.

At World Learning and SIT, we have always placed strong emphasis on Teaching teachers and training trainers. And this is an area where distance Education through available and appropriate technologies has had a profound impact. Particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, the number of teachers who need to be trained or need ongoing professional development is far too large for conventional institutions and approaches to make a dent. In these contexts, distance education is capable of addressing scale and improving quality at the same time.

SchoolNet Africa, for example, is creating collaborations and information sharing opportunities in more than 20 African countries and in 27,000 schools. The African Teachers Network, one of SchoolNet's flagship projects, is strengthening the educational capacity of African educators through collaborative projects, and using a variety of methods to promote educator forums and professional development opportunities. And those teachers who benefit from distance education are more likely to understand and seek out distance education opportunities for their own students, and more likely to become local and national champions for open learning in general.

But right now I'd like to focus briefly on the importance of open learning methods for children who are migrants, minorities, or are at risk in child labour or conflict situations. These are some of the children who continue to fall between the cracks of our education system and must be reached through non-traditional means. As I mentioned a moment ago, since 2005, World Learning has been engaged in a project in Ecuador, called Wiñari, to combat child labour through education. That's where I met Oscar. Child labour remains a serious problem in Ecuador, as it does in much of the developing world, with an estimated 165 million children worldwide between the ages of 5 and 14 engaged in labour, often working long hours in hazardous conditions. Just last month the World Day Against Child Labour

highlighted Education as its theme, recognizing child labour as a major obstacle to reaching the Education For All goals.

World Learning's Wiñari project aims to reduce the incidence of child labour among the indigenous population of Ecuador, where it is prevalent, while increasing the school retention rates of children and adolescents. Four years since its inception, almost 6,000 children are in school who would otherwise have been deprived the opportunity, and indigenous parents and communities are more aware of the hazards of child labour and the value of education as an alternative. Wiñari's success has been due to an open learning approach that addresses the full context of the problem of child labour and the educational needs of the children and their communities.

For example, one of the obstacles to these working children joining or rejoining the educational system is the stigma and learning issues associated with age difference, as 11-year-olds try to start first grade alongside 7-year-olds. To address this, Wiñari developed an accelerated learning program to help children more than three years behind remain or reintegrate in the formal school system at a grade level appropriate to their age. Once in school, Wiñari encourages retention and continued focus on study rather than work through a range of activities, including: after-school tutoring, prevocational guidance counseling, and summer school activities. And to prepare teachers to understand and address the unique learning and life needs of children coming out of labour situations, Wiñari is training community-based teachers with new methods and new capacities.

What Wiñari and other such programs demonstrate is that success in providing education for all means working it from every angle. From individual schools to communities, parents, teachers, indigenous organizations, national agencies, the private sector, and government - effective programs build capacity at every level of society to inherit and sustain the models that effect change. It's not enough to develop specialized curricula or introduce new technology if there isn't sufficient funding to hire teachers and train them properly to deliver it. It's not enough to help more of these students obtain a secondary education if there's not the economic development to provide them opportunities when they graduate. We have to do it all if we're to succeed.

As I recall the many times the world community has committed itself to assuring every girl and boy a basic education, I remain confident that we can succeed and are steering the right course to meet our goal. And I'm encouraged to stand here and see that the tapestry of innovation begun some years ago continues to grow and spread as new partners, new ideas, and new technologies join this great effort. It will take all our focus and all our reserves and will require unflinching political will to ensure that education for all remains an international priority in the years ahead, faced as we are by so many other mounting needs.

We must remind ourselves and others frequently over the coming years that, as Jackie Onassis once put it, ***if you bungle raising your children, then whatever else you do well doesn't matter very much.***

So this year, as we send our sons and daughters back to school, let's be mindful of the millions for whom education remains a distant dream. And let's get back to ***completing the job we began*** more years ago that most of us would like to admit--to ensure Education for All by 2015.

Thank you very much.