

Lifelong Learning for Social Development

The recent International Conference on *Lifelong Learning for Social Development* organised at Loyola College of Social Sciences, brought together over 220 social scientists from 14 countries. The deliberations brought out certain major concerns.

About the very concepts: Education and learning cannot be restricted to a particular period of life. Learning is a lifelong process covering the entire life span of the individual, embracing and unifying all stages of education –pre-primary, primary, secondary, tertiary and adult education. Combining and integrating formal, informal and non-formal channels the lifelong learning process aims at integration not fragmentation. Lifelong learning should be rooted in the experience of the community, local culture, while at the same time providing a global perspective. Democratic and participative spirit informs the structures and processes of lifelong learning. The maxim is 'learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be' (International Commission on Education for 21st century). Some African educators added to the list and said that lifelong learning should include 'learning to promote, learning to participate; learning to share, learning to communicate and learning to anticipate. One senses an expansion of the concept and is struck by the rich possibilities that it evokes. 'Learning for life and learning throughout life' sounds a fascinating possibility.

The survival of humanity will depend, to a large extent, on the quality of learning that is provided. From Industrial Society, we have moved to a Knowledge Society. In the Knowledge Society education is becoming an internationally traded commodity. This trend is very clearly manifested in the debates on the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) within the World Trade Organisation. The commodification of education is bound to have major implications for the life of the people. One needs to ask, particularly, what happens when education is primarily viewed as a commodity to be bought and sold in the market. One of the most conspicuous eventualities will be the reinforcement of the inequalities that already exist in the world today.

Interest in lifelong learning is not, surprisingly, limited to the developed countries. The world over, educationists, planners and even the ordinary folk are realising the importance of lifelong learning for social development. Some of the very interesting experiences shared in the Conference were on Community Learning Centres in Thailand, adult Education efforts in Norway, Pingtung county community university in Taiwan, community colleges in the US, dimensions of socialisation in Swazi culture, equivalency programmes in Jamaica and a number of experiments in India and Kerala in particular. The message was loud and clear: There is a growing recognition that lifelong learning is essential for social development.

Other themes presented at the Conference included gender issues, health dimensions, community development and lifelong learning, value education, environmental education, contemporary issues in lifelong learning, indigenous people and lifelong learning and contributions of specific thinkers like Gandhiji.

Thus, it becomes obvious that the world is awakening to the immense possibilities of lifelong learning for social development. Understanding the concepts of lifelong learning and social development, expanding its scope and looking for effective models all over the world, is the challenge of the hour. With the 9/11 happening, humanity feels more vulnerable than ever. Everyone should recognise that the wide disparities that exist in the world today cannot continue, unless at a great risk to international security. The development agenda should include greater justice, participation and sustainability, a theme that was repeated over and over in the discussions during the Conference.

The aspirations of the people are on the increase. The desire for a sustainable and equitable social development can best be served by a learning society. Thus the agendas of social development and lifelong learning merge. The Conference called upon all educated people to contribute their mite to the cause of lifelong learning and pledged its support to all agencies and individuals engaged in the gigantic task of upbringing the downtrodden, exploited sections of society to the highest possible levels. They declared that lifelong learning is essential to promote peace, dialogue and settlement of disputes without wars and to augment progress and prosperity for all.

Copies of the papers presented at the Conference are available on request. Please contact the Chief Editor.