Adult Education into the 21st Century: Globalization, Democratization, Human Development

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CONCEPT

In the last years of the second millennium, humanity seems to have covered full circle. Earlier, technology, economic and social organisation, trade, knowledge and education were centered in the great civilisations of the East. However, the wheel of progress moved in such a way that 17th century industrial revolution and its associated phenomenon of colonialisation shifted the fulcrum of civilisation to the West. Europe and North America in the last two centuries become the sources of economic development, technological innovation, trade expansion, progress in education and science. With the remarkable economic growth in Asia-Pacific Region in the last decade, it appears that fulcrum of civilisation is once again shifting Eastward. Asia-Pacific is the growth centre of the future, largely viewed in terms of economic growth.

While the trends towards economic growth in East and South-east Asia were emerging earlier, this phenomenon received further attention after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and subsequent reorganisation of countries in former Soviet Union and Eastern/Central Europe. The Cold War politics and ideology has been replaced by trade and economic investment as the new basis of relationships across the countries and communities. As a result, countries of this region are being transferred economically, politically and socio-culturally.

We have completed a period of our history that witnessed the rise of nations – states at the end of World War-II. During these 50 years, systems of economic and political management of the global order were put in place, consistent with the reality in 1945. As a result, we are witnessing wide-spread questioning and re-structuring of international mechanisms like the UN System and Bretton Woods Institutions. In this new age of instant communication, events taking place in one part of the world get quickly known in and affect other parts of the world. The new information technology and electronic media are strengthening the basis of the new order in our region. It is in this changed context that we have gathered here at Darwin to inform our practice of Adult Education. This phenomenon of globalisation is increasingly penetrating the institutions and practices within our region. Therefore, the regional context of this phenomenon of globalisation presents the back drop for our deliberations in this assembly.

GLOBALISATION

It is useful to keep in perspective the long history of cross-cultural relations in our Asia-Pacific region. Much before the birth of Christ, intellectual, spiritual and economic relations had substantially developed across the Himalayas, the forests of Siam, the sea of Sumatra and the Mekong River. Trade routes of silk, spices and tea, teachings of Lord Buddha and joint protection of sea routes had demonstrated advanced globalisation in this region. Exchange of scholars and teachers across China, Indian subcontinent and into the Arab world had profoundly affected the scope of learning and knowledge in our region.

Yet, in some significant ways, the globalisation of today is qualitatively different. Its reach, speed and connectivity is of a much higher order than anything human civilisation has witnessed before. Therefore, this globalisation offers certain opportunities and presents many constraints unparalleled in human history.
CONSTRAINTS

Among the major constraints noted by many scholars and critics of globalisation, four are briefly described here. **First**, globalisation is taking place in a situation of inequality across countries and regions — inequality which increased dramatically due to rapid economic development in the North in 1950-70 periods. Today, only 20% of global GDP is the share of 80% of population in the developing countries. Even within countries, poorest 20% of the population average about 5% of national income in developing countries. As a result, relationships across unequal partner countries are resulting in increased domination by the powerful over relatively powerless. This domination across countries is acquired through capital, technology and unequal terms of exchange and trade. Multinational capital flows and WTO seem to be reinforcing such inequality.

**Secondly**, rapid economic development in the North has become a “model” of development for countries of the South. NIC, near NIC and Asian Tigers are illustrations of blind copying of “western” development paradigm without its linkages to the indigenous cultures and conditions. Globalisation has further intensified the adoption of this model of development in countries of Asia-Pacific. This race for economic development tends to reinforce singularity of approach to development.

This model of rapid industrialisation and faster rates of economic growth (10-15% per annum) have resulted in much faster and deeper ecological degradation and destruction in countries of our region. Globalisation further fuels export of hazardous industry, processes, products and wastes to countries of our region.

**Thirdly**, existing inequalities across countries in Asia-Pacific and inequalities within these countries has resulted in further skewed economic conditions. A section of urban-industrial population and rural landed elite benefit much more from globalization and its attendant economic opportunities. Elites across various countries of our region have built strong economic linkages, taking advantage of globalization. The poor rural poor in particular, the illiterate and unskilled remain largely excluded from this process of globalization. This has led to the exclusion of vast sections of these societies from being either producers or consumers in the market place.

**Finally**, globalisation is bringing in its wake tendencies towards cultural homogenisation. Uniformity in food, dress and language is wiping out the valuable social diversity rooted in long cultural practices of people in countries of Asia-Pacific region. Uniformity, unipolarism and a singular view of ‘good life’ is being perpetuated world-wide through a systematic process of ideational hegemony. Electronic media, internet and global tourism have hastened these processes of cultural homogenization.

OPPORTUNITIES

Despite these rather serious constraints and potentially disastrous consequences to humanity and ecology, globalization does offer certain new opportunities. It is helpful to acknowledge them as well.

**Firstly**, globalisation is associated with economic liberalisation. It implies access to new products, technology, markets. Increasingly trade, technology transfer and capital flows across countries and regions is generally associated with immigration of human skills and competencies. In Asia-Pacific region, new economic opportunities
have opened up enormous possibilities for many countries and societies. As
restrictions on economic investments are lifted, and as macro-economic policies are
developed to encourage private initiative, entrepreneurship among individuals and
families flourishes.

Secondly, contemporary globalisation is also associated with changing role of the
state. The modern concept of nation-state, with centralised system of governance
controlled administration and bureaucracy and maintenance of law and order through
police and military was implanted on countries of Asia-Pacific after Second World
War. Deep and wide control over natural/physical resources and human activity has
been exercised by the state in the past fifty years, be it a democratic state, single
party (Marxist) state or military dictatorship. Globalisation is creating the possibility
of greater political space for citizens, less centralised and more decentralised local self-
governance, reform and curtailment of omniscient and omnipotent state in many
Asia-Pacific countries. There is a growing demand for citizen participation in the
governance of their affairs. Transparency and accountability of public agenda,
decision-making and public officials is being demanded. Globalisation has also
opened doors (and minds) to diverse political perspectives and aspirations.
Democracy and respect of human rights are powerful new ideas flowing through
many societies of our region. Beyond narrow ethnic or religious identity,
globalisation is opening possibilities for more humane, non-sectarian, global
citizenship.

Finally, globalisation is today associated with enormous opportunities for information.
New technology has opened new frontiers of sharing, learning and knowing, hitherto
inaccessible to many in different parts of the world. Globalisation is being supported
through new information revolution; and globalisation in turn is promoting
opportunities to access distant and instant information. Knowledge as a source of
power is getting increasingly democratised and more widely distributed.

Therefore, globalisation and democratisation are presently closely associated, just as
globalisation and economic liberalisation are closely associated. This is most visible
in many countries of Asia-Pacific today. As these trends continue and deepen in the
twenty-first century, it requires unparalleled human response.

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Despite difference in economic approaches and political structures, there has
emerged a growing universal agreement on the significance of human development.
Creating possibilities for each human being, individually and socially, to develop her
full potential is the essence of human development. Education (besides health and
nutrition) is the basic building block of human development. Basic education
provides skills for reading, writing and numeracy, it also helps build a value system,
socialisation in the family, country and school “educates” a child into a socio-cultural
being. Secondary and tertiary education prepares an individual to be economically
productive and useful to society. There is growing evidence that human
development in general, and education in particular, contributes to economic
development and growth. Within our region, the East Asian “Tigers” countries
provide stunning illustration of this phenomenon.

However, the challenge of human development is not merely in schooling, but the
 provision of opportunities for lifelong learning and education. As markets, technology
and contexts change, continuing education supports ongoing human development.
As that change becomes rapid and widespread at this juncture of human civilisation,
lifelong education has to be promoted vigorously in order to sustain human development. Family, community and neighbourhoods have been significant arenas for learning and human development. As contemporary changes affect these arenas new ways of sustaining the moral, spiritual and cultural diversion of human development have to be discovered. Human Development, therefore, becomes the key strategy for realising the potential of globalisation and democratisation, while dealing with its associated constraints. Adult Education into the twenty-first century, therefore, faces the most severe challenge of stimulating and sustaining this strategy of human development through the processes and mechanisms of lifelong learning.

**CHALLENGES FOR ADULT EDUCATION**

As a contribution to responsive and libertarian human development in the context of globalisation in Asia-Pacific region, several important roles need to be, and can be played by adult education.

**First**, adult education can assist individuals and communities to understand the nature and dynamics of change ushered in by these trends. It can also assist families and groups to learn the implications of these changes for their life, work, country and citizenship. Without systematic and well-designed, learning opportunities created through adult education, many individuals and communities are bewildered and disoriented by the speed and scope of these changes, which are rendering traditional and habitual ways of behaving obsolete. In the absence of enlightened understanding of these changes, tendencies towards inward-looking or living in the past get reinforced; the need of the hour is outward and future-oriented.

**Second** as individuals and families move to new locations in search of economic opportunities created by globalisation, they find themselves in alien and at times inhospitable habitats. Migrants face exclusion, ostracisation and intimidation. Rapid increase in intra-country and inter-country migration in large numbers is creating unsettled habitation, both in departing and host locations and neighbourhoods. Adult education must address this issue of integration of new migrants by assisting those who arrive, as well as those who receive. The ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious composition of our communities is changing rapidly. Widespread heterogeneity and diversity characterise the composition of these neighbourhoods. Learning to live with diversity, tolerance for differences and solidarity towards distant others are needed to make these settlements into communities. Adult Education can contribute towards this direction. In the absence of these interventions of learning, migration is seen as a threat, and breeds isolation and hostility.

**Third**, new economic opportunities are passing by those who are illiterate and unskilled. Computer literacy has become crucial in the new information age. Restructuring of economies and reorganisation of trade and industry requires newer and different sets of skills and competencies. Nature of work, work place and environment are all changing rapidly. Adult education must provide tool to access literacy, computer literacy and new skills and capacities, particularly for those hitherto excluded from the process of economic liberalisation. Vocational education, multi-skilling and developing new forms of learning opportunities suited to the needs of each individual are making great demands on the practice of adult education in our region.

**Fourth**, decentralisation and devolution of governance to local levels is creating new opportunities for political participation. Ordinary people have been hitherto passively
dependent on centralised government and inefficient bureaucracy. The need to become citizens – citizens need to learn how to govern their own communities and arrange their common resources in public good. New capacities, confidence and reassertion of citizenship is required for local self-governance to become a reality in many societies of Asia-Pacific region. Adult education can assist this process of self-governance and decentralisation of decision-making by enabling and preparing citizens and their associations to build their appropriate capacity for the same. In the process, accountability of governance structures and just and equitable processes of public decision-making may get reinforced.

Finally, individuals and families are experiencing uprootedness from their historical and traditional cultures, as they face new cultural forms and practices. Cultural practices and institutions in many Asia-Pacific societies have existed for long and been well-developed. As a result, cultural transactions are appearing to be dynamic and painful. What is needed is a new synthesis of old and new; synthesis of the traditional and the modern, synthesis of local and global. New identity needs to be built which imbibes the new while retaining the old. Adult education can perhaps assist individuals and their families to redefine and reshape their identity in harmony with the old culture, and, in response to the contemporary urges.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR ASPBAE**

As a regional network of practitioners of adult education, ASPBAE should address the above challenges in a manner that strengthens the processes of human development and democratisation in the new global order. While this General Assembly will elaborate debate and formulate these strategies for ASPBAE and its membership, some elements of a future direction can be highlighted as implication of the above.

In its composition themes and focus, ASPBAE should strive harder to be inclusive. The diversity or requirements of lifelong learning and the wide variety of providers of adult education should find a place in ASPBAE. Secondly, in the wake of growing privatisation and commercialisation of the service provision in continuing education, it is important that ASPBAE promotes excellence in quality and adult-centeredness in methodology of such service provision. However, there is a noticeable trend in the declining interest among governments of our region (as dramatically visible in Jomtien UNESCO consultation during September 1996). Hence, pursuit of adult learning as a universal right and ensuring equity, quality and efficiency in provision of services of life long education acquires a priority. As regional economic blocks (APEC for example) gain significance in our region, it is imperative that a regional body of adult educators (like ASPBAE) continues to voice this priority to the national governments as well as regional groupings.

Lest that voice is not heard, a new generation of leaders in adult education should be supported by ASPBAE in its pursuit of the rights of all adults to learn, and go on learning. Above all, ASPBAE should find ways to contribute to the greater voice and capacity of the citizen, in her efforts to shape her own future.

Let this Assembly be an occasion for celebration of that voice and capacity, so that the local and the micro are not lost sight in the prevailing ethos of the global and the macro.
References

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