

WHAT HAPPENED AT THE WORLD EDUCATION FORUM?

(Dakar, Senegal, 26-28 April, 2000)

Rosa María Torres¹

“What happened in Dakar?” many people continue to ask. Little information has in fact circulated in public either before or after the World Education Forum, held in Dakar, Senegal from 26 to 28 April 2000.² In the days following the conference there were a few newspaper reports, especially in those countries which sent journalists to cover the event. However, in many cases one wondered at the costs and benefits of a week-long trip to Africa at the end of which what was written were descriptions, personal stories and travelogues, rather than substantive, analytical accounts of the complex world of education and of the myriad of relationships, positions, power conflicts, interests and games that are usually at stake in this type of events.

The purpose of the Forum was to present the global results of the evaluation of the Decade of “Education for All” (EFA) launched in Jomtien, Thailand, in March 1990, and to adopt a new Framework for Action, essentially in order to continue the task. As was already evident half way through the decade, the six goals set in Jomtien for the year 2000 had not been met. Thus, the Framework for Action adopted in Dakar basically “reaffirmed” the vision of the goals laid down in Jomtien, which now run for another 15 years, until 2015. Why 15? There is apparently no rational calculation or scientific answer.

The event was organized by the International Consultative Forum on Education for All (the EFA Forum), a body created in 1991 to monitor EFA and composed of representatives of the five international agencies that sponsored the initiative – UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA and the World Bank – and of bilateral cooperation agencies, governments and NGOs, as well as by some education specialists.

The Forum was attended by over a thousand people, representing governments, the civil society and international agencies. One salient feature (which was noted with displeasure by several national delegations) was the overbearing presence of functionaries from international agencies at the conference as a whole and on the various panels and committees, especially the two most important and most coveted: the Drafting Committee and the “Futures Group”. The latter was charged with suggesting mechanisms for following up the commitments made at the Forum up until 2015.

Since the Forum was held in Africa, there was a significant presence of participants from Africa and, to a lesser extent, from Asia. The Latin American presence was weak and

¹ Rosa María Torres rmtorres@fibertel.com.ar www.fronesis.org

² For more information see the web pages of UNESCO (www2.unesco.org/efa) and of the Dakar Forum (www2.unesco.org/wef).

hampered by the fact that neither Spanish nor Portuguese is an official language of the United Nations. The differences between national delegations were also striking: large delegations, and one-person delegations; delegations headed by Ministers or high-ranking officials, and those made up of junior officials; delegations that were exclusively governmental, and those in which the government had had the good sense to involve academics, members of NGOs, experts and even trade unionists.

The Forum lasted three days. The programme was organized in plenary sessions ("broad policy issues") and strategy sessions ("key operational issues") linked with the theme of each plenary. Since the programme of an event says much about its nature and intentions (the selection, organization and prioritization of its contents, and the proposed methodology), a list of the themes covered in the various sessions is included in Box A. The Forum concluded with a final plenary session that included the adoption of commitments and the "Voices from the Grassroots": statements by teachers and learners from Africa, the Arab States, Europe and Latin America.

Box A

Programme: Themes addressed in the World Education Forum

Plenary sessions:

- I. Improving the quality and equity of education for all
- II. Making effective use of resources for education
- III. Cooperating with civil society to achieve social goals through education
- IV. Promoting education for democracy and citizenship
- V. Fulfilling our shared commitment to Education for All
- VI. The new partnership for EFA

Sub-Plenaries (within the Strategy Sessions):

- Technology for basic education: a luxury or a necessity?
- Overcoming obstacles to educating girls
- Overcoming the effects of HIV/AIDS on basic education
- Fighting poverty and marginalization through basic education

Strategy Sessions:

- Meeting special and diverse education needs: making inclusive education a reality
- Universalizing free and compulsory primary education
- Expanding access to early childhood development programmes
- Designing basic education content to meet the needs and values of society
- Assessing learning achievement
- Enabling teachers to enable learners
- Utilizing debt relief for education
- Working with the business community to strengthen basic education
- Strategic choices in development and use of teaching and learning resources
- Providing basic education in situations of emergency and crisis
- Monitoring the provision and outcomes of basic education
- Mobilizing new resources for basic education
- Building effective partnerships with funding agencies
- Promoting population and reproductive health, especially among young people, through basic education

- Building social integration through bilingual and mother tongue education
- A FRESH start to school health: improving learning and educational outcomes by improving health, hygiene and nutrition
- Promoting basic education and democracy: the role of the media
- Including the excluded: enhancing educational access and quality
- Literacy for all: a renewed vision for a ten-year global action plan
- After primary education, what?

It should be explained that during that week Dakar was host not to one but to two international events concerned with EFA: the World Education Forum, that is to say, the “governmental”, “official” event, and the International Consultation of NGOs (24-25 April), the “alternative” event held immediately before. The Consultation was organized by the NGOs belonging to the “Global Campaign for Education” launched in 1999 by two international NGOs, Oxfam and ActionAid, and later joined by Education International (EI), the international confederation of teacher organizations. This campaign, which is critical of the work done by the EFA movement over the 90s, put forward its own Global Action Plan to achieve EFA. Some of those who took part in the NGO event also participated in the official conference, a number of them fulfilling important functions at it.

An Event Without Expectations

Not much happened at Dakar. It was a huge and costly meeting without sparkle and without expectations, with complicated logistics, with few surprises and with anticipated outcomes, as is usual at events that are concerned essentially with discussing and approving documents that have been prepared in advance and have already been through various drafts. What is left open for discussion is form rather than content: replacing, deleting or adding words, moving paragraphs, or highlighting one particular idea among the whole. Frequently, battles and victories revolve around “including” sentences or paragraphs that every person or group considers relevant from their own points of view or fields of interest: education for girls, protecting the environment, debt cancellation, early childhood development, street children, eradication of child work, the gender perspective, HIV/AIDS prevention, indigenous groups, South-South cooperation, teacher development, community involvement, the fight against poverty, and so on. This results in documents which are cover-alls, including everyone but neither representing nor satisfying anyone in particular. That is how international documents and declarations are drawn up and how they end up talking about generalities, coming back to commonplaces, enshrining vagueness and ambiguity, and creating the illusion of shared ideals, consensus and commitment.

It was, as has been said, an event without big surprises. The broad results of the EFA end-of-decade global assessment were known prior to Dakar (see a brief summary in Boxes B and C). The assessment process began in mid-1998, with national reports drawn up by governments in each country (on the basis of 18 indicators proposed by the EFA Forum), which were then incorporated into regional reports presented and discussed at regional

meetings.³ There was also a special meeting held in Recife, Brazil, in February 2000 to evaluate the “Nine Most Populous Countries Initiative” (Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria and Pakistan), a sub-programme launched in 1993 by the same international agencies within the framework of EFA.

Information about the assessment process was provided step by step by the various publications and web pages of the EFA Forum, UNESCO and the other EFA partners. National and regional reports on the end of the decade were released on the web. Thus, and even though the national reports were generally drawn up in government offices by small groups of technicians and consultants working against the clock and with no or very little social participation or consultation, any educated person with access to the Internet could be informed before the Dakar Forum that the Jomtien goals had not been met, and could read such reports on the web.

Box B

1990-2000: SOME COMPARATIVE DATA

	1990 (Jomtien)	2000 (Dakar)
Expenditure per pupil as a percentage of Gross National Product (GNP) per capita	Between 6% and 19%	Between 8% and 20% (1998)
Children in early childhood development and education programmes (0 to 6 years)	99 million	104 million (out of a total of over 800 million)
Children in school	599 million	681 million (44 million of this increase being girls)
Children with no access to school	106 million	117 million (60% girls)
Illiterate adults	895 million	880 million (60% women)
Adult literacy rate	75%	80% (85% men, 74% women)

Sources:

- WCEFA (Inter-Agency Commission World Conference on Education for All), *Final Report, World Conference on Education for All* (Jomtien, Thailand, 5-9 March 1990), New York: UNICEF, 1990.
- EFA FORUM, *Statistical Document*, World Education Forum (Dakar, 26-28 April 2000), Paris: UNESCO, 2000.

³ The regional meetings were:

- Sub-Saharan Africa: Johannesburg, South Africa, 6-10 December 1999.
- Asia and the Pacific: Bangkok, Thailand, 17-20 January 2000.
- Arab States: Cairo, Egypt, 24-27 January 2000.
- Europe and North America: Warsaw, Poland, 6-8 February 2000.
- Latin America and the Caribbean: Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, 10-12 February 2000.

Box C

SOME DATA FROM THE EFA 2000 GLOBAL ASSESSMENT

- In around 60 countries which carried out learning assessment operations, only 5% of primary pupils attained or surpassed the minimum level of learning.
- The figures for repetition remained extremely high.
- Among the causes of the low quality of education were the low salaries and poor training of teachers.
- Worldwide, 63% of the cost of education was covered by governments, 35% by the private sector (including parents) and 2% by external cooperation.
- Half of the developing countries which supplied information reported spending less than 1.7% of their GNP on basic education in 1998.

Sources:

- EFA FORUM, *Statistical Document*, World Education Forum (Dakar, 26-28 April 2000), Paris: UNESCO, 2000.
- *Countdown*, N° 21, UNESCO, Paris (June-August 2000).

The proposal to extend the period until 2015 had already been put forward in the EFA bulletins prior to Dakar. The six goals adopted in Dakar are essentially a ratification of those agreed in Jomtien, although there are some changes in content and form that are worth noting (see Box D): this time, education is acknowledged as a *right*⁴ and it is specifically stated that primary schooling should be free, compulsory and of good quality; there is a reminder that the outcomes of education should be visible and measurable; greater emphasis is placed on the elimination of gender inequality in both primary and secondary education, with particular reference to girls⁵; and there is a request that adult education should be fully integrated into national education systems and policies.

It should not be forgotten that we arrived at Dakar with a considerable reduction of the “broad vision” of *basic education* adopted in Jomtien, where EFA was meant to satisfy the basic learning needs of *all* – children, young people and adults – throughout life, within and outside the formal school system. Nonetheless, over the course of the decade, this “all” visibly shrank, as did the contexts and levels of satisfaction of such basic learning needs.⁶ The “focus on poverty” (i.e., not on the poor but on the poorest of the poor, since the poor are in the majority and their number is growing worldwide), combined with the focus on childhood and, within this, on girls, may mean now that Education for *All* gets further reduced to Education for [the Poorest] Girls. Also, while

⁴ The Jomtien documents avoided talking of education as a *right*. The formula adopted was 'taking advantage of opportunities': “Every person – child, youth and adult – shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs”.

⁵ During the Forum, Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations, officially launched an Initiative for Girls Education, within the framework of EFA and under the leadership of UNICEF.

⁶ See: R.M.Torres, 2000. *One Decade of Education for All: The Challenge Ahead [Una década de Educación para Todos: La tarea pendiente]*, FUM-TEP, Montevideo; Editorial Popular, Madrid; Editorial Laboratorio Educativo, Caracas; IPE UNESCO, Buenos Aires; Artmed Editora, Porto Alegre.

the notion of *basic education* in Jomtien had the potential to include secondary education (Goal 2: “universal access to ... primary education or whatever *higher* level of education is considered *basic*”), in Dakar the upper limit is clearly primary schooling, even though the issue of gender equality extends to secondary education.

Box D

JOMTIEN AND DAKAR: THE GOALS

1990-2000: JOMTIEN	2000-2015: DAKAR
1. Expansion of early childhood care and development activities, including family and community interventions, especially for poor, disadvantaged and disabled children.	1. Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.
2. Universal access to, and completion of, primary education (or whatever higher level of education is considered as “basic”) by the year 2000.	2. Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality.
3. Improvement in learning achievement such that an agreed percentage of an appropriate age cohort (e.g. 80% 14 year olds) attains or surpasses a defined level of necessary learning achievement.	3. Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes.
4. Reduction in the adult illiteracy rate (the appropriate age cohort to be determined in each country) to, say, one-half its 1990 level by the year 2000, with sufficient emphasis on female literacy to significantly reduce the current disparity between the male and female illiteracy rates.	4. Achieving a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults.
5. Expansion of provision of basic education and training in other essential skills required by youth and adults, with programme effectiveness assessed in terms behavioral changes and impacts on health, employment and productivity.	5. Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls’ full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality.
6. Increased acquisition by individuals and families of the knowledge, skills and values required for better living and sound and sustainable development, made available through all educational channels including the mass media, other forms of modern and traditional communication, and social action, with effectiveness assessed in terms of behavioral change.	6. Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

An Accolade from Governments for UNESCO – for a New UNESCO

Perhaps the greatest surprise, the tensest moment and the source of most contention at the conference, was countries’ reaction to the proposal put forward by the Futures Group for the monitoring of implementation of this second stage of EFA (2000-2015). The proposal

entrusted global coordination of follow-up to a special body to be set up by the international agencies that sponsored EFA, and by representatives of governments and the civil society. The *who* and the *how* of this follow-up had been the subject of critical discussions among the international agencies in the lead-up to Dakar, and one of the topics entrusted to the Futures Group during the Forum. The mechanism proposed was expressly designed to avoid UNESCO's taking on the global coordination of Dakar+15. "*Part of the criticism is that UNESCO has not given enough importance to Education for All*", said John Longmore, a United Nations official and coordinator of the Futures Group, the day before.⁷

However, a number of speakers from government delegations, from Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa and Asia, rejected the proposed mechanism in firm and even heated terms, and requested that the leadership of EFA should be taken by UNESCO as the specialized educational organization within the United Nations system. The speakers were equally emphatic in agreeing that the task should be entrusted not to the *present* UNESCO but to a *restructured* UNESCO.

This development took everyone by surprise, including UNESCO itself, both honored and worried by the responsibility and the implications of the task. The Futures Group had to reconvene in an additional unplanned emergency session to amend the original proposal.⁸ At the final plenary, the Director of UNESCO, Koichiro Matsuura, made a commitment to such a restructuring. This means, of course, an urgent major reform on which depends not only the chance to give new impetus to the renewed worldwide commitment to EFA but also the very survival of the organization.⁹

From Jomtien to Dakar: Inevitable Contrasts

There were huge differences between the Jomtien and Dakar conferences, not merely because of the ten years of dramatic and turbulent changes in the world that lay between them, but also because of the spirit surrounding each of them. For those of us who were in Dakar and had also been Jomtien ten years earlier, where what was being evaluated in Dakar began, the differences were enormous, and obvious.

Jomtien succeeded in creating a spirit of a fresh start, of hope, of "this time it'll work". In Dakar, both agencies and national delegations inevitably arrived with a feeling of failure, of a task half done. In Jomtien, anything seemed possible, the future looked promising, *quality* and *equity* were somewhat new words, and made for credible goals. Ten years on, there has been an unprecedented growth in poverty throughout the world, in exclusion,

⁷ In: *Education Forum*, Newsletter of the World Education Forum, N° 3, Dakar, 28 April 2000, p. 1.

⁸ A duplicated sheet circulated by the Futures Group on the last day of the Forum explains: "Explanatory note: After a first draft of the Futures Group was orally presented to the plenary on Thursday, a late evening meeting was convened of all group members who could be traced (50% of the original group) to develop this second draft in response to the comments from the Ministers".

⁹ The United States might rejoin UNESCO, according to statements made by Gene Sperling, Clinton's economic adviser, at a press conference at the end of the Forum.

unemployment, hunger, despair and AIDS. *Quality* and *equity* are now used words, with little relation to reality. In 1990, technology seemed to be the magic wand that would scatter its gifts, ushering in longed-for educational innovations, mass access and enjoyable, rapid learning for children, young people and adults. At the start of this century, the potential and promises of developments in information and communication technologies leave us speechless; at the same time, the “*digital divide*” is a new phenomenon and a new term already incorporated to the educational jargon – one more problem and one more division between rich and poor, between the included and the excluded. Jomtien was an invitation to create, to invent and to dream. Dakar, faced with the crass contrast between rhetoric and reality, between documents and facts, between goals and achievements, restrained the imagination, encouraged excuses and self-justification, and provided a temptation to inflate numbers and to blur realities.

The international agencies which organized the 1990 conference arrived in Jomtien disposed to try to strengthen the inter-agency collaboration to which they were committed, in the knowledge that this was a requirement if they were to set the necessary example of leadership of a world initiative that proclaimed cooperation, partnership, multisectoral policies and efficient use of resources. These same agencies, ten years later, have experienced the real difficulties of such collaboration, have withdrawn into their own “niches” and institutional styles, and have developed the well-known “donor fatigue” syndrome. The differences and disputes between them, which were already present in 1990, have not diminished but have rather worsened over the decade. Perhaps the most unfortunate aspect of Dakar was the infighting between agencies, particularly between UNESCO and UNICEF, sister agencies in the United Nations system and today in open competition for hegemony over the world panorama of education, and specifically over EFA. Each is dismissive of the other’s technical quality. UNESCO resents the fact that the United Nations gave UNICEF world leadership over education for girls, while UNICEF resents that UNESCO was ratified by national governments as the lead agency for Education for All. The only organization which appears not to have problems with its identity and hegemony is the World Bank, which has its own agenda and huge financial and political resources with which to pursue it, and which, in the technical vacuum effectively created in the field of education at a global scale, has succeeded in imposing a new type of technical “expertise” and legitimacy in the field.

National delegations themselves arrived in Dakar without much security or conviction. Even though those heading governments and education ministries were not the same people as in 1990, today’s officials know that they have to accept liability for the success or failure of their predecessors and to present a decent image of their countries. In many cases, however, the reality and the statistics gave them no help. At the end of the decade, several countries had no information available with which to respond to some of the 18 indicators laid down. Few had data on learning achievement; in some cases, the data were there but progress had not been made in the very field which was defined as crucial in Jomtien: learning. Many countries admitted in their reports that they had ignored adult and non-formal education, while regarding Education for All as *Primary* Education for All, and, even worse, as *access* to primary education, with little attention to retention, completion and effective learning. For all the juggling with words and figures,

governments know that they are subject today to the watchful eye of civil society, of researchers and specialists who may want to scrutinize the truthfulness of figures and statements. While ten years ago, government reports were confidential documents locked away in the archives of education ministries, today they are exposed to generalized demands for information, transparency and accountability.

Academic institutions and non-governmental organizations have no reason either to feel satisfied with their participation in EFA over the last ten years. NGOs became increasingly involved and concerned in the progress of EFA as a macro policy and programme at national and international level, over the final few years when EFA was being assessed and the decade was drawing to a close. The Global Campaign for Education, critical and alternative to the “official” EFA movement, was set up at the instigation of international NGOs from the North rather than as an endogenous movement founded by NGOs from countries in the South. The uncritical attitude of NGOs – and of progressive intellectuals as a whole – is a well-known phenomenon of the era. Heavy reliance on international and national funding, and their growing role as consultants, service providers and implementers of government social policies and compensatory programmes, have placed NGOs in a difficult position as the “ham in the sandwich”, causing them to lose much of their autonomy and to become reactive rather than proactive. Furthermore, activism and focus on local concerns and projects have meant that many national NGOs have remained on the fringes of the national and international issues and forums that decide on the policies and guidelines that eventually govern their own activities at local community level.

Between Jomtien and Dakar, not only were goals not fully met, but the original ideas of EFA also stood still. Despite the weaknesses to be found in the Jomtien documents, they had the potential and power to inspire a renewal of education at many levels and in many ways. The “broad vision” of *basic education* espoused in Jomtien remains indeed as a current challenge, to be developed in theory and delivered in practice in the coming years. One decade on, Dakar does not pretend to elaborate or offer anything new: it presents itself as a Jomtien+10, that is, as a staging post between the evaluation of a decade of EFA and its extension for another 15 years.

The 1990s initiated a new historical era¹⁰, the world changed fundamentally over the past decade, but this is not reflected in the Dakar documents. The “poverty alleviation” discourse continues to be repeated over and over again, while in this very decade we reached a point where we need to ask ourselves whether the problem is to improve education in order to alleviate poverty or rather to alleviate poverty in order to improve education and, moreover, to make education and learning possible. Trust is still placed in economic growth as the solution to social inequity, while what was reaffirmed in this decade is that growth is not enough, that the distribution of income remains unchanged and wealth is becoming ever more concentrated in a few hands.

¹⁰ See: Eric Hobsbawn, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World 1914-1991*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1994.

The reiteration of Jomtien's vision and goals, and the postponement of the target date, assume that failure and potential success can be explained in terms of a linear axis between more and less, that what is needed is not to rethink the diagnosis, objectives and strategies, but more of the same: more time (15 more years), more money (new loans and donations, and better use of existing resources), more commitment, and more action.¹¹ Once again, there is no consideration or criticism of the major changes that need to be introduced at local, national and global level to the ways of thinking about and confronting education policy, education reform and international cooperation in this field.

Where is the new theoretical and practical knowledge about education that was acquired in the course of the decade? What was learnt at global, regional, national and local level, from the attempt to translate the ideas of EFA into policies, programmes, projects and action plans? What should have been done differently, at all levels? Neither the national and regional reports, nor the global EFA report contain substantial answers to these questions. In fact, the global end-of-decade assessment was largely quantitative (the 18 indicators) and unilateral (international agencies requesting evaluation by governments without evaluating their own performance). In comparison with 1990, there is no doubt that we now have more refined statistics which would allow the magnitude of the problems to be better understood, but neither the Declaration nor the Framework for Action suggests that ten years of practical application of EFA have led to any better understanding of the nature of these problems or of suitable ways of dealing with them. The only international EFA partner that worked out and published its "lessons learnt" during the decade was the World Bank. Such lessons, however, show the Bank as a slow learner, only just grasping what has been known in theory and through painful practical experience -- often assisted by the same World Bank and by other donors -- in most poor countries in the South for many years.¹²

Perhaps the greatest difference between Jomtien and Dakar is the very deep erosion of the collective confidence and credence placed in the usefulness and effectiveness of international conferences, agreements and commitments. The continued postponement of deadlines for the same repeated objectives and goals has made them to be perceived as

¹¹ Throughout the Forum the need for less rhetoric and more action was stressed "As we look forward, we want to put emphasis on action. We do not need any more global talk shops. We need action on the ground -- country by country by country," the Canadian Minister of International Cooperation, Maria Minna, stated at the final plenary by way of conclusion. She was reading her report on behalf of the following bilateral donors: Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States.

¹² The eight "lessons learnt" by the World Bank in the 1990s in the context of Education for All are as follows: "1. Strong political commitment is the cornerstone of success; 2. Quality is as important as quantity; 3. Governments cannot deliver on EFA alone, partnerships are key; 4. Countries make better progress when they have developed sector policy frameworks; 5. Inefficient utilization of education resources constrains progress; 6. Education must adapt quickly to new economic, technological and social challenges; 7. Education must be cushioned during crises; 8. Educational expansion needs to be supported by a growing economy". In: World Bank, *Education for All: From Jomtien to Dakar and Beyond*. Paper prepared by the World Bank for the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal (April 26-28, 2000). Washington, D.C., 2000.

commonplaces – *eradication of illiteracy, universal primary education, free and compulsory education, basic education, leading role of teachers, quality improvement, gender equality, alleviation of poverty* - towards which there is little progress, at least as measured by the conventional indicators and mechanisms with which education continues to be evaluated.

After Dakar, What Next?

It has repeatedly been said of EFA that it began and remained an eminently "donor-driven" initiative. One of the key "lessons learnt" by international EFA partners during the 1990s is that the mechanisms for implementing and monitoring EFA were not sufficiently clearly defined in Jomtien, and that implementation and monitoring did not gravitate at the country level. This time, the Framework for Action agreed in Dakar defines better the roles and mechanisms at the various levels, and reaffirms that "the heart" of the action must lie at the national level. However, it was clear from the Dakar Forum itself that it will take a great effort for the international organizations to go beyond rhetoric and good intentions, to give up their roles as protagonists and to abide by the lessons that they themselves have learnt.

In the new Framework for Action adopted, countries undertake by 2002 to draw up, or revise, National Plans for EFA to meet the six goals agreed. As in Jomtien, but more explicitly, there is an emphasis on the need for participatory mechanisms and processes within each country in order to design, implement and monitor these National Plans.

"The heart of EFA activity lies at the country level. National EFA Forums will be strengthened or established to support the achievement of EFA. All relevant ministries and national civil society organizations will be systematically represented in these Forums. They should be transparent and democratic and should constitute a framework for implementation at sub-national levels."¹³

National delegations left Dakar with the task of organizing, in the immediate future, National EFA Forums and drawing up – in a participatory manner – National EFA Plans by 2002. The lack of conviction and enthusiasm with which many of those present took on this task may be well understood. It is to be expected that some will not see the sense of the exercise and will go about it like schoolchildren passing on the task to their fathers or mothers (that is, engaging consultants to produce a document) or will do it simply in order to please teacher. It is even to be expected that some will not carry out the task at all.¹⁴

¹³ In: *The Dakar Framework for Action*, Education for All: Meeting our Collective Commitments, final draft, Dakar, 28 April 2000.

¹⁴ National Action Plans were often abused in the 1990s. There were governments which prepared two, three or more in the course of the decade due to changes of administration or in response to the demands of different international agencies.

In this respect, it is necessary to keep in mind that the Dakar Forum – and the Jomtien Conference, in its day – may have marked a BEFORE and AFTER for international agencies, but not necessarily for countries.

Firstly, countries move in real time and real situations. Governments, unlike international agencies, are elected by popular votes and are turned out if they fail to fulfill people's expectations. They are guided by time frames that do not coincide with the time frames and rhythms laid down and agreed, homogeneously, at the international level. Government signatories to the Dakar Declaration, like those who signed the Jomtien Declaration ten years earlier, belong to governments which may be outgoing, incoming or part way through their terms of office. Between 2000 and 2015, countries will experience at least three or four changes of government. And we know what that usually means. "Education as an affair of state rather than of government" remains more a catchphrase than a reality in most countries.

Secondly, *literacy, universal primary education, quality, efficiency, equity and gender equality in education* are national and international goals which in many cases go back to the 1950s and '60s. In the 1990s, the vast majority of countries developed education plans and reforms to promote basic education in line with the goals set at Jomtien. Dakar essentially means updating or reorienting these plans, and giving them an extra 15 years.

One lesson which should have been firmly learnt in the 1990s is that education reform is not a technocratic top-down enterprise, either at the international or at the national level. Developing and changing education and education systems require the understanding, commitment and active participation of those directly involved and of the population at large: teachers, parents, learners, the academic community, NGOs, private enterprise and the churches. No international agency or declaration can ensure that real governments and citizens will develop the will, or that plans will be carried through. This is an internal matter for each country, a political and sovereign fight in the collective effort to build a democratic state and an informed citizenry able to participate, to be watchful, to demand and to contribute at the same time.

Education for All 1990-2000 was essentially a top-down movement planned, conducted and evaluated by international and national political and technocratic elites, with scant information or encouragement to participate given to citizens, even to teachers and education researchers and specialists. National EFA plans were usually government plans, drawn up and discussed behind closed doors by national and international functionaries. The global, regional and national meetings to monitor EFA were meetings attended by a few familiar faces. Few people knew about the work done by the EFA Forum – the international body monitoring EFA, the secretariat of which was located in the offices of UNESCO, in Paris – or about the composition of its Steering Committee, its meetings and decisions.¹⁵ The end-of-decade EFA assessment was, for many people, a

¹⁵ There is an evaluation of the EFA Forum, commissioned by the EFA Forum at the end of 1999 as part of the global EFA 2000 assessment (see: A. Little and E. Miller, *The International Consultative Forum on Education for All 1990-2000: An Evaluation*. A Report to the EFA Forum Steering Committee, Paris, UNESCO, EFA Forum Secretariat, 2000).

reminder that there was something called *Education for All*, which was being evaluated by others and which was already coming to a close.

The next 15 years must not be a repeat of this story. It is not possible to separate *thought* (top) from *action* (bottom), either in the relationship between international agencies and national governments or in that between national/local governments and national/local societies. Accepting this distinction means accepting that there are some who plan and others who are restricted to implementation, that the investigation and analysis are already done and that all that is left is converting them into Action Plans. Doing things well means *thinking and acting at all levels*. Discussing the diagnosis and the strategies adopted at a macro level, and making suggestions as to the “what” and “how” for each specific context, are tasks for the National EFA Forums and for civil society as a whole.

This time it should not be possible to arrive at the year 2015 and complain about lack of achievement. Participation is built in as a prerequisite and as a channel open to all, and for that to take place information and evaluation will have to be transparent, flowing in both directions between the local and the global. In 1990, information and communication were undertakings requiring considerable time and money, tons of paper, distribution of materials, organization of meetings, travel and delays; today we can also use electronic mail and the Internet. No one should arrive at 2015 and unload on to others responsibility for what has not been done, done badly or only half done. It is the responsibility of ALL – the national and the international community, from the local to the global – to ensure that Education for All becomes a reality.

Fifteen years seem a long time, but ten also seemed a long time when governments and the international community made a commitment in Jomtien to attain six goals by the year 2000. Just as happened with the Jomtien Declaration and Framework for Action, it will soon be “realized” that the goals set in Dakar are too ambitious for the resources and time available. Hence the need for realistic and flexible national plans that are constantly revised and updated, in which governments and national societies examine their capabilities and jointly draw up, and make a commitment to achieving, plans for EFA, setting goals and intermediate deadlines which can serve as plausible objectives and achievements that help smooth the way. An action plan is more than an expression of intent, a list of objectives and goals to which indicators of success and statistics of achievement are tacked on: it implies establishing – and creating on the move – the conditions and requirements, strategies, methods, partnerships, and human and financial resources needed to reach those objectives and goals. In the field of education there is no longer space for rhetoric, for goals without strategies or budgets, or for unreal and non-committal declarations.

There is no worse plan than one that cannot be implemented. There is no worse commitment than one which cannot be achieved. This time we have to be serious. The year 2015 must not be a Jomtien+10+15, to which more and more extra time is given. Because there will simply be no more time. In the next 15 years we have the chance to raise education from its present state, or to let it collapse finally.
