

*Mr. President,*

I join the delegations that have preceded me, in congratulating you and your colleagues in ECOSOC on this most important initiative, as well as for the excellent manner in which you have been guiding our deliberations. The theme of this high level segment – The Contribution of Human Resources Development...to the Process of Development – is one that has engaged thinking on development for a very long time. From the work of academics on human capital, particularly the Chicago School, some decades ago, to the increasingly strong advocacy of the United Nations and its specialized agencies, particularly UNESCO, UNICEF, ILO and in recent times, UNDP, the message has been the same: without a strong human resource base in any society, development will never take root or be internalized.

The veracity of this message has been borne out time and again by the performance of human development indicators in the developing world: high literacy rates, high ratios of middle and high level skilled people in the economy, high rates of labour productivity, high rates of coverage and access in the health sector, and so on, have correlated positively with high rates of economic growth and socio-economic development. In those countries where these indicators have performed badly, development has remained elusive. This unfortunately has been the case in most parts of the developing world.

The conclusion can only be, that unless countries in the developing world are able to raise educational levels within their societies and shield their people from debilitating health conditions, all other things being equal, and their chances of hauling themselves out of poverty will remain slim. And if this truly is the case, then it becomes easy to see that if we are not able to develop the human resources in the developing countries, it will be impossible to attain the millennium development goals, particularly the goals set for poverty reduction by 2015.

Mr. President, I say “we”, because in this increasingly small global village, most of what can be achieved by developing countries depends on the goodwill and support they receive from their development partners in the international community. This has always been the case for as long as world development became the central concern of the international community. And we all welcome this partnership between the weak and the strong. Therefore, the onus is on all of us, both in the developing and in the developed countries to foster genuine and equal partnerships at all levels but more especially south/south cooperation should be greatly enhanced.

We must seek innovative and effective ways of decreasing illiteracy worldwide and increasing knowledge and skills among the deprived populations of the world. This is an essential requirement for raising productivity levels among those groups and for unleashing their potential for self-actualization and development. Non-formal education and distance learning programmes are most cost-effective ways of quickly increasing access. Literacy campaigns, which were once popular in the developing world, should be accorded the prominence they once had as a means of rapidly reaching out to large numbers of illiterate people in a short period of time. Above all there is an urgent need for the preparation of a significant numbers of teachers, tutors, instructors, and a host of change agents to catalyse the transformations required among the poor in the developing countries. This calls for strong political will among the Governments concerned directly, but also appreciable levels of support from their international partners. Here I must quickly admit that the proposed international Open University hold much promise and should therefore be given all the necessary support particularly by the UN and donor community.

*Mr. President,*

It is true that traditionally there has been a strong partnership between developing and developed countries in the area of human resources development. This partnership has usually come in the form of financial and material support and through technical cooperation, although in recent times, it has also been prominent in the form of policy advice, and more lately by way of outright conditionalities. It was in this way that African Governments were forced to divest from higher education. A condition for qualifying for World Bank assistance in the education sector was for African countries to divert resources from higher education and channel them instead towards primary and basic education. The justification was that the social rates of return began diminishing the further the African moved upwards from the primary level of education. Therefore it was more productive for African countries to invest the meager resources at their disposal in more primary and basic education.

African Governments protested that in the matter of providing education to their people, it was not a question of either primary or secondary, or indeed higher education. Their preoccupation instead was to ensure that as many young people as possible benefited from primary and secondary and higher education. Needless to say, with the tremendous pressures that come along with World Bank and IMF conditionalities, they lost the battle, and higher education in Africa virtually went under. To this day, many countries have not been able to recover from that onslaught on African higher education. Some of our finest institutions have thus almost been destroyed, thanks to the imposition of bad policies from partners who, in the first place, came out professing to help us. What we received from them was the kiss of death!

The lesson is a simple one: Policy makers in the developing countries may be poor, but they are not unintelligent. Genuine assistance in areas that are as critical to the survival of society as are human resources must be guided by the knowledge and collective aspirations of the indigenous people and their chosen policy makers. The new partnership must be based on a new attitude and a new disposition, otherwise, international actions in development support will be doomed to failure and would have been too costly. In the particular example which I just cited, apart from the all round negative effects on the African economy and society, what else is there to show for all the millions of dollars that were poured into the implementation of these bad policies?

The same is true for the effort to help us increase the quality and relevance of the education we provide to our young. In Africa, every once on a while, well-meaning partners come along to tell us how to increase relevance and achieve greater effectiveness in our education system. We dutifully comply in spite of protestations from our own experts. Years after this new system has been entrenched, we begin to realize that it has in fact taken away from the strengths of the previous one, and that it is a poor substitute to what we had before. We then go back to the drawing board to try to revamp it. At the end of it all, we come to realize that the changed curriculum has not helped us in any meaningful way to provide an education of high quality and relevance to our young, neither has it prepared them sufficiently for the higher levels of education to which they aspire. From all angles, we are the net losers.

*Mr. President,*

Let me turn, very briefly to the question of health that is the second pillar for human resources development.

Some of the greatest challenges to human resources development are found in the area of health. Pervasive conditions of poverty throughout the African continent compound the poor status of health in the majority of the countries. Services are inadequate, not well distributed among the various population groups, or too expensive for the average man. The dearth of well-trained health manpower imposes additional constraints on efforts to improve on the situation. Many African countries have striven to address this problem by embarking on intensive - and expensive - programmes of training of doctors, nurses and other paramedical personnel. Alas, lacking the conducive working conditions to retain them in their labour markets, they promptly lose them to other regions of the world through the brain drain. This is an aspect of the problem that deserves to be addressed in a determined and special way.

The majority of Africans have no access to modern health services and facilities. And as economic conditions worsen from year to year and as services consequently get more elusive to the ordinary man, more and more Africans find themselves resorting to traditional health systems. It is these systems that provide maternal and childcare and much of the curative services to many, especially in the rural areas. It would be a realistic approach if efforts were made to increase the effectiveness of these services by intervening to strengthen them and raise their delivery capacity. In some countries, efforts are under way to work with traditional birth attendants and herbalists to get them to deliver safer and better services to their clients. Partnerships in human resources development should support such efforts and assist in helping to have them replicated in as many countries on the continent as possible.

Finally, Mr. President, while commending the Secretary-General for producing this high quality report on this important subject, my delegation wishes to express the hope that this time, through the relentless efforts of ECOSOC and the UN in general, we shall be made to cross the Rubicon and move from words into concrete action, such that ten years hence, we shall all look back with satisfaction and say,

“At last, we have done it”.

I thank you for your attention.