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*RIGHT TO KNOWLEDGE AND HUMAN
DEVELOPMENT IN ASIA*

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§ 1 INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

As a Latin maxim goes, *scientia potentia est* - knowledge is power. This old maxim, probably a paraphrase of the passage from Proverbs — “Being wise is better than being strong; yes, knowledge is more important than strength.”(*Pr* 24: 5) — implies that knowledge empowers human in terms of self-esteem, economic independence and social advancement, thereby elevating the dignity of human “being”. Hence, the Analects of Confucius begins with emphasizing the importance of acquiring knowledge: “To learn and to practice what is learned time and again is pleasure, is it not?”¹

Needless to say, right to knowledge is fundamental to achieving other human rights and education is the key to promoting right to knowledge. Right to knowledge and right to education are both sides of the same coin. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights clearly affirms that the right to education is a basic human right. In fact, Article 26 declares: “Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory.”

The Catholic Church goes further by underlining right to education as a natural right:

Human has the natural right to share in the benefits of culture, and hence to receive a good general education, and a technical or professional training consistent with the degree of educational development in his own country. Furthermore, a system must be devised for affording gifted members of society the opportunity of engaging in more advanced studies, with a view to their occupying, as far as possible, positions of responsibility in society in keeping with their natural talent and acquired skill.²

Thus, right to knowledge and education constitutes a basic element of human development. And it presupposes “right to freedom in investigating the truth, and — within the limits of the moral order and the common good — to freedom of speech and publication, and to freedom to pursue whatever profession he may choose. He has the right, also, to be accurately informed about public events.”³

Education is a crucial human development goal in its own right and a key to progress in other areas. In fact, education can bring forth and has brought forth social as well as private

1 Confucius, *The Analects*, I, 1.

2 John XXIII, Encyclical Letter *Pacem in Terris*, 13.

3 *Ibid.*, 12.

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benefits. Empirical research has demonstrated that education can make and has made important contributions to economic growth by (1) enhancing the human capital; (2) creating employment opportunities in education-related industries; (3) providing educated leaders of society; and (4) providing a basic knowledge and literacy and skills while promoting a cultural transformation in society.

Such effects of education have been evidenced by remarkable postwar economic growth of such Asian countries as Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. These countries are renowned for their respective people's extraordinary educational desire and excellent educational system commensurate therewith through all levels, which in turn produces a population of almost universally literate and capable citizens. (See Table 1 and Table 4) Examples of these countries demonstrate that education, indeed, makes all the difference.

Economic growth depends on human development, the goal to which it aspires. Therefore, "basic education is the first objective for any nation seeking to develop itself. Lack of education is as serious as lack of food; the illiterate is a starved spirit. When someone learns how to read and write, he is equipped to do a job and to shoulder a profession, to develop self-confidence and realize that he can progress along with others. Literacy is the first and most basic tool for personal enrichment and social integration; and it is society's most valuable tool for furthering development and economic progress."⁴

In addition to basic education, higher education is required to prepare for a humanly fulfilling career in the world of today. To keep up with the most demanding high-technology climate in this phase of history, the qualifications required of those who work are higher than ever before. Thus, quality education at all levels has become a necessity for any person or nation that does not want to remain on the sidelines of social and economic progress.

Education in Asia takes on a particular importance for the fate of humanity, in view of the fact that Asia accounts for nearly two-thirds of the world's population. Asia is a continent of sheer contrasts. While there has been enormous economic and technological progress, there still persist situations of extreme poverty and injustice. Most of the developing countries in Asia are evaluated as least democratic.⁵ About 1.9 billion people, or 60 % of developing

4 Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Populorum Progressio*, 35.

5 Cf. World Audit, *World Democracy Table*, March 2008.

Asia’s population, still live on less than US\$ 2 a day.⁶ Most of the countries in Asia rank low in terms of human development, and “highly corrupt” in terms of the Corruption Perceptions Index score.⁷

6 Asian Development Bank, *Key Indicators 2004: Poverty in Asia: Measurement, Estimates, and Prospects*.

7 Transparency International, *2007 Corruption Perceptions Index*.

§2 A BALANCE SHEET

§2.1 BASIC EDUCATION

The attempt to provide primary school educational opportunities has largely been the most significant of development efforts of the countries in Asia. In most countries, education takes the largest share of the government budget.(See Table 1) Yet despite some remarkable quantitative advances in school enrolments, large numbers of people still remain illiterate, not to mention even larger numbers of functionally illiterate. In fact, of the world's 799 million illiterate adults for 2000-2004, representing 18% of the world's adult population, 98.7% inhabit in developing countries and 60.2% live in five Asian countries such as India (33.8%), China (11.2%), Bangladesh (6.5%), Pakistan (6.4%), and Indonesia (2.3%).⁸

In an increasingly knowledge-based global economy, about 99 million children are still denied even the most basic primary education in 2002.⁹ Most of the children who are not enrolled in school are in Sub-Saharan Africa (40 million) and South Asia (30 million). Compounding this, primary school completion rates are low. For example, these rates are in the range from 60-75% in South Asia: 61% in Nepal, 65% in Bangladesh, 70% respectively in Pakistan and Myanmar, 73% in India, 75% in the Philippines.¹⁰ School life expectancy, closely linked with such rates, is 9.9 years in developing countries, 11.2 years in East Asia and the Pacific, and 9.1 years in South and West Asia, whereas 16.1 years in developed countries in 2002. (See Table 2) On average, a child born in East Asia and the Pacific today can anticipate 11.2 years of formal education, while one born in North America or Western Europe will receive 16.4 years at vastly higher provision. Average schooling in South and West Asia, at 9.1 years, is less than two-thirds (61.4%) of the level in developed countries (16.1 years).

§2.2 HIGHER EDUCATION

The number of students in tertiary education worldwide has continued to increase rapidly, from 90 million in 1998 to 121 million in 2002, an average of more than 7% per year. Such an increase is in great part due to the increase registered by the developing countries, which, on

8 UNESCO, *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2005*, 131.

9 UNESCO, *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2006*, 46.

10 UNDP, *Human Development Report 2007/2008*, 270-271.

average, more than doubled the growth rates for tertiary education observed in developed countries. China's growth by 24% annually from 6.4 million students in 1998 to 15.2 million in 2002 accounts for one-third of the global increase.¹¹

However, tertiary education enrolment gap still remains wide between developed and developing countries. In fact, the median tertiary enrolment ratio is 58% among the former and 13% among the latter. Tertiary enrolment ratios of China and India are 16% and 12%, respectively. With a few exception, high-income countries achieve ratios of 50% or more, as do a few developed countries in East Asia such as Korea (85%) and Japan (51%).¹²

11 UNESCO, *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2006*, Statistical Annex, Table 9A.

12 *Loc. cit.*

§3 SOME URGENT PROBLEMS

§3.1 GENDER INEQUALITIES

Gender inequalities in educational opportunities remain large. Women account for 64% of the illiterate adults, virtually unchanged from 63% in 1990.¹³ The rate in East Asia and the Pacific (71%) is higher than the world average and that in South and West Asia (64%) is equivalent to the world average.¹⁴ Female accounts for 55% of the children who are not enrolled in school in the world; 97% of them are in developing countries; 32% in South and West Asia; 14% in East Asia and the Pacific. (See Table 3) Girls receive considerably less education than boys in developing countries. School life expectancy for female children in developing countries is 0.9 year lower, 1.3 years lower in South and West Asia. Reverse is the case in developed countries: school life expectancy for female children there is 1.4 years higher. (See Table 2)

In 2005, women's enrolment in primary education was lower than that of men by at least 6 percentage points in developing countries and lower by 7 percentage points in South Asia. In developing countries, on average, primary school completion rates are 75% for girls but rise to 85% for boys.¹⁵ The situation would not be better in developing Asia. Gender inequalities are even wider at the secondary and tertiary levels. (See Table 4) This fact is in sharp contrast with the situation in high-income countries where the gender inequalities favor women over men.

Wide gender inequalities constitute not just a violation of the universal right to education but also a threat to future human development prospects: female education is one of the most powerful catalysts for human development across a wide range of aspects.

§3.2 CHILD LABOR

Child labor is a serious problem widespread in developing countries. It is estimated that 191 million children aged 5-14 years — 16% of the world's total child population— are

13 UNESCO, *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2006*, 67.

14 UNESCO, *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2005*, 129.

15 UNDP, *Human Development Report 2005*, 25.

involved in some kind of economic activity in 2004.¹⁶ 64% of the 191 million working children, or 122 million, live in Asia and the Pacific, while 26%, or 49 million, live in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Child labor is associated with poverty, which in turn leads to hinder children's right to education. In fact, child labor is negatively correlated with school attendance rates.¹⁷ When children under age 14 work, in most cases, they are forced to drop out of their schooling. In addition, the health of working children is significantly threatened. Besides, a large fraction of them are subject to exploitative working condition. Thus, vicious cycle persists between poverty and inadequate education.

§3.3 INCOME INEQUALITIES

Recent studies show that the educational systems of many developing countries sometimes act to increase rather than to decrease inequalities, quite contrary to the popular assumptions and expectations.¹⁸ The basic reason for such an inegalitarian effect of formal education on income distribution is the positive correlation between level of education and level of lifetime earnings. As level of earned income is dependent on years of completed formal education, it follows that income gap between rich and poor will widen, if for financial or other reasons the poor are effectively denied access to higher educational opportunities. Thus the educational system can actually perpetuate and even increase inequality in developing countries. Such an inegalitarian nature is compounded even further, where the institutions of higher education are subsidized by the government. In this case, government subsidy from public funds amounts to a transfer payment from the poor to the rich. Such may be the case in most of the developing countries in Asia as well as in the world, where tertiary enrolment ratios are extremely low, and that registered mostly by the students from middle- and upper-income brackets.

16 Frank Hagemann, et al., *Global child labour trends 2000-2004* (Geneva: ILO, 2006), Table 2.

17 Federico Blanco Allais and Frank Hagemann, *Child labour and education: Evidence from SIMPOC surveys* (Geneva: ILO, 2008), 4.

18 Cf. Michael P. Todaro and Stephen C. Smith, *Economic Development*, 9th Ed. (Essex: Pearson Education, 2006), 388-390.

**§3.4 VICIOUS CYCLE BETWEEN INADEQUATE EDUCATION
AND POVERTY**

It follows from this that educational inequalities turn into social and economic inequalities, and *vice versa*. Such a corollary can be verified in the international dimension as well. In fact, developing countries are lacking in a minimum level of knowledge and financial resources to benefit from technological progress. Hence, inequalities between countries regarding access to technical and scientific knowledge and to the most recent products of technology ends up, in the process of globalization, increasing rather than decreasing the inequalities between countries in terms of economic and social development.

§3.5 NOT QUANTITY ALONE, BUT QUALITY

What matters for human development is not merely the quantity but also the quality of education. In many developing countries an enormous gap exists between the numbers graduating from schools and those among them who have managed to master a minimum set of knowledge. The fact is that the schools accessible to the poor are under-resourced and inadequate. Poor facilities, over-sized classes, and lack of trained teachers lead to low standards of education. In these circumstances, given the demonstrable positive correlation that exists between cognitive achievement and many of the benefits of basic education, schooling does not benefit a large proportion of those who attend.

§4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

None of the afore-mentioned problems can be solved without the collaboration of all — especially the international community — in the framework of solidarity. Greater educational aid, technical as well as financial, must be offered to the needy countries. The developing nations in Asia themselves also have the duty to practice solidarity among themselves and with the neediest countries.

It cannot be overemphasized in Asia where a knowledge-based economic growth has been pursued with priority given to enhancing technical and scientific knowledge that education should not merely be cognition-oriented, but also, and more importantly, value-oriented for the sake of ensuring a more human life for one’s self and all others. Education should address itself to “change the spiritual attitudes which define each individual’s relationship with self, with neighbor, with even the remotest human communities, and with nature itself; and all of this in view of higher values such as the common good or the full development of the whole individual and of all people.”¹⁹

In fact, knowledge should be oriented toward a common good as well as an individual good. The Italian word for ‘to know’, i.e., ‘conoscere’, derived from compounding the two Latin words, “cum(together)+noscere(to know)”, properly represents this aspect of knowledge. Knowledge, thus, implies solidarity with others for the sake of the good of society as a whole. Knowledge is action-oriented²⁰— an action directed toward the common good on the basis of “true humanism”.²¹ The Confucian tradition also emphasizes that acquiring knowledge should be based on proper values. The Analects puts it this way: “Learning without thinking is fruitless. Thinking without learning is dangerous.”²² Likewise, technical and scientific knowledge without the basis of human values “can cause as much harm to the world of tomorrow as liberalism did to the world of yesteryear. Economics and technology are meaningless if they do not benefit man, for it is he they are to serve.”²³

19 John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 37.

20 Confucius emphasizes the importance not only of acquiring knowledge but also of practicing it. Cf. *The Analects*, I, 1.

21 Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Populorum Progressio*, 42.

22 *The Analects*, II, 15.

23 Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Populorum Progressio*, 34.