

Time to WISE up

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Comment

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So the audience at the inaugural World Innovation Summit for Education (WISE) were informed when the event opened in Doha, Qatar last week.

Imagine how many educational opportunities -- which are badly needed in Afghanistan -- have been squandered on soldiers. Till today, there is no end in sight to this crisis. One delegate suggests that a "teaching" force -- rather than an "invading" one -- is more effective to win the hearts and minds of the people.

In one session at the summit, education was said to be "under attack" by the state and non-state alike to disrupt and deter educational provision.

Such attacks are directed against learners, educators and educational institutions of all levels. They include targeted killings, disappearance, abduction, forced exile, imprisonment, torture, maiming, rape by soldiers and security forces, recruitment of child soldiers, and occupation and destruction of educational buildings, as spelt out in a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) brochure entitled Protecting Education from Attack.

A book with the same title -- subtitled A State-Of-The-Art Review -- will soon be launched.

A similarly titled seminar held in Paris, from Sept 28 to Oct 1, was apparently the groundbreaking event that raised global awareness of this long-standing predicament.

As a result, the commitment is to reduce the incidence of education-related attacks and end impunity, critical to the safety and development of individuals and communities affected by conflict and insecurity.

Often, deprivation of education is deemed a form of violence which eventually destroys a person's future. Even more so for those who have missed their basic education, which is a springboard to progress.

According to UNESCO director general Ms Irina Bokova (who succeeded Mr Koichiro Matsuura), there can be as many as 75 million boys and girls who are out of schools; and a staggering 800 million, if adults were to be included.

WISE, which involves more than 1,000 leading education stakeholders from 120 countries, is poised to offer some solutions by leveraging innovation and sustainability as strategies to move forward.

It envisages visionary thinking on education while anticipating future academic models. WISE looks set to initiate an overdue progress of change immediately.

The chairperson of Qatar Foundation Sheikha Mozah Nasser Al-Missned, as a patron of WISE, emphasised the need for "innovation in order to develop thoughts, create opportunities and come up with practical solutions that link educational solutions to the requirements of sustainable development".

Innovation in education should not be confined to technical know-how to meet market and consumption demands only.

It is imperative that innovation encompasses socio-cultural development that stems from minds as the seat of intellectual education to shape human destiny and protect dignity.

This change, therefore, is from the "inside"; beginning with the thought process, mindset and ultimately the individual. In other words, WISE is a change agent from the outset.

There cannot be anything more pressing than that, as speaker after speaker agree on the notion that education is facing an imminent crisis and is in need of an urgent transformation.

A case in point is the slow progress in meeting global educational goals and agenda, as well as the daunting task of ensuring that solutions provided are innovative and sustainable.

All too often what is done is a "timid circumstantial reaction responding to the reports of research and development centres, superficial and temporary solutions which fade away rapidly," observed Sheikha Mozah.

Bokova threw a challenge. "What does it take for change to run deeply through education systems and make innovations sustainable? The starting point is unflinching political will -- the recognition that education is central to human, social and economic development."

Ultimately, it is about our commitment to the future and the succeeding generations, and giving space for the new educational model to emerge. It is about challenging old assumptions and redefining them from the failing consumption model.

The "cut and paste" educational reforms and standards are no longer adequate. Countries in the Gulf region have seen many "unhappy" consequences, often due to imported models being imposed on them without due regard for the steep cultural differences.

It is not surprising they failed to provide solutions to problems for a different group of people in an innovative and sustainable way!

The time has come to wise up, and WISE is a sobering platform towards this.

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