

## Education and Millennium Goals

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Comment

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IF there were doubts that Malaysia was not putting a premium on education, the 17th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (17CCEM) dismissed them.

So, too, would be the case for the Commonwealth in general. The conference ended on an optimistically high note.

Given the theme, "Education in the Commonwealth: Towards and beyond global goals and targets", it is not surprising that many have chosen the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as their reference points.

We have barely another five years to see the successful completion of the MDGs. And unless this is persuasively achieved, there is no "beyond" to talk about.

The prime minister's call to the ministers to establish an expert working group to help member countries reach the goals is what the last MDGs target is about: develop global partnership for development.

To be sure, there are eight goals in the MDGs agreed upon by the 192 United Nations member states.

These include eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality and empowering women, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensuring environmental sustainability, and developing global partnership for development.

To end poverty and hunger, for example, is to "reduce by half the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day", which now stands at more than a billion.

Meeting these goals is a daunting task. The progress thus far has been uneven, although some are doing better than others. In other words, there is a lot of work to be done.

And it goes without saying that the economic crisis is having tremendous impact on the current achievement of MDGs, especially in terms of education which Datuk Seri Najib Razak described as being a "panacea for strengthening competitiveness, employment and social cohesion".

Still, it is easy to under-invest in education because the impact will not be immediately felt, unlike other sectors involving health or food.

In reality, not many education systems, including higher education, are realigned to meet the MDGs. Sadder still, most education institutions are not even familiar with the goals, its targets and what they stand for.

A casual survey noted that a mere one per cent of institutions of higher learning are directly involved in the MDGs.

Meaning to say, most are detached from this major global agenda despite the pronouncement that we are living in a global village.

Education, which is often touted as the leveller of society, has failed miserably to live up to this expectation.

Instead, it is at risk of being hijacked by market forces that will likely cause even greater disparity among communities and societies.

Hence, when education ministers talked about bridging the rural-urban divide, and the role of governments to ensure a more equitable distribution and mobilisation of resources, one can almost feel the counter-force that must be exerted as long as the marketplace is not properly reined in.

At the rate education is expanding, this will not be easy unless there is enough political will. The fact remains that there are more divides in education today than there were before. And some are growing rapidly.

Hence, it is not enough to consider education only in terms of efficiency, effectiveness and efficacy without adding to it the 4As -- accessibility, availability, affordability and appropriateness.

It is when all these are factored together that quality is meaningful because it lends support to equity as well. This will ensure that gaps are narrowed and closed as much as possible, gradually eliminating the divides.

It is in this context that education will be the leveller of society since it has greater harnessing capacity and highly innovative striving for excellence.

In short, as we look beyond global goals and targets as stipulated by the MDGs, for instance, we must be innovative enough to imagine that another world is possible and that must necessarily be propelled by a new and bold education that is itself innovative and forward looking.

This is where today's system falls short in taking us up the value chain, one that nurtures humanity and human wellbeing as its ultimate goal.

It is, therefore, time to refocus and re-educate ourselves to the real purpose and goals of education. To take a leaf from the wisdom of Confucius, "learning is about being and not having". Invariably MDGs is a good place to start as far as "being" is concerned worldwide.

This is one clear take-home message from the 17CCEM.

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