

## **"EDUCATION FOR ALL": FOURTEEN YEARS LATER**

**Interview with Rosa-María Torres**

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### **1. Four years have passed since the World Education Forum took place in Dakar. How different is the process of implementation of the Education for All (EFA) initiative post-Dakar compared to the 1990 post-Jomtien period?**

**RMT:** In and after Jomtien there were great expectations, enthusiasm. Fourteen years later the expectations and enthusiasm have vanished. There is deterioration, generalized scepticism. Plans are reiterated and multiplied, the deadlines stretch, the commitments and the goals are not fulfilled. The situation of education in "developing countries" is not better today than it was 14 years earlier; it is worse. Among others because the world is worse: the situation of our countries, of the people, especially of the poor, who are more and poorer, a situation that perpetuates and that, while becoming transgenerational, can end up becoming irreversible.

Neither the "alleviation of poverty" nor the "improvement of the quality of the education" reached the poor, that is, the majority of the world population. The external debt becomes eternal and the initiatives and plans for the education mushroom, in an uncoordinated and chaotic manner. In 1990, Education for All (EFA) appeared in the firmament as a star. Today the firmament is full of "stars" competing with each other for visibility and leadership. In Latin America and the Caribbean there are at this point all sorts of initiatives: global (EFA, Millennium Development Goals), regional (PRELAC), hemispheric (Summits of the Americas), Iberoamerican (Iberoamerican Summits). This region is a labyrinth of international plans, where what is at stake is the hegemony and survival of the very international agencies and of "cooperation for development" as we know it.

### **2. How do you perceive the relationship between the agenda of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) that is gaining prominence, and the agenda of the Dakar Framework of Action?**

**RMT:** Clearly, the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) are today and will continue to be until the 2015 the dominant agenda in relation to "development" for countries in the periphery. Its power derives from several issues: the actors and resources behind the MDG are the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, OECD countries and the United Nations System; the goals are not sectoral but multisectoral, with an integral vision that is closer to the needs and possibilities of development, including education development. Poverty is not an "out-of-school" or an "out-of-education sector" issue nor an "associated factor" of student academic achievement; it is life in itself, a human condition, a fundamental factor conditioning survival, wellbeing, education and learning by children, young people and adults, families, local communities, cities, municipalities, nations.

The Dakar Framework of Action is Education for All - Second Stage (2000-2015). EFA first and second stage remains a sectoral initiative, where education is viewed sectorally and even scholarly. EDUCATION is understood as SCHOOL EDUCATION, thus reducing and re-sectoralizing the educational perspective precisely when there is a need to recognize its holistic

nature, the need to learn in and beyond the school system, throughout life. The "expanded vision of basic education" that was agreed upon in 1990, at the Jomtien Conference, was never really adopted: the six EFA goals were reduced fundamentally to one, "basic education" became "primary education", and "all" was translated as "children" and as "the poorest of the poor" (focalized and compensatory policies and programmes addressed to poverty with qualifications: "extreme poverty", "hard poverty", "structural poverty", etc.).

The EFA movement became bureaucratic, technocratic and rigid, operating through numerous committees and commissions, high-level meetings, reports, monitoring and follow-up processes, and so forth, an endless number of rituals known in the international world that end up disconnecting the ideas and the goals from the realities and human groups they are supposedly meant to serve and in whose name such rituals are set up in the first place. In Latin America, at most experts and bureaucrats of Ministries of Education know what "Education for All" is about. In this region, and from the start, EFA did not connect with people, has been kept suspended in high spheres, associated to high-level meetings, declarations and plans in paper, and to international agencies.

### **3. How do you evaluate the "Fast Track" Initiative in general, and in America Latin in particular? How do you evaluate the fact that UNESCO has incorporated the FTI in the EFA agenda?**

**RMT:** It is necessary to say in the first place that the Fast Track Initiative promoted by the World Bank takes the MDG education goals as reference (1. completion of four years of primary school, and 2. gender parity in primary and secondary education), not EFA goals (which are six, including education inside and outside the school system, initial education, and basic education for young people and adults). There is currently a tendency to speak of *basic education* and *primary education*, of EFA and MDG goals, as if they were the same thing, but not they are not.

UNESCO – as I see it – is trying to articulate EFA and MDG goals. This can lead either to the impoverishment of EFA (if it is reduced to primary education and to four year of schooling) or to the enrichment of EFA (if it leaves the narrow sectoral approach and adopts a wider frame of reference that includes social and economic policies, the North-South relationship, etc, that are part of MDG). Let us hope that the latter is takes place, that is: a Millennium Agenda expanded and enriched in its educational perspective, which is today extremely narrow. This requires social watch and proactivity from the actors and groups that can have some incidence in these developments at the national and international level.

*Fast Track* may be a fast route but it is a mistaken one. In other words, it may be a fast route towards failure. The short life of *Fast Track* already makes evident many of the difficulties that were foreseeable. The problem is that the World Bank does not learn, it does not learn the lessons that should derive from its own experience as financier and adviser of economic, social and educational policies in our countries. It has not learned what we, who work and do research in our own countries, know a long time ago: that the solution is not more (or even better) of the same, that the fundamental problem is not more money, that more international loans are no solution but an additional problem, that rhythm cannot be imposed from the outside, that any idea - to be valid and useful- must come from inside, that there are no universal prescriptions,

that "what works" and "what does not work" in general does not exist, that education is not so much a technical field but a social field... Financial organizations do not learn because learning goes against their own nature and mission: a bank must place loans and ideas, and its survival depends on their marketing, on the continued existence of a "client" ready to buy such ideas, loans, external assistance, etc., and of the permanent innovation of products and packaging, as is the case of any company forced to compete in the market today.

#### **4. How do you evaluate the action of civil society organizations -- NGOs, networks, unions, foundations, etc. -- in the Education for All initiative? In this context, which are the main contributions of the Latin American Statement for Education for All?**

**RMT:** In general, the reaction of civil societies in our countries is weak in relation to education issues. Among others because they have been historically deprived from access to information, knowledge, education, free expression and debate of ideas, and from the exercise of a culture of rights.

“Alternative” initiatives emerging from so-called “civil society” are generally small in scale, short-lived, without aspiration nor strategy to become genuinely “alterative” of the social and educational order. When they are institutionalized and expanded, they often develop similar vices to those of the international organizations: lots of projects, of meetings, of reports. In the last two decades there has been an important loss of intellectual production and of critical thinking-acting in general in relation to the world that surrounds us and the canned information and knowledge that we receive from outside. The recipe for education reform that was propagated worldwide in the 1990s, fundamentally by the World Bank, simplified and flattened educational thinking. “International cooperation” continues to be a taboo issue for social and political actors, because a great deal of the financial sustainability of “civil society” – that with greater national and international visibility – depends on such cooperation. The N of the NGOs is in trouble: the “non-governmental” character enters in conflict with the role many NGOs are playing as executors of state/government policies, and also because the autonomy with respect to national governments has been transformed into dependency from international agencies. The new social movements – such as the FZLN (*Frente Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*) in Mexico, the MST (*Movimento dos Sin Terra*) in Brazil, the *Piqueteros* in Argentina - appear in many countries as an important force for educational and pedagogical renovation, breaking barriers and stereotypes. We need more of that irreverence to challenge ankylosed institutions. Education is dying not only of abandonment but also of weariness, of boredom.

With respect to the Latin American Statement for Education for All, maybe its greater merit and contribution are: to be a Latin American initiative, born in the region (not outside); to be a self-managed initiative, that does not depend on external funds or assistance; and to be a pluralistic initiative, that does not attempt to represent a segment of the society but rather to agglutinate and to horizontalize relationships: State, civil society, political society, international agencies, educators, artists, economists, communicators, classroom teachers, academics, political and social activists, are here intermingled and interacting. All these must be seen as important conquests today, in a region and in a moment characterized by increased homogenization, hyperspecialization and fragmentation, loss of people’s identity and autonomy, and strong technical and financial dependency of international agencies. The Latin American Statement is the case of a document that became a process, a document that has been signed to

date by more than four thousand people from this and from other regions of the world, and that has its own virtual community through which we communicate daily nearly 700 people, thus keeping alive the memory and the commitment, the possibility of collaborating, the need for ongoing and collective learning. The web site is: <http://www.fronesis.org/prolat.htm>

**5. Do you think that Latin American governments have been influenced by the Dakar Framework of Action and by the general Education for All process?**

RMT: The real impact of the EFA on education policies in this region has been very low so far. Those who dictated the education policy in the 90s in this region were the World Bank and the InterAmerican Development Bank (IDB), and they continue to do so. "Education for All" is not even mentioned in WB documents and working tools. (EFA was not even mentioned in UNDP's last - 2003- Human Development Report, devoted to the Millennium Development Goals!). The technical missions and the economists of both banks, when they arrive in a "developing country", they meet with the President and the Minister of Finance; once the macroeconomic policy and the agreement with the IMF have been cooked, they meet with the ministers of the "social area". What is left for a Minister of Education to decide is marginal with respect to all the rest that is decided within the framework of the economic policy and the social policy widely understood. In these spheres, that are the ones that matter and in which the main destinies of education are defined (the education budget, even teacher salaries, but most importantly people's conditions of life, work, health, etc.), it is the economists of the IMF, the World Bank and IDB who reign.