

Top UN official stresses academia's role in solving global problems



Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information Kiyo Akasaka

17 November 2009 – A top United Nations official today called for a new culture of “intellectual social responsibility” to take education beyond the classroom to the search for real solutions to real problems, with the academic and educational sectors creating and sharing knowledge to help realise UN objectives and goals.

“The United Nations was founded on the premise of individual States working collectively for the greater global good,” UN Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information Kiyo Akasaka told the World Innovation Summit for Education (WISE) in Doha, Qatar.

“It draws upon the strength of all nations to address a broad spectrum of security, development and human rights challenges. The time has come for scholarship to do the same, and to draw upon all its varied disciplines to inform the solutions to the problems the world faces today.

“The time has come for a new culture of ‘intellectual social responsibility’ – one that takes teaching, learning and research beyond the classroom, laboratory or campus; one that harnesses its energy and promise to the search for real solutions to the real problems that are confronted by real people; and one that recognizes that to be sustainable, education must itself have the capacity to sustain.”

Mr. Akasaka pointed to the “movement of minds” launched by his own Department of Public Information (DPI), mobilizing an international network of centres of higher learning through the **Academic Impact** initiative, with the simple premise that there is no area of scholarship or research which cannot have an impact on what the UN is trying to do.

"What the 'Academic Impact' asks is that each participating institution undertake one activity each year which can directly contribute to the realization of a specific United Nations objective," he said of the initiative first announced by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon last year, and which has been joined by more than 250 universities and institutions of higher learning so far and endorsed by international academic networks from every region, covering a range of disciplines.

These include technology, public health, art, physical and social sciences, global affairs and education itself which, Mr. Akasaka stressed, was central to achieving the UN Millennium Development Goals (**MDGs**). These include targets for slashing a host of ills, including extreme hunger and poverty, infant and maternal mortality, and lack of access to education and health care – all by 2015.

"Whether in the area of health, shelter, or livelihood, education is the means to their achievement," Mr. Akasaka said, noting that Mr. Ban has called for a summit next year to galvanize action to achieve the MDGs by the deadline.

"As such, the Millennium Development Goals represent an excellent example of the critical link between academic research and action," he said, underscoring that they were defined on the basis of what was seen as academically sustainable, with their benchmarks determined scientifically. Universities could mobilize their campuses to demonstrate support to the MDGs at the 2010 summit, he added, citing a tremendous groundswell of youth support, particularly from students, for the goals and the efforts of governments to attain them.

Mr. Akasaka cited both the Academic Impact and the mobilization for the MDGs as concrete examples of how to make education sustainable, a major focus of the WISE organized by Sheikha Mozah Bint Nasser Al Missned and the Qatar Foundation and bringing together a diverse group of experts and leaders.

"It will only be when education provides not only the skills, but also leads to opportunities to make use of them, that education can again be said to be truly sustainable," he stressed, noting that 51 million jobs will need to be created in Arab countries within the next 10 years to absorb those entering the job market.

"The question remains whether the education of this region's large youth population will be met at the same pace as the creation of jobs and other opportunities for the future educated men and women of this region. Failure to do so, and the resulting frustration and disappointment that could arise, might result in potentially 'unsustainable' societies," he said.

Turning to the global picture, Mr. Akasaka said that worldwide 72 million children of primary school age are still denied the right to education, almost half of them in sub-Saharan Africa, followed by South Asia with 18 million out-of-school children. In Western Asia, 64 per cent of the 3 million children out of school are girls.

"It is only when a world preoccupied with immediate deadlines and timeframes looks to a vision of the future that the benefits of education become tangible and, indeed, sustainable," he added.

In his speech to the summit, the Secretary-General's High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, Cheick Sidi Diarra, focused on ways to manage international academic mobility, which he called a "double-edged sword" that offers many possibilities for developing countries but also threatens to drain them of intellectual capital.

"If current trends of internationalization continue, the distribution of the world's wealth and talent will be further skewed," he said. "[But] the advancement of communication

technology has made it increasingly feasible to tap intellectual migrants at their host countries, creating the phenomenon of brain circulation.”

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