

## Educating the Children of the World

Joel E. Cohen

If there's anybody in this room who is over 40, I have some information for you. You have lived through a doubling of the earth's population from 3 billion in 1960 to 6 billion today. Several billion more people are anticipated in the coming decades. How are they going to live? And what can we do to make their lives better? Prompted by such concerns, I published in 1995 a book called *How Many People Can the Earth Support?* The book argued that how many people the earth can support is not a static number; it is a dynamic interaction between natural constraints on one side and human choices on the other. Human populations interact with their economies, their environments, and their cultures.

Two years after the book was issued, in 1997, it occurred to me that educating well all children for 11 years, from the age of 6 to 16, would almost certainly add value to their lives and might do much to address the interacting problems of population, economics, environment, and culture. I have no illusions that achieving this goal of educating all children is going to be easy.

In November 1999 I had the privilege of spending two weeks in Burkina Faso, a West African country of 12 million people, where 60 languages are spoken—an enormous challenge to the system of public education, which is conducted in French. In Burkina Faso the life expectancy is 47 years—about the life expectancy in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. Only 9 percent of the adult women are literate, and the average income per person per year is \$250—the price of dinner for five of us. Nearly half the population is under age 15. How might education affect this society?

With respect to population, education has the potential to reduce fertility and improve the health and survival of children and adults. With respect to economics, it has the potential to increase the productivity of workers and local capacity to use and develop technology. With respect to environment, it has the potential to improve environmental preservation and disease prevention. With respect to culture, it has the potential to reduce inequalities between males and females; to increase people's connection to local and world cultures; to strengthen effective, democratic governance; to enhance people's flexibility in the face of unforeseeable contingencies; and to promote the creative arts.

As a scientist, I take these ideas as working hypotheses to be tested by careful analyses of appropriate data and, where possible, by experiment. Would spending money to educate all the world's children do more for human well-being than, for example, spending money to improve their health and nutrition? Or do these efforts complement each other? Would **universal basic and secondary education (UBASE)** do more for human well-being than spending money to develop economies and job opportunities, more than spending money to reduce governmental corruption and strengthen democratic institutions?

These questions go far beyond my knowledge. I was fortunate to be able to discuss these concerns in 1997 with David Bloom, professor of economics and public health at Harvard, and with the Academy's Executive Officer, Leslie Berlowitz. Leslie and other leaders of the Academy recognized that this organization could marshal the talents and resources required to respond to the challenge of educating well all the world's children from the age of 6 to 16.

The Academy proposes the formation of a task force to examine the rationale, means, and consequences of achieving UBASE—that is, an education of high quality for all the world's children from age 6 to 16. We hope that an ambitious program of action-oriented research, pursued under the sponsorship of the Academy, will lead to the development of a global plan of action for UBASE and its subsequent implementation. The developers will have to be scholars, program officers, educators, public servants, and business leaders from around the world. The first phase of this initiative aims to



Joel E. Cohen with new Fellow Charles Misner

produce reports that could be widely published, followed by work directed toward action if the studies indicate that action is warranted.

The research plan concentrates on six areas:

- Basic facts and data
- Intellectual and programmatic history: Where did the idea of universal education originate in different cultures, and how has it been pursued?
- Consequences of achieving UBASE
- Goals, delivery, and assessment of UBASE in the future: Where do we want to go, and how are we going to get there?
- Politics of educational reform; obstacles to UBASE implementation
- Cost and financing of UBASE

Study teams will be formed to work in each area.

How big is the challenge we face? As of 1995 about 1.25 billion children in the world—more than one-fifth of the population of the earth—were 6 to 16 years old. Of this school-age population, about one in seven lived in the more-developed countries (North America, Japan, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand). The other six in seven children, roughly a billion, lived in the less-developed regions (all of Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, Melanesia, Micronesia, Polynesia, and Asia, excluding Japan). Six-sevenths of the world's children lived in countries where the annual per capita income is about \$1,300 a year. Of those children in the less-developed countries, about one in six lived in the 48 least developed countries, as defined by the United Nations General Assembly. Roughly as many school-aged children lived in the rich countries as in the 48 poorest countries.

According to the 1998 medium projection of the United Nations Population Division, the school-age population is not expected to change much in total size in the next half century, but will shift dramatically between regions. In the more-developed countries, it will drop by 24 percent between 1995 and 2050, while in the least-developed countries, it will increase by 71 percent in the next 30 years.

It is difficult to estimate how many school-age children are being educated well. The available educational statistics are so poor that the World Bank does not even attempt to estimate primary or secondary net enrollment ratios for the world as a whole. The best guesses suggest that late in the twentieth century, about three-quarters of the children eligible to attend primary schools in the poor countries did so. The 130 million children who were not enrolled in primary schools were disproportionately girls and were mainly illiterate. A much smaller fraction of secondary-school-age students are enrolled in school or receiving other education. In 1999 the World Bank estimated that among people 15 to 24 years of age in the low-income countries, 23 percent of males and 41 percent of females are illiterate. These young adults are not well equipped for a rewarding life.

What's new about the Academy project? The goal of primary education for all has been prominent internationally for at least a decade. The Academy project extends this goal through secondary education and offers three new features. First, it proposes to be more comprehensive. It will assess all modalities of education in addition to the classical schoolroom. Second, it will be more analytical. Rather than assuming that education for all children aged 6 to 16 is self-evidently the highest priority, it will treat UBASE as one of a number of competing and complementary ways of improving human well-being. Third, it will be broader. It will encourage fresh perspectives from economists, developmental psychologists, demographers, statisticians, historians, cultural anthropologists, public health workers, and others to complement the expertise of scholars and practitioners who already work in education.

We welcome your thoughts on our efforts.

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