Education for Development and Sustainability

Education has been considered a panacea for development. We continuously see in the newspapers that education in the short and long run is the only option to address our challenges of development. Much less is said about what type of education that should be.

In the age of climate crisis, we must recognize that education should be such that it provides an opportunity for future generations to have access to resources, at least as much as we have had in this generation. Achieving sustainable levels of resource use needs to be the end objective of education today. Progress should mean progress in all the dimensions of natural wealth, sustainable lifestyle and equitable access to natural resources.

If indeed this must be the end objective, what do we need to do for the current education system to take that route?

If we carefully observe the content of the texts available today across the country, we see enormous emphasis on science and technology and interestingly on applications which are many times irrelevant to local contexts. Education provided with examples from alien context is either useless or sets the student on a clear path of migration. In most cases, the emphasis is on the ‘urban’ context, problems discussed and applications presented (if these are presented at all) are Urban in nature. This creates an illusion in a rural student that these are indeed the challenges we face and must address. She has no clue about the local problems and if she has, she does not have the tools and wherewithal to tackle these local challenges – as the problems she solves today have nothing to do with her immediate surroundings. Fortunately only around 40% of our people live in the cities. This means, we still have a
fighting chance of taking development to people than taking people to development (read cities!). If we indeed are able to develop vibrant rural areas, with good understanding of challenges and how could one go about addressing these, we stand an excellent opportunity to develop a model of distributed sustainable resource use to the envy of much of the world. Much of the world has moved into cities which are resource guzzlers and nearly unsustainable in their character. We have seen a few and will see even more of the ghost industrial towns and cities in future.

If we indeed can move away from “universal” content and develop local context, content and problem bank, we would have done yeomen service to the field of education.

Knowledge of local resources and how these can be used to address local challenges must be the theme for meaningful education. This will also help in creating local livelihoods and opportunities for developing local economy. This would mean no significant need for rural folks to move to the cities. Focus on primary production is becoming more and more important in these times of food crisis. The best way to address this is to provide clear focus on rural areas and local economies. We can turn the challenge into an opportunity.

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