

Summary remarks for the Institute

The five days of the Institute on Education for Development in the Context of Disasters were intense and, often, far-ranging. As is often the case in such discussions, too many good ideas go by too quickly and there is a danger of forgetting them and of losing the thread of continuity among them!

The Institute was greatly aided in averting this danger by the careful, coherent and forward-looking summary comments made by Thomas Franklin. The editors of the volume decided that it was important to include these here, for the readers of these ideas as well as the participants, because of their synthesis of many of the ideas that have gone before and because they suggest future directions for those of us concerned in working in the disaster/development continuum.

Institute on Education for Development in the Context of Disasters: Summary Remarks

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First, some brief introductory comments. The aim of this Institute has been to bring together theoreticians and practitioners in the fields of disaster research, Third World education, humanitarian relief, and development planning. This it has done, and done well.

My objective is to synthesize what happened during this exciting Institute, and to make some suggestions as to the process for following up on this week. These suggestions will not be in the form of specific next steps. That, it seems to me, is a job for the whole group. But my suggestions will attempt to set some terms of reference for the process of deciding on those next steps.

Second, the issues that we have considered here are literally those of life and death. We must never lose sight of that fact or of our moral responsibility to deal with it to the best of our limited ability. To a very real degree, this must be the bottom line for volunteers, professionals, and educators in this field.

Third, our ideals are by definition ambitious, and by the same token, more likely to be frustrated than to be met.

Fourth, we have neither the luxury nor time to develop perfect answers. The scale and pace of the onset of crisis conditions in the world is rapidly outstripping the coping mechanisms that are in place both locally and internationally. Particularly in Africa, we all know that a prolonged emergency is already a reality. We all know the probability of death and suffering on a massive scale.

This Institute, if it has taught us anything, has taught us that we can and must increase our options, improve our performance, and optimize the use of scarce local and international resources.

Unfortunately, these things are easier said than done. They are enormously complex tasks that require the skills that all too often we do not have, resources that all too often may only be available to us at the cost of stringent conditions, and international agreements that may not be feasible at the present time.

The sombre tone of these opening remarks provides a backdrop for some brighter conclusions. This Institute has been helpful for all of us, without exception. The challenge for us now is to make it more useful, and to take advantage of the time and money that has been invested in it. I would like to suggest some ways in which we could enhance its usefulness.

First, we need some clarity and discipline in the use of our words. We must avoid euphemisms. But confusion can be avoided if we discipline ourselves in the use of the word "disaster." Our main conclusion here is that disasters and development are stages of the same process, but there are events within that process which can trigger crises involving widespread death and destruction. During the Institute we fell into the trap of using the word "disaster" when what we really meant was "crisis event."

Second, we can take advantage of traditional wisdom from the countries in which we have worked, to encapsulate ambiguities which have plagued, enriched, and challenged our discussion. I will organize my comments around three West African proverbs.

The first proverb is "Any water quench fire," which literally translated means that any kind of water will put out a fire. The proverb is however open to many interpretations. In the context of my opening remarks, it serves to remind us of the paramount need to put out the fire, and that whether we like it or not, we may at times have to use Perrier water or champagne. We may not have time to make the ideal choice.

What then have we learned from this week? What insights, lessons and conceptual tools can we take back to our respective institutions? At the least, this Institute has fulfilled one of the crucial functions of education: we have increased our awareness of the dimensions of the problem. Theory has informed practice, and practice has informed theory. The rest of these remarks are an attempt to organize the lessons learned around these categories of insights, lessons, and conceptual tools.

INSIGHTS AND LESSONS

The following are stated as simply as possible, at the risk of oversimplification.