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By Mahmoud Mohieldin | NEWSPAPER EDITION

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Illustration by Zhou Tao

THE world is assailed by problems that defy easy answers. Economic shocks are destabilizing countries and regions, and inflicting great social and financial hardships on families and their communities.

Environmental damage threatens our food supplies, the air we breathe, and the rich biodiversity that sustains the balance of life. Wars and conflict produce millions of new refugees.

Moreover, new health risks are emerging, with diabetes, obesity, and other non-communicable diseases now stalking low- and middle-income countries - even as many of those countries are still locked in combat with tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other infectious diseases.

Hundreds of millions of young people around the world are searching for jobs in a very uncertain labor market. The infrastructure we use to produce our energy, transport our goods, and transact our business is under stress.

This list of worries is not meant to discourage, but to challenge. As the world's physical resources grow scarcer, we must increasingly rely on the best and most proven renewable resource available - human ingenuity.

Just as they confronted problems in the past, our scientists and entrepreneurs have brought us solutions by way of the Green Revolution, new vaccines, communications technology, and cleaner energy.

Scholars and leaders have given us the means to identify and resolve social and economic dilemmas. Rising levels of education have given people more control over their own health, household circumstances, governments, and culture.

The global challenges that we face today are proof that we need a world of problem solvers. We need a world of people who are productive, resilient, creative, and versatile enough with technology and culture to find solutions to the many challenges we face.

Education helps to build that world. Households with more education cope better with economic shocks and with extreme weather events.

People with higher levels of education earn more, have more control over their fertility, and have healthier and better-educated children.

Education gives people the skills to earn a living, to innovate, to invent, and to access culture - all of which allows them to live more fulfilling lives.

The good news is that the global community has united to help all people acquire these skills - and with real

results.

In 1990, a broad coalition of governments, the World Bank, United Nations agencies, and civil-society organizations committed to a strategy called "Education for All."

Twenty years later, there has been significant progress in enrolling children in school and expanding access to secondary school and universities.

Globally, 88 percent of children now complete primary school, and 67 percent go on to enroll in secondary school.

But low-income countries are still far from meeting the goal of ensuring that all children complete primary school: only 63 percent of children in those countries achieve that milestone.

Poor children, children with disabilities, girls, and ethnic minorities still face daunting barriers to education.

Many countries struggle simply to build schools quickly enough to keep up with population growth. Severely overcrowded classrooms, lacking in trained teachers and basic supplies, are not uncommon.

In the rush to expand services, school systems have sometimes neglected teachers' professional development, student assessment, and even basic building standards.

Over the years, we have learned that the real challenge is not just to enroll children in school, but to help them to acquire the skills necessary for employment, entrepreneurship, family life, and citizenship.

The World Bank's new education strategy, "Learning for All - Investing in People's Knowledge and Skills to Promote Development," highlights this imperative.

Equitable societies

It emphasizes the need to invest early, nurturing young children to ensure that they arrive at school healthy and ready to learn; to invest smartly, transforming schools with good teachers, good materials, and good management; and to invest for all, laying the foundation for just and equitable societies.

The strategy rightly recognizes the importance of building systems that support the development of education on a large scale.

Sufficient numbers of teachers, school buildings, and textbooks are all essential, but accelerating learning requires much more. We need well-designed systems of finance, student assessment, professional development and management, quality assurance, and monitoring and evaluation. We need more robust and transparent relationships between central and local governments, state and private education providers, and households and communities.

And we need stronger links between schools and employers to ensure that graduates acquire skills that are relevant to a changing job market.

We have much to learn from systems that have demonstrated continuous improvement, in contexts as varied as Singapore, Chile, Ghana, Slovenia, and England. While each of these countries had very different starting points, progress has been aided by the political will to measure outcomes and learn from results, define a sustainable path for change, and make smart, effective investments.

To foster learning about how systems improve, the World Bank is embarking on a major initiative to assess the quality of education policies around the world.

Its new databases will catalogue which policies countries have adopted to promote learning in each part of the education system, in areas ranging from teacher policies to student assessment to school financing mechanisms. Our goal is to facilitate the spread of good policy and practice, allowing countries to learn

from a variety of approaches and to understand which ones might work in their own context.

The case for improving education systems is urgent. Imagine our world, 20 years from now, if we could educate a new generation of young people so that they have the skills and creativity to take on the great economic and technological challenges of the day.

Imagine, in particular, that all girls are educated, with all the profound benefits that this would yield in the areas of population growth, health and welfare, poverty alleviation, human rights, and politics.

Now imagine the alternative and ask yourself: Which world do I want to live in?

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