

Discurso del Presidente de la República en Premio Interamerican Dialogue  
ADDRESS BY H.E. RICARDO LAGOS, PRESIDENT OF CHILE

Inter-American Dialogue

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I feel deeply honored by this prize, which I receive in the name of the Chilean people and its efforts in the field of education.

The Inter-American Dialogue

The Inter-American Dialogue is an important center for policy analysis, exchange and communication on Western Hemisphere affairs. As such, one of its programs is focused on policy issues including social development with particular attention to education.

We appreciate the key role that the Dialogue plays in hemispheric affairs and its contributions to the Summit agendas. In particular, we value your efforts to strengthen the region's efforts on education.

The role of education

Education has risen to the top of our policy agenda.

According to the historian Braudel, a world economy exists since at least the XVth century. As it has been pointed out, the difference of this world economy with the global economy we are now experiencing is that strategic, core activities, including innovation, finance and corporate management function on a planetary scale on real time. And this became possible because of the technological infrastructure provided by telecommunications, information systems, microelectronics machinery and computer-based transportation.

Today, more than ever before, knowledge and knowledge-based technology and systems hold the key of world development, and –of course- the key to our national development.

That is why education is the focus of our efforts.

Education and the Summit

As you know, education was the single most important policy area targeted for attention at the April 1998 Summit of the Americas in Santiago. The heads of State reiterated their commitment to the goals agreed upon at the 1994 Miami Summit:

By 2010 to provide for universal access to and completion of quality primary education for 100 percent of the children.

By 2010 to provide access for at least 75 percent of young people to quality secondary education with an increasing percentage of young people who complete secondary education.

To assume responsibility for providing the general population with opportunities for life-long learning.

For us these are specially meaningful goals: the year 2010 will mark our Bicentennial as an independent country. The Chilean people aspires to pull Chile into development by then.

The battle is being lost

However, so far the region is not doing enough to improve education for all its people. The region as a whole is losing the battle of our freely determined goals of 1994 and 1998.

The evidence suggests that not all countries are meeting the Summit' s education goals:

Current trends in primary enrollment rates suggest that Latin America as a region will fall short. Besides, in most countries, primary education consists of between six and eight years only. The region is unlikely to achieve the objective of universal primary completion by 2010.

The enrollment rates at the secondary level have risen over the last decade to their present level of just over 56 percent, far from, the 75 percent target for 2010. Moreover, Latin America's secondary enrollment has increased far less than Asia' s; only sub-Saharan Africa grew more slowly than Latin America during this period.

The available information suggests that education quality remains low and provides no indication that significant improvement is underway.

Some lessons from experience

Our own experience of education reform during the 1990s had taught us several policymaking and implementation lessons. Of course, we are all aware that this kind of lessons are always dependent on the trajectory and the context of the reform process, as it would be the case in any other national case.

First, a comprehensive effort to transform and upgrade the educational opportunities offered by a national schooling system could best be undertaken when four conditions are present:

Social consensus about the need for changes.

Political support at the highest level within the state.

Sufficient financial resources to fund changes within the system.

A time horizon that is longer than the term of one government.

The government must pull all its political and financial clout behind a defined agenda, based on the consensus in society about the sector' s strategic importance to the

development needs of the country. Goals should include the reaching of specified levels of student achievement, spending targets, and equity measures.

Second, decentralization with national gains in quality and equity requires an able center that defines goals and standards to be achieved and provides support to those who require it, and decentralized units responsible for developing their own answers.

Third, vouchers have their uses and their limits. The per-pupil subsidy and the competition between schools for students are not in themselves sufficient to produce improvements in the quality and equity of education.

Fourth, synergy is created by both push and pull mechanisms, as well as through networking. Classic, centralized, top down approaches must be combined with decentralized mechanisms of two types: incentives for grass-roots initiatives and support networks for schools.

Fifth, a program may expand its coverage according to its own financial and institutional capacities, but the entry order of its components into the schools must respect the learning rhythms of the involved actors and institutions. Profound changes require integral approaches.

On the other hand, we foresee several challenges for the Chilean education:

To overcome the shortcomings of the right to education in a competitive context. The current legal framework makes it difficult to reverse the practice of expelling students on the basis of poor performance, the marital status of their parent, teenage pregnancy and other similar causes.

To make faster progress with regard to equity. The most vulnerable schools still receive insufficient resources to counteract the effect of poverty on learning results.

To overcome the tensions between structures and functions. The pedagogical, curricular and management practices promoted by the different reform programs often clash with the vertical, closed and bureaucratic nature of the normative that regulates schools and teachers.

To improve voice and accountability mechanisms. Participation by parents and the community must be strengthened.

To deepen teachers participation. It remains an outstanding issue to build a new sense of partnership between the state and the teaching profession with respect to the organization and functioning of the state-supported education.

An hemispheric approach

It is not enough for each country to work alone to improve education. It is also important that there exist a broad and vigorous inter-American effort to improve education.

Only by working together will our countries be able to overcome the immense political and institutional obstacles that prevent meaningful reform in the region's education systems.

In this direction PREAL's work is vital because it works at the regional level to improve education and produces useful, high-quality policy recommendations.

By establishing clear and measurable goals and working together to meet them, summits can energize governments to overcome national obstacles that they would not otherwise take on.

My friends,

Education has been significantly affected by globalization: there are changes in the payoffs to different levels of education; the influence of financially-driven reforms tends to redistribute access to schooling away from lower-income students. Schools are the center of struggles over the definition of what knowledge is valuable and how a society's culture should be defined in the new global environment.

The Latin American and Caribbean countries have formidable challenges within the field of education and culture. After decades of internal and often external confrontation, we should now have a common goal: to use the key of education to achieve a better society, one which provides fairness of access to anyone.

Thank you very much.