

'Rural children just need a chance to be world beaters'

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Trying to build a nation on second languages will destroy developmental goals and South Africa should move with greater urgency to make mother tongues the mediums of instruction in all primary and secondary schools.

So argued Fanie du Toit, executive director of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, who spoke to the *Mail & Guardian* during the second World Innovation Summit for Education (Wise) in Doha, Qatar, last week.

To improve the standard of education, all South African children must be taught in their mother tongue, Du Toit said. "I have no doubt that we have the human capital to do this and our rural children can be world beaters. They just need a chance."

Wise is an initiative of the Qatar Foundation, a non-profit organisation focusing on education, scientific research and community development. The foundation describes the Wise conference as a global collaborative initiative that seeks to address the urgent challenges and powerful economic, demographic and technological pressures facing 21st century education.

More than 1 200 delegates from 100 countries attended the three-day conference, which this year had the theme "Building the Future of Education". Delegates included policy-makers, academics and representatives from private corporations.

Du Toit's formal presentation explored whether South Africa's education system acknowledged that the country shared features common to "post-conflict" societies. Titled "Reconciliation through Education: Lessons from the Post-apartheid Classroom", his paper summarised apartheid's racially unequal education and noted that this had fuelled South Africa's popular resistance movement.

History education in post-conflict areas is essential, Du Toit argued, because building national unity depends on educating former enemies in learning how to live together. But how could this be done without creating "new hegemonies, new forms of exclusion, new layers of belonging and not belonging", he asked.

"How is history taught, rather than ignored or forgotten as so often is the case in post-conflict societies, without loading on to the young shoulders of a new generation the sins of their ancestors?" his paper to the conference asked. "Are historical divisions revisited without recreating them?"

Earlier in the conference, speakers highlighted both funding and private-sector participation in education worldwide. World Bank economist Steen Jorgensen said governments should treat education with the same urgency they bring to bear in combating HIV/Aids and global warming and the private sector must play a far larger role in assisting them to do so.

"We should learn from our colleagues in the health and the environment sectors and leverage with business for the future of education," said Jorgensen.

Investment in education is vital for economic recovery from the world financial crisis and for poverty reduction, he said. Education also improves personal health, reduces crime and increases people's awareness of, and involvement in, local politics.

The primary provider of education funding should remain national governments but the private sector should also play a much larger role because the challenges are too complex for governments to resolve on their own, he said.

"It is critical for national governments to protect their education budgets and invest in education as a solution to economic uncertainty," Jorgensen said.

Irina Bokova, director general of Unesco, told the delegates societies needed to move away from business as usual when it comes to education funding because it was not working. Only five years away now from the deadline for the Unesco's Education for All goals, the aftershocks of the global financial crisis threaten to deprive millions of children in the world's poorest countries of an education, she said.

Unesco's Education for All Global Monitoring Report for 2010 exposes the continuing failure of governments to address extreme national inequalities and of donors to mobilise resources on the required scale, Bokova said.

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