Guiding Notes for the Panel Discussion Three:

*Socio-cultural Trends in the Asia-Pacific Region and Implications for Education*

**Introduction**

More than a decade into the 21st century, it is increasingly being acknowledged that a purely economic model of development is not sufficient to respond to the problems facing the world. Research and initiatives by many different bodies and individuals, including UNDP’s human development reports since early 1990s, more recently OECD’s Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, the University of London’s Institute for Education and the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress (‘Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi Commission’ 2009), have highlighted that a more appropriate model of human development would be one that incorporates socio-cultural dimensions, including consideration of cultural practices and traditions, ethnic identities and language.

While there is an inherent tension between the increasingly globalized character of the world today and the need to preserve cultural identities and value systems, minority languages and the traditions of indigenous populations, there is growing awareness that development – and the development of education systems in particular – must find the right balance between the local and the global, tradition and modernity, preservation and innovation, academic and non-cognitive skills (also see: Delors 1996).

The trend toward a wider vision of development is also motivated by the persistence of intra- and inter-national conflict, social unrest, and consequently, the increasing attention paid to how social institutions can support peace and social cohesion. At the same time as countries become increasingly interconnected, national and global citizenship and civics have come to the fore, as well as the importance of learning to live together as one key social learning outcome.

**Implications for education**

Education should not only respect local socio-cultural traditions but draw upon existing knowledge systems and values and incorporate them into modern education, building upon them. Some national systems of education are increasingly working to find ways to accommodate the socio-cultural sphere, including the teaching of indigenous and other
minority groups’ histories in culturally sensitive ways, the teaching of ethics and values and bilingual or mother tongue education. The latter is particularly significant given that teaching students in their mother tongue has been shown to not only improve their academic results, but also to provide communication skills, critical mindsets and opportunities to learn through aspects of one’s own culture. Given the linguistic diversity of the region (2500 languages are found in the Asia-Pacific region and Papua New Guinea alone has more than 850 languages (UNESCO 2007)), this is a particularly pertinent consideration.

In some other countries, governments prefer to promote the dominant language in the interest of national unity. Regardless of the diverging ways in which countries may attempt to balance these two forces, it is important to better understand and explore the complexities of this issue. At the same time, it is interesting to note that the more holistic and culturally sensitive vision of human development has inspired the construction of new indices and measures which take account of socio-cultural factors, such as Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness (GNH) Index1, the OECD’s better life index (based very much on the findings of the ‘Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi Commission’), and OECD’s social indicators, which include measures of equity, health and social cohesion.

A related consideration concerns the purpose of education. Beyond its cognitive dimensions aimed at producing highly performing students for the labour market, there is increasing recognition of the role of education in teaching people to live together. This more comprehensive conception of education acknowledges its centrality in promoting peace, citizenship and sustainable development and responding to crucial challenges such as ethnic and religious conflict, youth unemployment, social unrest and HIV and AIDS. While this aspect of education has been largely neglected in both international discourse and national policy, there are a number of nascent initiatives to define and measure this domain, including the OECD’s projects on the Social Outcomes of Learning and Education and Social Progress as well as the University of London Institute for Education’s Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning. In the lead-up to 2015 and beyond, it is important to increase our exploration of how education systems should go about promoting learning for the acquisition of the non-cognitive skills needed to confront contemporary challenges and to be responsible and engaged members of society. Additionally, the need to evaluate the acquisition of such skills requires new paradigms of assessment.

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1 The four pillars of GNH are the promotion of sustainable development, preservation and promotion of cultural values, conservation of the natural environment, and the establishment of good governance.
This panel on socio-cultural trends and challenges and their implications for education will discuss these issues, and in particular, how education systems can harness the opportunities posed by an increasingly complex socio-cultural environment.

**Key questions for discussion:**

1. What are the key current and future socio-cultural challenges and opportunities impacting on education and what are the implications for education policy making?

2. How can education policies ensure the right balance between meeting educational needs in a globalized world while preserving cultural identities and value systems, minority languages and the traditions of indigenous populations?

3. How should education policies best reflect cultural and linguistic diversity?

4. What social outcomes should be generated by education? How can education policies promote the achievement of these outcomes in concrete terms?

5. In particular, in which way can citizenship and social cohesion be fostered by education and how can this be reflected in education policies?

**References**


