Aklilu Habte Wages War against Illiteracy

by Morallina Fanwar-George

 practically on his way out of the Bank, Aklilu Habte agreed to talk to The Bank’s World before leaving to take up his new job as Chief of the Education Unit with UNICEF (United Nations Children’s Fund) in New York.

In his soft-spoken manner, Mr. Habte invited me in and insisted I was not interrupting, a fact contradicted by the packing boxes—some closed, some still open—which surrounded us. In fact, the whole office was in disarray with pictures off the walls, papers lying in piles on the desk and conference table, documents waiting to be sorted and packed away. It was the last day of August and his last day at the Bank. “Moving is never easy,” he remarked wryly as we sat down to chat.

After 13 years at the Bank, Mr. Habte is moving on to help set up a new education unit for UNICEF. “It all started with the World Conference on ‘Education for All’ held last March in Jomtien, Thailand,” he explained.

Basic learning needs

The Conference, held jointly by heads of UNICEF, UNDP, UNESCO and the World Bank, was attended by delegates from 155 governments, including policymakers and specialists in education, officials and specialists from 20 intergovernmental groups and 150 non-governmental groups. The result of the five-day event was a declaration to meet basic learning needs for all and to eradicate illiteracy in developing countries. Mr. Habte’s terms of reference are to help implement the Jomtien Declaration.

“UNICEF is now seriously contributing to the implementation of the declaration. In fact, UNICEF’s resources are being increased from 7 to 15 percent and they are expected to be increased to 20 percent in order to expand the education program,” he explained. “I have been asked to join them and be in charge of this program.” He elaborated on UNICEF’s mandate. “UNICEF has always worked on basic education—children and women—and looked after the welfare of children.” He also noted that UNICEF is very much present in developing countries with almost 80 percent of its staff and resources decentralized. It is, therefore, in a good position to help initiate and implement the Jomtien Declaration.

To this end and with the support of perhaps five or six U.N. headquarters staff members in the new unit, Mr. Habte aims to undertake this awesome task. To start, his unit will get in touch and hold discussions with various countries’ representatives and officials to set up a program and strategy. Priorities will then be established according to each country’s individual needs. Once these have been formulated and approved by the countries’ officials, “we can start mobilizing this activity,” he said. “This will be a global effort and will involve developing countries in Asia, Latin America and Africa.” And UNICEF will depend greatly on the support of, and joint efforts with, various other agencies.

As for priorities of the plan, he continued, “We want to target girls and the underprivileged. However, we don’t want to just rush to build schools—we want to also be able to monitor what is being taught.” Some attention is also expected to be focused on reducing adult illiteracy—a figure believed to be 1 billion worldwide.

“I’m looking forward to the challenge. This is such a humbling task,” he added.

Invited by Robert McNamara

Mr. Habte, an Ethiopian national, joined the Bank at the invitation of former Bank President Robert McNamara and has served most of his tenure here in the field of education.

From 1977 to 1985, he was Director of the Education Department, and from 1985 to 1987, Director of the Education and Training Department. Since the reorganization, he has served as Special Adviser on Human Resources to Edward V.K. Jaycox, Vice President of the Africa Region.

In this last capacity, he also served as a member of the Regional Management Team in the Africa Region and was instrumental in developing a major education policy paper, Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: Policies for Adjustment, Revitalization and Expansion, which was published January 1988. Prior to joining the Bank, Mr. Habte had been Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth Affairs for the Government of Ethiopia.

To the query, “Will your work with UNICEF have any tie-in with the Bank’s work?” he answered, “We can build bridges between UNICEF and the Bank based on each organization’s advantage. We must work in a more systematic manner to expand education privileges to the underprivileged and help eradicate illiteracy.”

Major tool for development

The Bank has much to offer now in this field, he pointed out. “When I first came to the Bank, the education sector was not a mainstream activity—it was on the periphery. But education is now a major tool for development.” As reported in the June 1990 issue of The Bank’s World, Mr. Conable announced at the Jomtien Conference that the Bank would double its annual lending for education to $1.5 billion over the next three years. That figure, based on the Bank’s business plan, reflects the heightened priority accorded to education in country strategies and lending programs. Following the Jomtien conference, Mr. Aklilu inspired a full day colloquium of Africa Region PHR staff to review the Bank’s experience in assisting basic education, and to identify means to further strengthen the effort in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Not quite out of the Bank yet, he already spoke with nostalgia. “The friendship and congeniality of Bank colleagues has been the best part of my service here. I look forward to continuing to work closely with Bank staff. We all work to serve people.”

THE BANK’S WORLD / OCTOBER 1990