

Interview Reiner Klingholz, Wolfgang Lutz: „Who survives?“

Questions for campus.de

Teaser: In the 21st century the major global divide runs between knowledge societies and those where access to education is hampered or denied, say population experts Reiner Klingholz and Wolfgang Lutz. In an interview with campus.de they explain what this means.

1. Education empowers us to look beyond our own horizon and to consciously choose our lifestyle. Better qualified people are more involved in political decision making processes and foster democratization - this is what your book says. Does this mean in reverse that societies with limited education opportunities are, as a rule, less democratic?

Rainer Klingholz: From antiquity to medieval times, the uneducated masses were dominated by despotic elites. Wherever the first seeds of democracy were observed, for example in ancient Greece or Florence during the Renaissance, at least a certain part of the male population could write and read. They were in a better position to see what was going on and they strived for more influence in decision making. The more educated the population became, the more chance there was for democracy. In the modern world, we see a clear statistical association between the education of broad segments of society and a well-functioning democracy, although education is a precondition and not always a guarantee.

There are direct and indirect reasons why education is good for democracy. Education directly fosters the ability to obtain information, express one's own opinions, engage oneself in discussions and look for compromise, all prerequisites for a lively democracy. Education works indirectly through economic development as it fosters prosperity, and such societies are in a better position to afford the 'luxury' of democracy. Even autocratically governed countries, such as Singapore and China, which have invested massively in education and achieved rapid economic growth, can also be seen as moving in the direction of democracy in a long term.

2. You say that in a context of global competition countries with low educational standards have lower chances to succeed. Could these countries get out of misery by their own strength or does this problem require a global solution?

Wolfgang Lutz: Looking back in history, we see that many countries have made it without outside assistance. In our book we describe the example of Finland, which was one of the poorest regions of Europe before 1900 and later due to massive educational efforts became not only a winner of PISA test but also one of the most innovative industrial countries. Or, let's look at Mauritius, which as recently as the 1960s presented a textbook example of a country trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty, population growth, and destruction of the environment. Today, thanks to an early boost in education that was followed by fertility decline and economic growth, it is the most successful country in Africa. Similarly, the rise of the "Asian Tigers" has been induced by massive investment of their own modest means into basic education of the broad layers of population.

In many other countries, mostly in Africa and in South and West Asia, this did not happen. As a consequence, there is still widespread poverty and birth rates have remained high, causing continued rapid population growth and difficulties in finding solutions for existing

problems. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that dissatisfaction results in conflicts which in turn trigger streams of refugees. There are of course many other reasons for this but lack of education is a root cause.

The most important factor behind decreasing fertility rates is female education. If women complete at least secondary school, they have substantially fewer children, they and their offspring are much healthier, and they become more independent from their husbands, as they are better informed and can obtain their own income. Education is the best and most effective development aid. In order to make this happen, the least developed countries need urgent help from outside. The world cannot wait decades for these countries to later possibly make it on their own. By that time, their population may have multiplied by a factor of 3-5, resulting in higher poverty and possible conflicts. There is good reason why there has been compulsory education and a right to education for all children until the age of 16 for a long time in all developed countries. This must apply equally to all children of the world.

3. Just a small portion of total development aid expenditures goes into education. Have we still not recognized the problem?

Reiner Klingholz: We have, on paper. The new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations postulate exactly this. The problem is that these ambitious education goals are not being implemented. Only 2 to 4 percent of global development aid goes into basic education; this makes it impossible for all children to complete primary school and even less secondary school. Most of the development money goes into big infrastructure projects that satisfy local potentates and promote corruption and exports from the donor countries. Building of a rural school, or education of teachers, in Mali or Pakistan are not attractive in that sense. Since educational efforts only become noticeable in 10-20 years, it is much more attractive for a current president to build a new highway. Despite or perhaps because of this, we point out that investment in basic education is the most important investment for enhancing the ability of people and countries to help themselves and it therefore should become an absolute priority in international development.

4. In some Arab or African countries there is a youth bulge without adequate occupation or place in the society. What are the long-term consequences of this?

Wolfgang Lutz: The main problem of these countries is that the population grows faster than opportunities are being created, especially job opportunities. Many young people do not see prospects for their lives and at the same time they see through TV or internet that elsewhere people are much better off. Under such conditions, young men in particular have a tendency to become radicalized, or fall victim to religious zealots, who tell that people of different religions are the enemies. This mixture leads to a clash between education cultures that we describe in the book.

5. Who or what impedes education in countries like Pakistan, Egypt, or in Western Africa?

Rainer Klingholz: Until the middle of 20th century, most of those countries were pawns in the hands of colonial powers that did not invest in broad education. They were afraid of a population empowered through mass education. In the majority of these countries with independence, authoritarian governments came to power who pursued the same goal: they wanted to stay in power surrounded by small educated elites and had no intention of empowering their citizens through education. Fortunately, in many of the countries the

situation has improved in recent years and younger generations are now better educated than the older ones. But there is a real threat from fundamentalist religious or terroristic groups, such as IS or Boko Haram, that actively fight against modern education. They want to stop the teaching of natural sciences and instead have boys memorize the holy scriptures and exclude the girls from education altogether.

6. What does Martin Luther have to do with your book?

Wolfgang Lutz: Martin Luther was the first person in history who actively and successfully fought for the basic education of all, including girls and the poorest farmers. He wanted every individual to find his/her own way to salvation through being able to read the Bible. To achieve this, Luther had to translate the Bible into a language that people understood. But most of all, he had to do something to enable all people to read themselves. This focus on universal literacy was new in world history and went further than e.g. the rather elitist humanists had gone.

Interestingly, we see today that the protestant countries that first implemented those educational reforms in the course of the next decades and centuries became more economically successful as a consequence. The rise of the Netherlands and Great Britain, the industrial revolution, and the later success of the United States, the improvement of living conditions and declining death rates—all this had as a necessary precondition the education of broad segments of the population that ultimately goes back to the Reformation. Luther himself did not have long-term social and economic consequences in mind. Coming from a medieval culture he personally would have been probably unsettled by the following developments towards modernity.

7. In your book “Who survives?” you describe different scenarios of the future of humanity to the end of the 21st century depending on investments in education in the near future. Can we only survive current and future crises if we indeed prioritize education?

Rainer Klingholz: At the beginning of the 21st century, humanity faces the biggest challenges in its history. It has to abolish poverty, stop population growth, combat climate change, and sustain peace in a world which at the moment may seem to be falling apart. These problems require the best possible brain power and the empowerment through education of everybody. The alternatives to education are high population growth in the poor countries where uneducated women have much higher birth rates together with many other development problems, which likely result in chaos and possibly conflict.

Wolfgang Lutz: The problem is that education needs time to show its positive effects. We have to wait until children come out of school and become active adults. Education is hence not a quick solution to any of the urgent problems that fill today's newspapers. But in a long run, there are no alternatives to universal education.