
Topic: **OPENING CEREMONY SPEECH BY THE SECRETARY-GENERAL**
Occasion: **3rd African Continental Curriculum Conference**
Date: **23rd May 2022**
Location: **Banjula, The Gambia**

Honourable Minister of Basic and Secondary Education of the Republic of The Gambia,
Madam Chairperson of the African Curriculum Association,
Madam Secretary-General of the African Curriculum Association,
Esteemed participants,
Ladies and gentlemen,

In my previous capacity as President of the Education Relief Foundation, I had the honour to partake as Keynote speaker to the 1st and the 2nd African Curriculum Association Conference, which had been held in Uganda and Ghana respectively.

And now, over three years later, I am delighted, as Secretary-General of the Organisation of Educational Cooperation (OEC), to be with you again in person to co-open this third edition.

And this elation is shared by the entirety of the Secretariat that I have the honour to lead, for it is enthusing for us to see the African Curriculum Association, an Associate Member of the OEC, be at the vanguard of the educational transformation to which we aspire. And as a matter of fact, it is altogether appropriate and right for us to mention, with unconditional praise, the Chairperson of ACA, Dr Grace Baguma, and its Secretary General, Dr Gertrude Namubiru – if it was not for their contagious energy and selfless dedication, we would not be here today.

It would also have been impossible for us to meet on this day were it not for the hospitality of the Government of the Republic of the Gambia and, in particular, had we not had the extraordinary privilege to encounter on our arduous path a woman of such admirable qualities, such an inspiring abnegation, such a stimulating commitment to our common ideals that is the Gambian Minister of Basic and Secondary Education, the most Honourable Claudiana Cole.

It therefore only seemed natural for the OEC, along with the African Union and the International Bureau of Education, to unwaveringly support this initiative and co-organise its proceedings.

Because the principal motive that has led us, at the OEC, to support this conference – beyond the fact that ACA is an Associate Member of our Organisation – is the very same motive that has led you all to be here, today; the very same motive that leads each one of us to strive daily, in the face of daunting odds, with indefatigable persistence and inexorable determination. And that unifying

motive is that we all serve the same noble and collective cause: that of building a third, inclusive, and equitable way of development that can only emerge through and from education.

And lest some claim that this is mere sophistry on my part, allow me to set out three, concrete reasons that the OEC considers this Continental Conference to be absolutely essential:

The primary reason, ladies and gentlemen, is that as an intergovernmental organisation *of* the Greater South and not merely *for* it; as the first international organisation *by* the Greater South, and not arrogantly *on behalf* of it; we firmly believe in the importance of a new kind of multilateralism, one that adopts a framework of equality amongst parties, of equity in their relations, and of elevating solidarity, rather than debasing charity.

This new multilateralism demands, on the one hand, North-South partnerships which are equitable in that they acknowledge, respect, and abide by national priorities and local realities; and, on the other hand, it unambiguously calls for the reinforcement and amplification of South-South cooperation, amongst countries and peoples' that, whilst extraordinarily diverse in their cultures, histories, and realities, also share systemic challenges and aspirations.

And in order to build mutually beneficial North-South partnerships that achieve self-sufficiency in our countries, and in order to ensure effective South-South cooperation that goes beyond mere aspirations, and achieves tangible results – for that, proper regional exchanges, cooperation, and integration are indispensable.

And this Continental Conference, ladies and gentlemen, takes on the curricular mantle of this African integration.

The second reason that we consider this conference to be primordial is that we have an ardent conviction that – building on the importance of regional integration, and retaking the title of the OEC Strategic Plan – to shape the future that we want, through the education that we need we must ensure the encounter of all sources of knowledge, the fertile union of experiences, and the fructuous expression of dignified divergence, the fruitful interchange of respectful disagreements.

In other words, the success of our collective cause can only be born from true debate and dialogue. And this conference, by bringing together curriculum development centres from across the continent, but also other stakeholders, is undeniably abundant ground for the dialogue that is needed to transform, and not merely reform, our education systems.

And this, ladies and gentlemen, leads me to the third reason that the OEC considers this continental conference to be so very essential to the construction of the future to which we collectively aspire. And that is that when we speak of education from our countries of the Greater South, we are not merely speaking of education for its own sake. Because we know all too well that there is no such a thing as a neutral education, no education that is neutral in terms of social justice – for as much as education carries within it the promise of a better, more equitable future, it can also act as an instrument of alienation, an industrial factory reproducing society with all its inequalities and deformities.

When we speak of education, therefore, we are speaking of a transformed education, one that can hence achieve its emancipatory and transformative potential.

We are speaking of an education that prepares us for the complexity of the world, not one which simplifies our minds by distorting reality as a mere set of disciplines existing in parallel.

We are speaking of an education that returns to teachers and to students their humanistic vocation, not one which dehumanises educators by having them reduced to obsolete information-sharing vehicles, nor one that de-personalises learners by treating them as empty receptacles to be filled with cold facts and data.

We are speaking of an education that recognises our regional aspirations, our national priorities, our local realities, and our individual particularities, not one that – with the disguise of universally equal standards – only reproduces inequality.

We are speaking of an education that recognises our histories, our cultures, our identities – who we are as peoples and individuals, including our millenary sociocultural mutual borrowings – not one that, by Eurocentric historical narratives, negates the very essence of who we are and, therefore, impedes us from truly becoming who we want to be. For a universality that strives to erase particularity betrays itself – Humanity's unity, ladies and gentlemen, lies in its diversity.

In short, we are speaking of an education as defined in the Universal Declaration of Balanced and Inclusive Education, from which the OEC was founded and of which the African Curriculum Association is a pro-active party.

And as such, we believe that this continental conference, initiated by ACA jointly with The Gambia, is a commendable step ahead in conjugating reflection with action, in strengthening, through solidarity, dialogue and cooperation, national capacities to enact the educational transformation that we need.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Now that I have explained the reasons for our unwavering support, and with the objective of being concise so as to allow this conference to duly commence, I should like to provide three brief elements of reflection for the debates you shall be having over the upcoming days:

First, noting with great satisfaction that this continental conference is focused, in part, on a recognition of the necessity of aligning school curricula, teacher education, and learning assessments – as rightfully and necessarily promoted by our colleagues at UNESCO-IBE –, I should like to submit for your consideration and deliberation another equally fundamental alignment that ought to be achieved, and that we could roughly qualify as "social alignment".

This suggestion emerges from our Strategic Plan and our biennium's Programme, which speak of the imperative of systemic governance. For the avoidance of doubt, systemic governance does not

negate but rather draws, in part, from the fundamental need for curriculum alignment, that is the recognition that an education system is a living organism composed of various sub-systems, satellite systems, direct and indirect agents, whose actions are in constant inter-retro-activity and whose understanding of their role in the broader education system and their corresponding coordination, or lack thereof, will determine the efficiency and effectiveness of the system as a whole.

This is, ladies and gentlemen, the foundational stone of the debates that you shall be having over the next three days, and as I know that our IBE colleagues have this topic well in hand, I shall not elaborate further on the matter of curriculum alignment.

I therefore return to social alignment, to be achieved through the systemic governance in which the OEC is actively supporting its Member States. Basing itself, once again, upon the necessity of curriculum alignment, social alignment goes a step further. It recognises that an education system's quality, effectiveness, and efficiency only go as far as the purpose for which it was designed. For if it was designed to meet a certain set of educational objectives that the system meets but that are disconnected from the broader, macro-system that is society, such an education system may be judged as efficient for meeting its own objectives, but it would nonetheless be irrelevant – and I would go so far as to say *detrimental* – to social and national development.

As such, the systemic governance that we defend and support from the OEC proposes that, in addition to ensuring alignment between school curriculum, teacher education, and learning assessment, there also be an alignment with *every*, and I repeat *every,* sector of development. For when we speak of health, of technology, of the economy, of social cohesion, even of war and peace, we are, in fact, speaking of education and, in turn, when speaking of education, we are also speaking of all these matters at once. In other words, education is both the *cause* and, paradoxically, the *result* of development.

And since systemic governance for curriculum and social alignment is such a colossal, yet indispensable task, it is also a constant, perpetual work in progress, for our societies, our countries, our world are ever evolving. It requires, amongst other transformative initiatives, the establishment of inter-ministerial, transdisciplinary, and multi-stakeholder national committees, endogenous resource centres, and local learning networks. And as a consequence of this, the realisation of systemic governance requires the broadest possible exchange and confederation of efforts amongst international, national, and local stakeholders.

I then move, ladies and gentlemen, to the issue of technology, another fundamental theme of this year's conference and which is inextricably linked to the previous.

This subject, that of technology, is one that the international community and the development sector have been discussing for years – if not decades. The COVID-19 pandemic did not, therefore, suddenly make us realise the importance of technology – although some international fora seem to be acting as if it was a sudden epiphany, a divine revelation of sorts – but that, ladies and gentlemen, is a matter for another day.

What the pandemic did do, however, has been to further increase the visibility of, and exacerbate, the techno-digital divide between North and South, between countries of the South, and within countries.

It has also accelerated the 4th industrial revolution, transforming, beyond dispute, the abstract question of *whether* to use technology into the all too concrete question of *how* to do so.

It is only natural, therefore, for this conference to explore the role of technology in achieving curriculum alignment and, I hope, systemic governance.

The legitimacy of the topic notwithstanding, I should like to invite this conference to deliberate some reflections that I respectfully present to it in two parts: the first, in terms of risks and reservations that must be accounted for in the introduction and amplification of technology in our systems; the second part pertaining to two proposals in this regard.

Onto the risks and reservations, ladies and gentlemen:

Technology, in the broadest sense, and within the context of the 4th industrial revolution, has undeniably been a source of most beneficial and, at times, exponential progress for our societies and for the world.

But we must beware of falling into the blind mimetism, the unconscious herdism, the resigned fatalism of systematically considering that anything that is new, or sectorially disruptive, is necessarily progressive.

In other words, it is not because a technology is new that it is desirable, just as it is not because a practice has long been the standard that it is necessarily effective.

And we must not accept the imposition of this mindless trend, accelerated by the pandemic, of thoughtlessly jumping onto the bandwagon of technology for the sake of technology:

Not because we are anti-technology – we are not so in the least, for we know from experience that it can be a most valuable and useful tool.

But we also know, as the massive proliferation of virtual conferences demonstrated over the past two years, that technology, as a tool, has its limits.

Take, for instance, the issue of distance learning, which has – albeit in a dystopian manner – concretised the vision of "borderless classrooms" that was enthusiastically discussed some years ago. Whenever it was made possible by connectivity and computer access, it has ensured the continuity of learning. It has also, however, made learning less effective.

You see, ladies and gentlemen, I distinctly remember times – as you will all, I am sure – from my own schooling when the teacher stated something, from which I learnt, and the person next to me

muttered a half-hearted comment to himself that instigated a thought in mee that I would not have had otherwise – and I learnt this way as well.

And that is because learning is as much a *social* process as it is a cognitive one. And that is simply lost through distance learning.

So whilst we recognise that there is no debate to be had on *whether* to use technology, we must still have a rigorous, thoughtful debate about *where*, *when*, and *how* to use technology. And for these debates, neither the OEC nor our colleagues from UNESCO-IBE, nor any other international body, can give you pre-made recipes. Those that do, even with the best of intentions, are bitterly mistaken. We can share best practices, provide guidance, deliver technical support – that is, after all, our very role as international organisations –, but we certainly cannot provide recipes – because these debates must be contextual: sometimes technology is desirable and useful, at other times it is simply unnecessary and detrimental – and only you, ladies and gentlemen, and not any international organisation (and by which I include the OEC), are apt to understand your own contexts.

The second risk that must be considered and mitigated is that despite appearances or promises to the contrary, technology is neither socially nor culturally neutral. That is because the development of technology is an entirely human process, which is neither random nor independent, it hence gains non-neutral characteristics as a consequence of its developer's purposes, their conscious and unconscious biases, and their socio-cultural background. And as we all know, from collective experience, technology does not only change how we interact with the world, but also how we understand it – meaning that it is an instrument that has the potential to shape its user, to shape who we are as individuals and collectives.

And thus, in addition to the questions of *where*, *when*, and *how* to use technology, we must also add the essential, fundamental question of *which* technologies to use.

And the invariable answer, ladies and gentlemen, is once again centred on context: we need contextualised technologies, or at very least technologies that can be contextualised, rather than the ready-made, proprietary, closed-source technologies that are provided and sold to us.

So this leads me, ladies and gentlemen, to the last risk I should like to evoke and which must be, I believe, thoroughly considered. And that is the fact that since the crushing majority of the technologies that we now use as essential parts of our education systems, our development models, and our personal lives, are proprietary, we are nothing short than being at the entire mercy of a handful of private companies whose only accountability, regardless of intentions, is to their respective shareholders.

This raises, for instance, the major problem that our countries of the Greater South are at a constant risk of seeing the subscription and servicing prices of these already costly technologies rise at a moment's notice, with our complete inability to do anything about it so dependent we have become on them. This, ladies and gentlemen, is what I call the *technology trap*, so frighteningly similar it is to the debt trap that our countries of the Greater South have known far too intimately.

Now, needless to say, I do understand the argument that many such technologies are provided free-of-charge. But no one here, ladies and gentlemen, is a useful idiot for we are no longer in 2004 when none of us had any experience with these matters: in 2022, we know that no technology provided by a private company, once again regardless of their intentions, is entirely free: if we do not pay for the product, then, unfortunately, we *are* the product through the data that we conscious and unconsciously provide.

And since these proprietary technologies are, generally, closed-source, we also have no way to independently confirm what data is being collected about us, beyond what the same companies decide to voluntarily tell us. Even supposedly end-to-end encrypted platforms such as WhatsApp – which has increasingly, and understandably, been used as a further tool in educational settings – has the capacity to map out our networks – in other words, even if its mother company, Meta, cannot read our messages, it knows who we contact, how frequently, and other innumerable pieces of information about our lives, known as meta data.

In general terms, this is a serious area of concern, but even more so when it comes to our education systems. For the simple reason that we have a responsibility to protect our children, to protect minors and their inalienable right to privacy, in particular since they do not yet have the capacity to do so themselves. And when adopting such technologies as a matter of public policy, our youth do not even have a choice to make on whether or not to share their information.

Taking these risks into account, ladies and gentlemen, the OEC proposes that this continental conference considers two concrete avenues, in which the Organisation is actively supporting its Member States, to mitigate these risks and remedy these problems so as to enable us to truly benefit from the extraordinary potential of technology generally, and in our education systems particularly.

The first proposal is that we collectively conquer our technological and digital sovereignties. This means that we must, from our countries, develop endogenous technologies, be they local, national, or regional. This will result on us sustainably bridging the techno-digital divide by developing, through our own means, more affordable, contextual, transparent, and open–source technologies, simultaneously stimulating the creative power of our peoples and, in turn, our regional and national economies.

This also will enable us, as a matter of strategic importance, to become protagonists and shapers of the 4th industrial revolution – rather than to remain mere passengers –, hence providing us the opportunity of a development based, in certain areas, on an exponential, rather than linear, factor.

And this will require that we further reinforce our regional and national digital development plans, create the necessary ecosystems and secondary markets, and develop the appropriate legal frameworks. In this process, the role of TVET as well as higher education, as you will surmise, can under no circumstance be understated. It shall also require the active participation of our curriculum development centres, educational specialists, and local stakeholders if these

endogenous technologies are to reflect the principles and values of the path that we are collectively fraying and so that they may be relevant to our aspirations.

Now I do realise, ladies and gentlemen, because it is undeniably true, that this considerable investment of human, technical, and financial resources that we must crucially make shall only bear fruit in the medium-term, and that we are, unfortunately, faced by an urgent imperative.

Hence the OEC's second, parallel proposal, which we are developing with our Member States, Associate Members, and other partner, international organisations – and in which, of course, we hope that our colleagues from UNESCO will eventually join us. And that proposal is to work together towards achieving better, more favourable, more sustainable terms for our countries in the purchase, use, and transfer of technology.

This proposal may seem relatively straightforward, I realise, but I assure you, ladies and gentlemen, that it simply is not.

For in an era in which a single man is able to purchase a digital platform such as Twitter for 44 billion dollars, or approximately the nominal GDP value of a sovereign country such as Jordan, or in which the market capitalisation of a company such as Apple is greater than the nominal GDP value of countries such as Sweden and Switzerland, let us be honest amongst ourselves: no single country – whether it be The Gambia, Nigeria, Costa Rica, Mexico, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Cambodia, or Thailand – and no single Secretariat of an intergovernmental organisation – whether it be the OEC, the African Union, or UNESCO – alone, have any leverage to effectively negotiate with these technology giants.

But the 27 Member States of the OEC, and the Member States of our partners, and our respective Secretariats, along with our Associate Members and other civil society organisations, together, certainly have the capacity and the leverage, combined with the historic responsibility, to negotiate better, fairer, more sustainable terms. Hence the OEC's initiative of a coalition of the willing, of the brave to negotiate a collective, mutually-beneficial agreement with these technology giants. Such a collective agreement must encompass pricing caps, technology provision in emergencies, data protection, and technology transfers.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, I do realise that this final proposal may seem disconnected from the purpose and the mandate of this Conference, but I beseech you, ladies and gentlemen, to not underestimate your role and your capacities as a collective. Because if education is to be sculptor of the future, rather than the mere mirror of the present, and if the education system is indeed a living organism with the curriculum at its heart, then you are the electric impulse that makes it all beat – for you are the ultimate actors, the truest of pioneers, and we, but your indefectible supporters.

This conference, ladies and gentlemen, must dare to reconquer our collective capacity to dream, a capacity that the reality of the past few decades has stolen from us. And in order for all of us to move forward, you must debate these matters and reach concrete points of action to prepare our youth for this historic, noble mission of giving long overdue birth to Humanity's humanity.

For this Continental Conference – which we are humbled to co-organise –, by acting as a platform of regional integration within the broader framework of South-South Cooperation, by acting as a knowledge and experience sharing platform, by seeking to transform and not merely reform education, by strengthening respective national capacities in order to achieve, beyond curriculum alignment, social alignment through systemic governance, and in order to achieve, beyond technological use, digital sovereignty, this Conference – ladies and gentlemen – has a most important, and I would even say revolutionary, role to play in the building of the education that need to shape the future that we want. And this will remain our collective duty well after the closing session, and the reason for which the OEC was founded as *your* instrument.

This shared responsibility implies that, in aiming, in striving, in struggling for the realisation of our common ideals, we must marry the pessimism of intelligence with the optimism of will.

We must conjugate the patient diligence of experience with the righteous impatience of youth.

We must synergise the wisdom of our ancestral traditions with the vigour of our contemporary dreams.

We must give birth to the new without devouring the womb that has carried it.

This is what it means to achieve truly African curricula.

This is what it means to strive for balanced and inclusive education.

This is the historic mission of our collective.

And this is our unwavering, intransigent determination.

The clock is ticking, ladies and gentlemen, and the struggle for a better, faire, more equitable, and more sustainable world must continue.