

## **ADULT EDUCATION: A Lifelong Journey**

### **International failings and local promise Stephen Lewis on adult learning and the Quebec policy**

If you examine our world through the lens of the aftermath of war, there is a sense of disinheritance in many places that contrasts sharply with the sense of privilege that saturates our own society. In the keynote address opening the two-day conference that launched the Quebec adult education policy on January 9 and 10, 2003, for the English education sector, Stephen Lewis chastised international bodies for failed promises while he honoured adult education and educators.

Lewis says he was not intensely interested in education in the earlier part of his career because he took it for granted. Today, after recent years studying the impact of war around the world and the effects of AIDS in Africa, he has a deepened understanding of how central learning is to life; learning is, he told the audience of Quebec adult educators, "related to options, opportunities, and the possibility of over-throwing oppression." The most important recommendation to come from his study of children in war-torn countries was the need for schools. Everywhere, he says, the deepest instinct of children is "We want to go to school." With AIDS, he believes "millions are dying needlessly because they cannot make their case."

He quoted from the 1997 Hamburg Declaration on Adult Learning, which was invested in the dream of social justice and inclusion: "[A]dult education has become more than a right; it is a key to the twenty-first century. It is both a consequence of active citizenship and a condition for full participation in society."

However, Lewis tempered his remarks with a sobering review of the failed promises from international conferences and declarations of the past decade and a half, and a caution about how far short practice can fall from policy.

Lewis remembers his early experience in Ghana as a young man when he helped take adult education into the countryside with a traveling library and a kerosene lamp to teach extramural studies "to the literate elements of the community, the cocoa marketing board employees, the teachers, the firepersons who knew a little English, the collective people in the community who wanted to have in their adult lives some continued and additional learning." The enthusiasm and engagement he encountered still move him.

His current disenchantment with international conferences and agencies is a surprise to those who know his long record of support for the United Nations. Although he still



**Stephen Lewis speaks at the  
Adult Education Conference  
in Montreal.**

claims to be a United Nations man to the soul, when he looks at the evidence of progress on gender equity, on access to education, on environment, on human rights, and sees little of substance, he says he cannot be uncritical. "If you look back at the record of UNESCO in these areas," he laments, "over the last number of years, it is to weep." While he acknowledges the wonderful work of many international agencies in the field, he argues that overall actions have not matched the rhetoric, and, as adult educators, we do not focus enough on demanding performance from these bodies.

Globalization, he contends, cannot deal with global issues such as poverty, illness, and conflict. It has paid too much attention to economics and finance, and too little to human priorities. He believes that gender inequality underpins every major global problem in the world, and is a worse problem than race. Outrages such as the one in Rwanda show us the moral voids in our world.

Adult educators, Lewis believes, always think of the largest issues. Adult education gives people the confidence and ability to respond to many of the world's threats and challenges.

Quebec, in its new adult education policy, pays these issues more central concern than any other province in Canada, Lewis concluded. It "isn't some narrow vocational training rubric.." The policy is rich in generic terms such as culture and identity, but is rooted in a large vision of the world. Now, he says, we must hold the government account able for implementation. Rhetoric is not enough, as the history of previous visionary declarations has shown.

He ended by paying tribute to the educators in the room. They responded by giving him a standing ovation. [LS]