

Statement by Thoraya Ahmed Obaid
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Summarizing ECOSOC Education Roundtable
(check against delivery)
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Mr. President, Distinguished Delegates, Colleagues and Friends,

Achieving the goal of Education for All and eliminating the gender gap by 2015 requires strong political will, expanded partnerships and adequate funding. That is the main conclusion of the Education Roundtable that was held here in the ECOSOC Chamber last February with representatives from government, the UN system, non-governmental organizations, academia and private foundations.

The Roundtable addressed the question of Education for All, including girls' education, technical and vocational education, and higher education. The discussion brought out the need to fully integrate and link education and capacity-building interventions to poverty reduction strategies.

Several participants stressed the importance of political will and national commitment to education, recognizing that this would require difficult choices to be made in resource allocations. It was noted that countries that have invested serious political capital in the expansion of education have been able to change enrolment and retention figures dramatically.

Participants also stressed the need for stronger and more effective partnerships with the private sector, civil society organizations, especially in local communities, as well as with parents, to support the role of the public sector in expanding and improving education. Stronger partnership and coordination among UN agencies in the field was recommended, as was stronger South-south and regional cooperation in education.

All participants agreed that there should be substantial increases in domestic resources for education as well as in external resources for those countries that had developed good education policies and plans. In that connection, the Ministers of Education stressed the need for donor coordination of development assistance based on recipient country targets and priorities.

Participants agreed that for education interventions to be sustainable, they must be demand-driven and country-owned and led.

To reach the Millennium Development Goals in Education, participants in the Roundtable stressed that a multi-sectoral, integrated approach was needed that would address, among other things, inadequate food and nutrition, water and sanitation, HIV/AIDS prevention and conflict prevention and good governance. The need for training in, and use of, information and communication technologies for students and

teachers was also stressed, as was the need for training in international norms and standards.

It was agreed that human rights education and education systems geared towards promoting dialogue on issues related to cultural identity and diversity could play a useful role in conflict prevention and mutual understanding. It was also noted that it is possible to successfully integrate reproductive health and life skills education for youth through the formal and non-formal sectors, as part of a larger effort to maintain a lifecycle approach to education and health.

Overall, participants stressed that basic education must be part of a sector-wide strategy that includes the entire system from early childhood, through secondary, technical/vocational and higher education.

To close the gender gap in education, participants called for a sustained campaign to provide a girl-friendly environment that addresses cost, appropriate facilities and safety issues. More positively it means making school a relevant and empowering experience with female teachers to provide role models and a curriculum that will equip them for a richer life. Overall, it was noted that food is a simple, proven and effective tool to attract poor children to school. When school meals are offered, enrolment and attendance rates can double within a year.

While many underscored the need to improve access, including for girls, it was felt that there should be a simultaneous push on retaining pupils and improving the quality of education. Strong views were expressed on the need to restructure existing curricula to a more science-based education with a commitment to research and development at the tertiary level. It was felt that measures and strategies to reverse the brain drain in the education sector could help in this regard.

There was a strong consensus on the need for greater investment in technical and vocational education as well as higher education, particularly if education is to fulfill its role to support national development and expand the benefits of globalization. Participants noted that a science-based curricula should be taught from a young age if countries are to adapt and respond to rapidly changing technologies. The need to link technical and vocational education at the secondary level to enterprise development, the work environment and requirements in technology and the labor markets was noted. Participants also stressed the need to expand non-formal education to reach those in the informal sector.

Finally, as education systems attempt to become more effective, it was stressed that the role of teachers will become more, not less important. All countries therefore have an interest in enhancing the status of their teachers so that the profession can once again attract the brightest and most lively members of society.