



Report of UNAI/Department of Economic and Social Affairs Facebook Discussion

"Building a Future for Today's Youth: Improving Access to Education"



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Submitted by the Institute for Global Understanding, Monmouth University, West Long Branch, New Jersey, USA, March 28, 2011.

Executive Summary

As part of the communication campaign to promote “Education For All: Accelerating Progress,” the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) along with the United Nations Academic Impact (UNAI) and partner institutions of higher education held a four week online discussion on “*Building a future for today’s youth: improving access to education*”. It was expected that the e-discussions would provide a platform for youth to express themselves, help mobilize governments and the international community to improve and bring visibility to education within the context of global economic challenges, demonstrate the link between education and all the other MDGs, demonstrate the centrality of education for sustainable development, and highlight the role of the United Nations Academic Impact and its member institutions in encouraging activities by institutions of higher education and research in support of MDGs.

Of UNAI’s 9 Principles, the following 4 were discussed during the four week of the Facebook Discussion Series:
Principle 3. A commitment to educational opportunity for all people regardless of gender, race, religion or ethnicity
Principle 4. A commitment to the opportunity for every interested individual to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary for the pursuit of higher education
Principle 8. A commitment to addressing issues of poverty through education
Principle 9. A commitment to promoting sustainability through education

The impact of poverty and inequality on education, the need for accountability in higher education, the role of governments, non-government organizations, and international organizations, and the issues of sustainability in ensuring overall quality of life including education, and the cost and maintenance for new technology were the focus of the discussions.

The general consensus garnered from the responses across all regions reveal common concerns such as the widening achievement gap between wealthy and poor children, the need for qualified teachers and well-designed curricula, oversized classes, lack of discipline among students, lack of effective leadership, increasing unemployment, increasing cost of education, or a combination of these.

The recommendations included innovative suggestions on integrating resources, creating equitable access to education for all, creating opportunities within the curriculum for internships, and being more intentional about creating employment prospects for graduates. There was general agreement throughout the discussion that education will lead to creative thinking and innovative solutions to address issues of poverty and gender inequity. Education is also the basic tool for promoting sustainability. Citizens must be provided practical education on scope and extent of sustainability and how it could be achieved. Participants also called for more collaboration between governments, businesses, and educational institutions and for enhanced use of information and communication technology to achieve quality, effectiveness, and sustainability in education. There was general agreement that in the swift pace of globalization, local cultures and traditions should be respected.

Introduction, and purpose of the E-Discussion

Recent years have seen an increased and legitimate effort in examining the role of education in building a future for today’s youth, where education becomes accessible for every individual. The road to fulfilling this goal is, however, not free of challenges, and for this reason, coordinated efforts between universities, schools, students, civil society and governments are needed to make sure that educational institutions are in fact “Improving Access to Education.”

From 16 February to 15 March, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) and the United Nations Academic Impact (UNAI) organized the first facebook e-discussion on the topic "*Building a Future for Today's Youth: Improving Access to Education.*" The discussion was hosted on the UN Academic Impact Facebook page and was open to all interested parties; however, the intended primary audience was young people, the academic community - administrators, faculty and students.

Purpose

The purpose of the Facebook e-discussion was to provide an integrated examination of some of the core UNAI principles and examine how they can be achieved in conjunction with the related MDGs. Lack of equal opportunities to education is one of the biggest challenges facing the world today. To combat this reality and reverse a trend that strongly contributes to the manifestation of poverty around the world, Millennium Development Goal 2 commits to establishing universal primary education by 2015. Improved and accessible higher education plays an integral role in aiding countries towards sustainable achievements in the millennium development goals particularly those related to education, poverty, health, and gender equity. The achievement of such important goals requires the presence of quality and efficient higher education and research. Finally, sustainable society can only be imagined by making people aware of the problems we are/can be facing in near future; and this imagination can be realized by enriching the levels of education and consciousness among individuals. During the Facebook discussions, economic/business/industrial sustainability, environmental sustainability, and information and communication technologies (ICT) to promote sustainability and their impact on social/cultural sustainability were addressed at length.

During the e-discussions, participants from civil society, public and private sector and from several countries around the world engaged in a dynamic discussion that clearly indicated the need to focus on education as well as the necessity to replicate such online initiatives. Discussions during each week focused on a number of specific questions with a designated moderator posing new questions at every point to guide the discussions.

According to the participants, ensuring free access to education is not enough; there is an urgent need for equitable access to free and quality education. The discussions concluded that educational policies should enact more rigorous standards in schools to ensure that money goes towards raising the *quality* of education and not just the *quantity* of education. Nonetheless, it was agreed that since scenarios and problems vary between regions, resource and personnel constraints and the necessity of adapting western education methods to local needs and realities, countries and even sectors of a society, standard models are not the most appropriate solutions. Therefore, developing a needs-based model that can be exploited within a wide range of differing educational policy context is required.

Summary of the Recommendations

The discussions concluded that educational policies should enact more rigorous standards in schools to ensure that money is channeled more towards raising the "quality" of education and not just the "quantity" of education. Nonetheless, it was agreed that since scenarios and problems vary between regions, resource and personnel constraints and the necessity of adapting "western" education methods to local needs and realities, countries and even sectors of a society, standard models are not the most appropriate solutions. Therefore, developing a needs-based model that can be exploited within a wide range of differing educational policy context is required. The principal recommendations can be broadly grouped under the following subthemes, with some overlaps:

Access for All - Including Gender Equity

- Due to the various educational policies, development levels and uniqueness of situations, solutions must be tailored to different realities and specific scenarios.

- School systems need to focus more on servicing minority language students by developing effective instructional materials and support services for linguistic minorities.
- It is necessary to sensitise both education officials and teachers on the issue of gender equality and the important role that they can play in the reversal of gender-based discrimination and exclusion.
- Institutional policy on gender should be reinforced within institutions which include community involvement.

Resources and Ways to Overcome Poverty Related Challenges

- Participants recommended that any effort made towards achieving universal primary and secondary education should also ensure that every child continues to attend classes and make it possible for children to have the necessary academic resources needed to participate in the classroom and in society.
- “Improve libraries” - Participants recommended that Universities open all University libraries to the public and improve access to research journals.
- Schools, particularly in poverty stricken areas, should provide learners with at least one wholesome meal a day where meals are found not to be provisioned by care givers.
- Governments should subsidise (if not fully fund) such feeding schemes, as without a feeding scheme a developing country’s efforts to educate its people will be undermined from the onset.
- Practical courses such as vocational skills, military training, rights awareness and improved farming techniques can also improve poor peoples’ ability to earn a living, hence these skills should also be fostered amongst the poor.
- Over and above ‘academic’ skills and knowledge, the educational syllabus also needs to include life skills, such as child care; treatment and prevention of HIV/AIDS; and the cultivation of social skills and personal confidence.
- Content, pedagogy and education curriculum need to be adjusted to local realities (including non-traditional education), relevant learning materials, and utilized towards indigenous knowledge systems as much as possible.
- Schools, particularly in poverty-stricken areas, should provide learners with at least one wholesome meal a day where meals are found to not be provisioned by care givers.
- Governments should subsidise (if not fully fund) such feeding schemes, as without a feeding scheme a developing countries efforts to educate its people will be undermined from the onset.

Accountability

- Many participants recommended aid programmes tied with subsidies targeted to different populations, transportation facilitation, monitoring of aid programmes and free meal schemes as ways to promote education beyond enrollment.
- Educational systems should enact more rigorous standards in schools to ensure that money goes towards the quality and standards of education and not only focus on the number of children that can fit in a classroom.

- It is critical that governments, particularly those of developing countries, have in place sound and independent governance procedures, as well as regulatory environments and mechanisms, so as to minimise and promptly detect instances of corruption.
- An improved regulatory environment is needed, especially at the international level, to ensure equitable access to educational resources and the appropriate capacity building initiatives which allow poor nations to address or be aware of structural poverty and their causes.
- The awareness of the under-represented populations of some of the actors which contribute to poverty. i.e. ‘naming and shaming’ of multi-national corporations (MNCs) that cause poverty, is one means of attempting to change the manner in which MNCs conduct themselves within poor and impoverished communities.

Role of Governments and Non-Governmental Organizations

- Governments should invest more in vocational and skills training; that is, social programmes that invest in upgrading the skills training system into an integrated and efficient national training system.
- Participants recommend that governments should be more inclusive regarding the educational needs of disabled bodies instead of separating them in special schools, where they are excluded from society to some extent.
- Participants recommend that MNCs facilitate the growth of local businesses and also invest in areas such as infrastructure. As one participant commented, “MNCs have the resources to effect change, driving improvements in education and the motivation to pursue it.”
- National policies should motivate local governments to make critical decisions about funding and pedagogy, while serving as a channel between local communities, state/province and education departments.
- Participants recommended that communities help develop relevant curricula, engage in the maintenance of schools, assist teachers in their livelihood, and encourage school aged children to continue attending school.
- In addition to their primary function of educating children, it would be beneficial if schools could also conduct literacy classes or adult education for parents. It was acknowledged though that resource and capacity constraints may cause this to be unfeasible. Therefore, separate government led adult literacy campaigns, as well more substantial adult education programmes, need to occur in conjunction with school lead literacy campaigns.
- Amalgamation of effort and resources – be it at the inter-national or intra-national level – is advised in order to elevate the quality of education provided within a country or a region respectively.

Goals and Objectives of Education (Content, Knowledge, Skill Building and Beyond)

- Participants recommended making good use of new ICT. They asserted that quality in education could be higher and more accessible if communication technologies are used to make knowledge more accessible to a wider audience while also strengthening the teaching and learning processes.
- Participants recommended teaching entrepreneurial skills.

- Another interesting recommendation was made in regards to student voice and the need to foster student participation in policy-making and decision making processes.
- Academia should not take neo-colonialism as justification for poorly managed economies, especially in developing economies, for their failure to meet basic needs outside classrooms.
- Students should have structured spaces to have a voice and promote student participation.
- Formal apprenticeships need to be re-popularised as a means of ensuring the inter-generational transfer of hard skills.
- Internships and – where resources permit – government subsidy programs (whereby potential employers are assisted by government to cover the costs of hiring young people) should be used as a means of incorporating into the workforce current school-goers, recent school leavers and young graduates.
- Participants recommended that each individual become an active member of society, to exert and stimulate opinions.
- To counter the failure of educational systems, and to improve the quality of education systems and their impact on poverty eradication, the implementation of regular quality monitoring of education systems should be carried forward.

Education and Sustainability

- Education systems must encompass awareness and knowledge about sustainability.
- Government and agencies must promote green activities to make the common masses aware of the benefits of a sustainably unpolluted environment.
- Collaboration between industry and local businesses, as well as the international community, is necessary for the long-term success of the sustainability project. Schemes such as micro financing can be used to uplift the economic conditions of each individual, which in turn can result in the economic sustainability of a society.
- Information and Communication Technology (ICT) must be used hand-in-hand to deliver education and raise consciousness among the people on various aspects of sustainability.
- The role of government is important in formulating policies and strict enforcement of relevant policies to achieve sustainability.
- The cost of incorporating new sustainable technologies and equipment is a consideration.

Principal Contributions to the E-Discussion by Issues & Themes

The e-discussions were conducted based on specific questions (see Annex 2 for the questions) with some overlapping issues over a four-week period. The issues and themes that emerged, with some overlap, can be broadly categorized under: *Policy and Finance, Equality in Education, and Challenges and Accountability.*

Policy and Finance

Contributions highlighted the necessity for free access to education. While most participants agreed on the need for free access to primary and secondary education, there were proposals to encourage corporations to invest in education as best practice, and continue the responsibility of national governments to come up with funding support required to deliver national education programmes. Others argued for using philanthropic foundations as main source for grants for primary education and allocating state funds towards raising quality standards in education. Some suggested preparing unemployed youth, other community members & disabled people for employment opportunities who can directly participate in the main stream of economic development. Still others suggested giving more attention to how majors are to be chosen and this process needs to start in school prior to student's graduation; poor choice of majors results in increased unemployment rates in societies. New policies that would have an impact on funding include integrating countries in a particular region in order to combine their efforts and resources to form one regional university and emphasizing sustaining models through national, regional, and global cooperation and in the accomplishment of the above. One such integrative model is the Loreto Day School, Sealdah in Kolkata, India that integrates higher income students with disadvantaged children. On the e-discussions, there was also a suggestion to use microfinance schemes and models such as *Grameen Bank* to create sustaining models to bring overall improvement in the quality of life and to enhance education.

Equality in Education

With regard to equality in current educational systems, there was a general consensus concerning the idea that reducing gaps in student achievement in the future will depend on preserving policies that emphasize reducing educational inequality and on developing new initiatives. Many participants stated that the most important reason for educational inequality is socio-economic. Too many families have inadequate incomes to provide security for their children. Serious commitment (or specific programs) aimed/targeted towards reducing the income gap between lower and middle-class parents could be one of the most important educational reforms to consider.

Many participants reflected on the issue of gender inequalities in education. Gender inequalities in education are more prevalent in countries in Central and South East Asia and the Middle East such as Iran and Afghanistan. This was mainly as a result of cultural norms upheld in these areas and inappropriate school facilities for girls. Institutional policies, educators and school administrators play a substantial role in challenging communities towards gender-sensitive transformation and help women and men extend their abilities to be agents of their own development.

Participants also called attention to the fact that governments should not only provide free access to education but should also guarantee the right of every individual to learn in their own language and cultural context, as the problem of linguistic minorities is a major problem faced in many multiethnic and multilingual countries/regions.

On the role of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in education, many of the participants agreed that quality in education could be higher and more accessible if we use communication technologies to make knowledge more accessible to a wider audience while also strengthening the teaching and learning processes.

Challenges & Accountability

When discussing accountability in education there was a general consensus that education is a fundamental pillar of the integral development of a society. Thus, society plays a fundamental role in

promoting a culture of education. Poverty and access to free and quality education remains a huge challenge for governments in developing countries.

This notwithstanding, the development of initiatives to promote education should not be left to schools and the government alone. Civil society and the community as a whole must find ways to encourage children to continue their education beyond enrollment. In underdeveloped sectors, whether in poor districts, rural areas, or marginalized communities, education awareness programs should be conceptualized and implemented with the involvement of all community members.

To maintain accountability in educational offerings and ensuring quality education, there was discussion about how governments and institutions need to update and reveal real statistical information regarding levels of education, drop out rates, educational attainments, enrollment trends and teacher qualifications.

Role of institutions, especially that of institutions of higher education in generating employment was discussed. Several participants concluded that the high rate of unemployment among the youth poses a challenge and calls for the need for more intentional accountable models integrated into majors of study and other rationales and goals of higher education.

Moderators

The moderators and rapporteurs, and the UNAI principles they coordinated were:

University	Country	UNAI Principle	Dates	Contact person	
Escuela Politécnica Javeriana del Ecuador	Ecuador	#3: Educational opportunity for all	Feb. 16-22	Iveth Yanez, International Relations Coordinator	espoj.javerianos@hotmail.es
Modern University for Business and Science	Lebanon	#4: Higher Education for Every interested individual, and #5: Capacity Building in Higher Education System	Feb. 23- Mar. 1	Nael Alami, Board of Trustees Member	nael.alami@mubs.edu.lb
University of Kwazulu-Natal	South Africa	#8: Poverty	Mar.2 - 8	Julian May, acting Head, School of Development Studies	Mayj@ukzn.ac.za
Kyushu University	Japan	#9: Sustainability	Mar. 15-23	Pokharel Ramesh Kumar	pokharel@ed.kyushu-u.ac.jp
Monmouth University	U.S.A.	Rapporteur	Mar. 26	Rekha Datta, Director, Institute for Global Understanding	rdatta@monmouth.edu