

## **Background note on roundtable 5:**

### *Dialogue on education and literacy*

*Organizers: UNESCO and UNICEF*

*ECOSOC 2005 High Level Segment*

*29 June, 2005*

### ***A commitment to literacy for all: a development and human rights imperative still to be concretized***

The international community has committed and re-committed itself to the promotion of a fully literate world through *quality universal primary education* and *quality adult literacy provision* through formal and non formal education for over fifty years. Most recently, the Millennium Development Goals adopted at the UN Millennium Summit in 2000 declared the world's targets for drastically reducing extreme poverty and placed education squarely among the essential means to do so. The goal set for 2015 in Millennium Development Goal 2 and Education for All goals 2 and 4 remain elusive. The international community is now called upon to take concrete action to ensure that those goals are met. Yet, the Millennium Development Task Force on Education and Gender Equality reported on 1 October 2004 that, in spite of a long history of international goal setting through United Nations and other international bodies' conferences and declarations, there is little evidence that increased public spending, donor assistance and enrolment have followed as a direct and sustained consequence <sup>(1)</sup>. Moreover, the increasingly clear necessity for gender equality and empowerment of women, notably through education for the realization of all the Millennium Development Goals is yet to be transformed into concrete action through existing national and international commitments. A systemic approach to educational planning, governance and sustained resource allocation is as important for adult literacy as it is for primary education. Without attention to early childhood well-being and education, children may be disadvantaged before they even arrive at school. The quality of primary schooling depends on many factors not the least of which is the quality of secondary and higher education that their teachers receive. And the basic literacy, let alone lifelong learning possibilities of adults, women especially, and out-of-school youth are critical to sustainable personal, community and national development.

The international community's first commitment to education as a basic human right is, of course, contained in Article 26 of the 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights' (adopted on 10 December 1948). International conferences and declarations, such as the International Conference on Human Rights, (Teheran on 13 May 1968) in its Proclamation of Teheran stated: 'The existence of over seven hundred million illiterates throughout the world is an enormous obstacle to all efforts at realizing the aims and purposes of the Charter of the United Nations and the provision of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. International action aimed at eradicating illiteracy from the face of the earth and the promotion of education at all levels requires urgent attention. (2) This urgency has been addressed regularly directly since then, but especially since 1990.

Why have so many international conferences and their goal-setting led to modest results and what do we know about such processes? Historically, as argued by the Millennium Project Task Force on Education, there has been an imperfect link between the political and technical levels. The feasibility of the goals was not clear before they were pronounced. And in many

cases, the goals appear to oversimplify complex social and economic issues in order to advocate for change. Global goals also neglect the diversity of contexts and progress already achieved in some countries. Above all, goals pronounced in an international forum by a leader may not withstand competing priorities on the domestic scene. So, while goal-setting is essential to mobilize international attention, it must be followed by clear realizable targets identified at national, regional and local levels where specific progress can be measured. The Task Force on Education concludes: 'Achieving the MDG in education will require a major change in the approach to education at both the international and the country levels' <sup>(3)</sup>

This is not to underestimate the task. All societies reproduce themselves through their education systems and the non formal or informal learning opportunities they provide. The state of a country's education reflects the political, social and economic context. This is not new. The context is simply more complex in 2005 than it was even in the 1990s, with the impact of globalization, insecurity and changing multilateral relations. An increasing number of countries are directly and indirectly affected by conflict. The Task Force on Education and Gender Equality also reported that nearly half of the 104 million out-of-school children, two-thirds of whom are girls, live in countries in conflict or post-conflict settings <sup>(4)</sup>. Girls and women are the first and most severe victims in conflict and crisis. Women in poverty find their plight exacerbated by the instability and violence that prevail in these situations. They are increasingly the head of lone parent families in poverty. Conflict increases the likelihood of their poverty and vulnerability. Yet, formal education and access to out-of-school youth and adult literacy provision on their own cannot be expected to effect change for the major political and economic problems confronting today's world.

### ***The state of primary education in the world: the data***

Data in the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005 on three indicators gives a fair idea of the state of primary education. This analysis and more recent studies on demographic challenges and gaps in educational growth help explain the situation. The expansion of formal schooling is slowly reducing the number of out-of-school children of primary-school age, from 106.9 million in 1998 to 103 million in 2001. But this pace will not lead to universal primary education by 2015 under current circumstances. Girls represent some 57% of out-of-school children, as against 59.5% in 1998. Actual completion of primary schooling remains problematic. Children in low-income countries may not attend school or leave because of cost, need to supplement family income or a classroom environment that is not safe or appropriate to learning. Although survival rates to grade 5 increased in many countries during the 1990s, they fell short of 75% in thirty out of ninety-one countries. Substantial declines in many countries reflected deterioration in teaching and learning conditions. <sup>(5)</sup>

### ***The quality of educational provision in the world***

The World Development Report 2004 <sup>(6)</sup> provided a grim picture of the challenges to quality educational provision system-wide: 'unaffordable access, dysfunctional schools, low technical quality, low client responsiveness, and stagnant productivity'. The poorest countries and the poorest families within those countries are the most severely disadvantaged. Families may even be unable to meet their basic food needs, which also prevent them from sending their children to school and instead keep them at home to help with family chores or support the generation of income. But in the growing number of countries affected by international or internal conflict and crisis or natural disaster, poverty is aggravated by destruction, displacement and failed state institutions to ensure public services. Schools themselves may be 'dysfunctional' for many reasons including teacher absenteeism due to lack of motivation

or infrequent pay. The devastating impact of HIV/AIDS on teachers and learners alike is increasingly taking a direct toll on the availability of schooling at all. Furthermore, schools may provide little in the way of real learning opportunities and outcomes or they may appear to be the result of a distant government that is not responsive or accountable to local communities. Also, while educational spending may actually increase, it may not reach learners in the form of well-constructed school buildings, textbooks and trained teachers. The language of instruction may be an obstacle to learning or teachers may not be trained to convey a curriculum in a second language. Also, the national language policy and especially the language in education policy, have a critical impact on any learning. The choice of language of instruction or some form of bilingual transition or language maintenance instruction may be the single most important choice to be made by education decision-makers for the success of literacy and other knowledge acquisition. Increasingly, mismanagement of public funds or privatization without public quality control is being recognized as problematic around the world.

Equitable and effective school systems are not necessarily centralized or decentralized. According to a considerable body of national and international experience, success is best achieved through accountability, clear objectives, adequate resources and capable and motivated providers. It has also been argued by the World Development Report 2004 that successful education systems need to include: (a) the effective voice of the poor in both the school system's objectives and the public resources that go to education; (b) a compact between policymakers and providers of schooling to balance the autonomy of schools and teachers with performance assessment; (c) schools (and school systems) must be enabled to manage for performance—and, particularly, to find effective ways to train and motivate teachers; and (d) direct parent and community participation in schools' well-being and integration into the communities they serve. <sup>(7)</sup> The provision of a school meal or a take-home ration may encourage children's, and particularly girls', enrolment and retention in school

### ***The state of literacy in the world***

According to the estimates published by the EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2005, there are nearly 800 million adult illiterates in the world (adult defined as 15 or over), representing 18% of the adult population <sup>(8)</sup>. Literacy in this context is defined with the standard UNESCO statistical definition that 'literacy is the ability to read and write, with understanding, a simple statement related to one's daily life. It involves a continuum of reading and writing skills, and often includes also basic arithmetic skills (numeracy)'. More than half of adults lacking any basic literacy skills are women. Regional differences and differences even within countries are great. Of the world's adult illiterates, over 70%, or 562 million persons, live in only nine countries. The other countries are either countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the Arab States or South and West Asia with low literacy rates (below 70%) and sizeable populations, or populous countries in other regions with large absolute numbers of illiterates. The gender parity (ratio of the literacy rate for females to that of males) in another important indicator. It varies from 0.63 to 0.77 in South and West Asia, the Arab States and sub-Saharan Africa, and is over 0.90 in the rest of the world. And low overall literacy rates inevitably mean even lower female literacy. <sup>(9)</sup>

Adult literacy is also more than a developing country issue. Both developing and industrialized countries have long recognized that their entire populations do not necessarily have the basic literacy skills they need, regardless of whether they have attended formal schools. And indeed, there may be evidence that, as the public investment in schooling and adult education declines, the quality of educational provision is affected. This may be

increasingly the case in countries in Central and Eastern Europe as well as the developing world. It is undoubtedly the case in countries suffering from natural or man-made crisis. Again, women in poverty in all regions of the world are more likely to have limited access to basic skills training and to be heads of lone parent families where the demands on them are great.

Youth literacy for the population between 15 and 24 is an important indicator for Millennium Development Goal 2 and EFA. The state of youth literacy is a reflection of a country's ability to deliver basic skills through formal schooling. UIS data published in the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005 indicates that there are nearly 137 million youth with no basic reading and writing skills in the world. 85 million are female. Youth literacy rates are above 70% in all regions, although many countries do not reach the average.<sup>(10)</sup>

One of the critical issues regarding literacy is that currently existing data are not perfect. Reliable data on literacy is required in order to monitor and assess the current literacy situation in given countries and develop appropriate interventions in both policy-making and programme design. Given context-specificity and local variation, the challenge lies in forging methodologies for producing reliable and comparable data on literacy proficiency at national and international levels.

### ***Education and gender: key to all the goals***

There is considerable evidence that basic literacy and numeracy skills are fundamental, if not causally-linked, to political, social and economic participation in society today (11). Higher levels of general education are also clearly linked to preparing individuals for today's changing formal and informal employment markets. We know today that literacy and formal basic education, especially for girls and women, contributes greatly to enhanced well-being for families and communities. Education of mothers leads to better education for the next generation. Women's education has critical impact on health, infant mortality, and reduction of risk to HIV/AIDS and improvement of livelihoods. The findings and evidence of the vital importance of girls' and women's equal access and participation in all forms and levels of education is such that the Millennium Project Task Force on Gender and Equality has issued a single report: Taking Action: Achieving Gender Equality and Empowering Women. While literacy is not a panacea for social or economic problems, it remains the foundation for all learning. No other Education for All or Millennium Development goal can be achieved if a learners' basic need for sustainable literacy skills are unmet. The United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD) launched in 2003 is an opportunity to place literacy for all age groups back on international development agendas as well as central in all national development planning.

### ***Key themes for discussion in this session:***

***Achieving universal primary education and universal literacy for youth and adults alike will require a major change in the approach to education at both the international and country levels. What are the major systemic changes required in national planning, and how can other elements of a comprehensive national education programme be incorporated in planning, for example, school feeding and food for education? What have we learned from past experience? How can we do better?***

***How can we effectively address the educational needs of women in a world context of increasing insecurity, conflict and crisis where they take increasing responsibilities for themselves, their children and their community's well-being?***

***Given the impact of literacy on female well-being, autonomy and empowerment for themselves and their families, what actions can be taken to improve their equitable access to quality youth and adult literacy programmes that meet their immediate needs and longer-term aspirations?***

***What are the key ingredients of reform and accountability at international organization, donor community and national levels to ensure that goals set for the past fifty years relating to the Millennium Development Goal 2 and the Dakar goals are met?***

***How can commitments become actions to reduce the growing disparities between rich and poorer countries' abilities to address their own needs in educational policy, institutional capacity-building, reliable data and sustained finance for primary education and youth and adult literacy provision?***

Notes:

- (1) Birdsall, Nancy and Levine, Ruth (2004) Millennium Project Task Force on Education and Gender Equality. Final Report on Achieving the Millennium Development Goal of Universal Primary Education, Draft, page 13).
- (2) Cited in Limage, Leslie. (1987) 'The Right to Literacy', in Human Rights and Education edited by Norma Tarrow, Pergamon, Press, London, page 82. (from United Nations, 1981, page 19).
- (3) Op.cit., page 17.
- (4) Grown, Caren, Gupta, Geeta and Kes, Aslihan (2005). Taking Action: Achieving Gender Equality and Empowering Women. UN Millennium Project, Task Force on Education and Gender Equality, Earthscan, London, page 45).
- (5) UNESCO (2004), Summary. Education for All. The Quality Imperative. Education for All Global Monitoring Report, UNESCO, Paris, page 15-16. See also UNESCO (April 2005). 'Report by the Director-General on the Follow-Up to the EFA Strategic Review and UNESCO's Strategy for the 2005-2015 Period. The challenges of Education for All (EFA) in sub-Saharan Africa, the Arab States and South and West Asia', (171 EX/INF.16), UNESCO, Paris; Bella, Nicole and Belkachla, Said. (2005). 'Impact of Demographic Trends on the Achievement of the Millennium Development Goals of Universal Primary Education' in Seminar on the Relevance of Population Aspects for the Achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, New York, 17-19 November 2004, United Nations, New York.
- (6) World Bank. (2004) World Development Report, World Bank, Washington, D.C. page, 111.
- (7) Ibid, page 111. Also, UNESCO. (2004), The Quality Imperative. Education for All. EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005, UNESCO, Paris.
- (8) UNESCO. (2004) The Quality Imperative. Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2005, UNESCO, Paris, page 129. Note that the number of illiterates has been re-estimated by UIS in 2004 based on the latest data revisions. The present estimate of nearly 800 million adult illiterates in the reference period 2000-2004 is considerably lower than the estimate of 862 million for 2000 given by the preceding EFA Global Monitoring Report. This is a consequence of more recent data from some countries, notably China. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics receives data from countries based on their own reporting but then analyzes the data supplied and harmonizes it for the usage by the EFA Monitoring Report. UIS points out that the currently available literacy statistics are not internationally comparable.
- (9) UNESCO (2004). Ibid, pages 129-131.
- (10) UNESCO (2004). Ibid, page 130.
- (11) There is a vast literature on this complex relationship. See for example on the distinct histories of literacy and the histories of development/formal schooling: Graff, Harvey (1987) Legacies of Literacy. Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture and Society. Indiana University Press, Bloomington. Jones, Phillip W. (1989). International Policies for Third World Education. UNESCO, Literacy and Development. Routledge, New York and Jones, Phillip W. (2005) The United Nations and Education. Multilateralism, Development and Globalisation, Routledge/Falmer, New York.