



Check Against Delivery

Statement by

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**REGIONAL MEETING FOR WESTERN ASIA
FOR THE 2011 ECOSOC ANNUAL MINISTERIAL REVIEW**

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Honourable Ministers,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to sincerely thank you, Minister, and the Government of Qatar and the Qatar Foundation for generously hosting this important event. I especially appreciate the opportunity provided to ECOSOC to meet during such an extraordinary event as the 2010 WISE Summit. Today's Regional Meeting aims to contribute to ECOSOC's 2011 Annual Ministerial Review on achieving the international goals and commitments on education. It is a true privilege to address such a distinguished audience as we focus on ways to expand and improve education in the Arab region, particularly among the most marginalized.

The Economic and Social Council is the principal United Nations forum for discussing international economic and social issues, and for formulating policy recommendations addressed to Member States and the UN system.

Since 2007, ECOSOC has hosted an Annual Ministerial Review where countries gather to share experiences with the aim of accelerating the development agenda, including the Millennium Development Goals, by identifying approaches which work. ECOSOC's ability to attract a wide variety of important stakeholders to the same table is a vital asset.

This past September in New York, the UN hosted a successful MDG Summit. I would like to now briefly share several of the key messages on education which emerged from the event.

As we all know, formal education is critical to sustained, inclusive and equitable economic growth and to achieving all of the Millennium Development Goals. Neglecting education or health, gender equality and the environment invariably suffer. Reducing long-term income and other related inequalities demands placing education at the center of policymaking — isolating the subject in education ministries alone won't do.

If progress is to continue, development partnerships need to be strengthened — locally, nationally and internationally — and funding for education must be put on more reliable footing.

New resources will have to be mobilized, while old ones maintained. There are many opportunities for civil society and the private sector, with their energy, capital and know-how, to play a larger role too.

Reaching the marginalized, the focus of today's meeting, is the final hurdle to achieving not only universal primary education but also a wide range of other education targets. Now is the time to abandon old ideologies and embrace empirical, evidence-led reform. Let's place the marginalized at the center of education policy, just as I propose putting education at the center of government policy.

Straightforward actions which currently discourage poor children from attending primary school, such as unaffordable tuition, meals and a scarcity of separate bathrooms for boys and girls, need to be resolved.

At the same time, dealing with the root causes of inequality and discrimination that impact children may be less straightforward, but no less important. Non-formal approaches to education should not be ignored either.

If we are to succeed, quality and accountability must become a natural part of our education vocabulary. Reform will also have to be locally driven — more “bottom-up” and less “top-down”. Better incorporating parents and communities into the decision-making circle can yield dividends many times over.

How then, you ask, is success to be measured?

When bad things like drop-outs, grade repetition and failure rates go way down and good things like teachers, schools, retention and enrolment go way up.

In this region, in fact, net enrolment ratios are a particular cause for concern. With enrolment at just 84 percent of the primary school-age population, Arab States trail not only the world average of 87 percent, but also the developing country average of 86 percent.

The Arab world is, of course, far from monolithic and wide variations in enrolment ratios do exist. At 95 percent, Bahrain and Egypt for example are closing in on universal primary coverage, while Yemen, at 75 percent, and Djibouti, at just 45 percent, trail far behind.

The greatest gains, I believe, are to be found by raising female enrolment. In 2007, 54 percent of out-of-school adolescents worldwide were girls; in Arab states, the figure rises to 59 percent, among the highest in the world.

Move beyond primary education and gender disparities hardly budge – girls in the region account for just 43 percent of enrolment in technical and vocational courses.

The problem is larger still. Roughly 759 million adults – 16 percent of the world's population over age 15 – are illiterate, while in Arab countries illiteracy touches nearly one in three adults. Gender disparities in both primary and secondary education are a major cause.

Unemployment and illiteracy go hand in hand, as one problem leads to another. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), the Middle East and North Africa have the highest rates of youth unemployment in the world, with one-fifth of 15 to 24-year-olds unemployed; in Egypt, youth account for over 60 percent of total unemployed.

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The challenges we face are considerable, but far from insurmountable. Look at all we've achieved so far.

Since 1800, the world's population has multiplied six times, yet average life expectancy has more than doubled and real income has risen more than nine times, according to UN estimates.

Taking a shorter perspective, in the past fifty years, poverty was reduced more than in the previous 500 years combined. In 2005, compared with 1955, the average woman on Planet Earth ate one-third more calories of food, buried one-third as many of her children and could expect to live one-third longer.

She was less likely to die as a result of war, murder, childbirth, accidents, tornadoes, flooding, famine, whooping cough, tuberculosis, malaria, diphtheria, typhus, typhoid, measles, smallpox, scurvy or polio. She was less likely, at any given age, to get cancer, heart disease or stroke. And yes, she was more likely to be literate and to have finished school.

By any standard, this is an astonishing human achievement. There is every reason to believe then that by sustaining the momentum and continuing to share best practices, our current education targets will also be met soon.

Thank you.