



***Check Against Delivery***

Statement by

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

9 December 2010, Doha, Qatar

Honourable Ministers,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to join the President of ECOSOC in congratulating and thanking the Government of Qatar and the Qatar Foundation for hosting this Regional Preparatory Meeting in advance of the Council's Annual Ministerial Review. I am also grateful to UNESCO, for their help in organizing this meeting and to UNICEF, for their stimulating background note.

Education is arguably the most important building block in what economists call human capital – the knowledge, skills, health and values people accumulate during their lifetime and which, unlike financial or physical assets, they cannot be separated from.

Nobel laureate Gary Becker, who won his prize largely for work on the subject, once said that “when we stress human capital, we put people at the center of economic life and that is where they belong”.

Becker was right on another point too. Schooling, he argued, is an investment, no different from any other. Put in too little and returns rarely satisfy.

Insufficient investment in education is indeed a key factor holding back much of the developing world. UNESCO, in its latest global education report, estimates that achieving the Millennium Development Goal of universal access to primary education will require closing a global financing hole of \$16 billion.

Encouragingly, the study is optimistic that if low-income countries raise a bit more revenue and manage to distribute it more equitably, their spending on education could rise by some \$7 billion per year. Donor aid to the least developing countries– now at slightly under \$3 billion annually – could be significantly topped up as well.

Reaching the \$16 billion mark in the near-term will be a tall order even if governments are persuaded to offer up more cash. Dollars will have to go further. Just as importantly, they will need to be invested more wisely.

On the ground, more schools must be built and many new teachers hired – 8.4 million by 2015 in fact, just to keep current primary school teacher levels constant. Arab States themselves are expected to account for around 15% of total demand for new teachers.

Great strides, it should be noted, have already been made getting children into the classroom. In the past decade alone, the number of kids out of school fell from 105 million in 1999 to 72 million in 2007 and from 8 to 6 million in the Arab States.

Rising attendance means more kids with books in their hands. By 2015, youth literacy is expected to top 90% in the Arab Region.

The transition from primary to secondary education is especially difficult, particularly for girls. Some Arab States have made admirable progress — Syria increased its female transition rate by almost 30% in the past ten years and Qatar, at 100%, is a model to us all.

Learning achievement generally rises alongside national income, a sign that economic growth is both cause and effect of better, broader-based education systems.

Spending alone though is no guarantee of achievement, as highlighted recently in a major study by McKinsey. Some high spending countries have fared similarly – that is very poorly - to those spending far less, suggesting that *how* you spend is just as critical as *how much*.

Quality is a particular concern in the Arab region. On one recent international test, the 2007 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study for eighth graders, students from Arab countries consistently underperformed those from other countries with similar income levels. Only two, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates, scored above the international average.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you know, the theme of today’s meeting is **“Innovative approaches to reaching women, girls and the marginalized in the Arab region”**.

Innovation requires not only doing new things, but also looking at old things in new ways. And innovate we must, for the challenges remain daunting. I look forward to your stories of fresh approaches to innovation.

Globally, we know that two-thirds of the world’s illiterate are female; of the millions of out-of-school children, girls make up the majority. When women are empowered, we also know that society benefits.

Getting more girls and other marginalized groups in Arab society into school will demand tackling the many economic, social, religious and political factors which have so far kept them out. Where to start then?

Increasing investment in education and raising its productivity would be as good a place as any. Daunting as this may seem, recent gains across the world show that the goal of truly universal primary education is now very much within reach.

Thank you.