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ECOSOC Annual Ministerial Review (AMR) Regional Preparatory Meeting for Asia and the Pacific

Education as key to Achieving All Millennium Development Goals: Prospects and Challenges in the Asia-Pacific Region

Key Note Address

by

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Honorable Minister of Education of Thailand,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), United Nations, and to UNESCO for inviting me to this ECOSOC Annual Ministerial Review Regional Preparatory Meeting for Asia and the Pacific. The theme of the meeting "*Education as Key to Achieving All Millennium Development Goals*" reflects very well the outcome of discussions at the High Level Round Table on the Central Role of Education and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), organized on the occasion of the MDGs Review Summit last year. It also gives the opportunity to reflect further on the role of education in the follow up to the Outcome Document resulting from the same MDG Review Summit.

The challenging tasks confronting the international community in achieving MDG 1 are well acknowledged. Poverty is an affront to humanity and its eradication is the biggest development challenge of our times. The magnitude of the challenge is indicated by the fact that the number of people victims of extreme poverty surpasses one billion – a vast number of them living in the Asia and the Pacific region.

Poverty affects all social groups. However, children and women are particularly vulnerable as well as those belonging to ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, migrants, refugees, etc. Poverty is the greatest obstacle to realizing the right to education for all.

The MDG 1 is inseparable from the MDG 2 - universalizing primary education, and unless coordinated and greater efforts are deployed to accelerate progress towards these two goals, inequalities may widen. The achievement of nationally and internationally agreed targets for poverty reduction will be missed and inequalities between countries and within societies will widen, if progress towards MDG 1 is not accelerated. This calls for much greater emphasis on the right to education which is the central to the action aimed at promoting all MDGs. Indeed, a human rights perspective on all MDG's provides a firm basis for action by States. This has been recognized in the report by the United Nations Secretary-General: 'Keeping the Promise' (March 2010), which states that "Norms and values embedded in the MDG and international human rights instruments must continue to provide the foundation for engagement."

MDGs in a Human Rights Perspective and Educational Dimensions

All MDGs are underpinned by human rights, and like human rights, they are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. They all should be viewed in a human rights perspective, so that actions by governments to promote progress toward the goals are guided by human rights law.

Furthermore, it is the educational dimensions of a human rights perspective which is of pivotal importance in accelerating progress towards all the MDG's on an enduring basis. Thus, the right to education provides a firm foundation for progress towards all MDGs.

The MDG 1 on poverty reduction should be viewed in its nexus with the right to development, which embodies the principle of solidarity, and of which both states and the people are beneficiaries. The contribution the implementation of the right to development would make to poverty reeducation has been recognized by the United Nations Millennium Declaration (A/RES/55/2) which expresses the commitment by the international community

to "making the right to development a reality for everyone and to freeing the entire human race from want." Similarly, the Outcome Document resulting from the 2010 MDG Review Summit recognizes the importance of respecting, promoting and protecting all human rights, including the right to development. It states further that this is an integral part of effective work towards achieving the MDG's. The thrust of the Outcome Document is to improve the lives of poorest people.

Poverty emerges as a key factor in the limitation of opportunities and ultimate exclusion from education systems, given the multiple deprivations it entails. Thus, central role of education in elimination of intergenerational transmission of poverty needs special emphasis. Educational dimensions of the right to development are, therefore, so crucial in poverty reduction strategies. Education is indeed a powerful lever in pulling children out of poverty and in empowering them. The right to development, which subsumes all human rights, has direct correlation with the right to education.

MDG 2 is clearly underpinned by the fundamental right to universal primary education, which is inalienable right, established by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and by various international human rights treaties. Every child is entitled to primary education free of cost and this is *core obligation of States*. However, this fundamental right remains unfulfilled – according to estimates available, in spite of progress made towards EFA, nearly 69 million children remain deprived of this basic human right, and stakes for achieving MDG 2 are high in South East and West Asia. Overcoming existing disparities and inequalities in education is a daunting challenge. In order to combat marginalization and exclusion and to universalize access to primary education, greater emphasis must be put on human rights perspective and co-responsibility of governments and international agencies to achieve the right to primary education for all without discrimination or exclusion.

In face of diverse forms of exclusion, a system of inclusive education is necessary to do away with educational deprivation of children in urban slums as also in poverty struck rural areas. This calls for earnest actions for the realization of their right to education; education has a vital role in reaching the MDG target of cities without slums. It is indeed indispensable tool in struggle against poverty.

Human rights in general carry the obligations for States to provide resources for giving effect to them. States have responsibility under international human rights law to provide resources for the right to education. This is all the more important as the right to education is not only a human right in itself, but also essential for the exercise of all other human rights.

Even if primary or basic education were to be accessible free of cost, such access cannot be universalized effectively unless much needed financial support in the form of grants and bursaries is provided to the children who are victims of exclusion, in particular those who are victims of extreme poverty. Action in this respect must be propelled on the strength of linkages between MDGs 1 and 2. Without *free and compulsory primary education*, those who cannot afford going to school are denied a fundamental right. The ability of a family to pay for direct, indirect or hidden costs should never be the decisive factor for enjoying the right to education.

Since poverty and social exclusion remain the major barriers to achieving the EFA, the use of direct financial support (through fellowship schemes, conditional cash transfers, or social assistance support for children at school age, for example) can be incentive in enlarging access to education. For instance, India and China have introduced scholarships for poor students, including free textbooks.

Affirmative action and promotional measures are highly important in addressing educational needs of the economically and socially marginalized, and the poor. Such measures may be suitable in cases of longstanding or historical and persisting forms of discrimination. Such actions have a normative basis in international human rights conventions and in UNESCO's Convention against Discrimination in Education. UNESCO's Convention lays down the criteria of 'merit or need' with respect to "grant of scholarships or other forms of assistance to pupils." (Article 3 § c). Similarly, Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights provides for "an adequate fellowship system" among its provisions on the right to education.

Clearly, the goals of EFA or MDG 2 are not attainable unless permanent support is guaranteed to the enjoyment of the right to education. In this sense, it is commendable that as part of the EFA process, many countries have developed national legislation establishing the right to basic education (references are not anymore related to primary education but to basic education as a fundamental right). Indonesia's Act on National Education System of 2003 provides an example. The importance of basic education is recognized by the Background Note prepared for this meeting. In the current global context, it is crucial to revitalize the profile of basic education on political agendas, by emphasizing the strong linkages between primary education – and other components of basic education – and the other MDGs. Achieving the MDG's will rest upon reinforcement of the central role that basic education plays.

Quality of learning is determinant in such a role. Ensuring the enjoyment of the right to education is not only about ensuring access to education, but also ensuring quality in education. However, while deploying efforts to meet demands to broaden access in EFA processes, quality is being sacrificed. The dearth of qualified teachers, for example, has assumed alarming proportions. As a result, despite progresses in access, learning outcomes are frequently below acceptable levels. Without ensuring that education meets minimal quality criteria, the achievement of MDG 2 is undermined by drop-outs. Lack of quality also undermines future job prospects of students, thus affecting the possibilities to overcome poverty and the achievement of other goals.

Empowerment through education means imparting necessary life skills and meeting basic learning needs. This is the concept underlying the World Declaration on Education for All, which was adopted in Jomtien in 1990. Recalling that "education is a fundamental right for all people, women and men of all ages throughout our world", the World Declaration stipulates that "Basic education should be provided to all children, youth and adults. To this end, basic education services of quality should be expanded and consistent measures must be taken to reduce disparity" (article 3).

In this sense, national level normative action for quality education is highly significant. For instance, in the Philippines where the Constitution carries provisions on quality education, a *magna carta* of teachers for improving their career development is under discussion. In India, the schedule to the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, contains quality norms.

This region is aware of the relevance of quality education. The Republic of Korea achieved the best results in terms of learning outcomes according to the PISA system of indicators. The response to quality imperatives figures prominently in the short and medium term education plan (2010-2020) being developed by China. Quality concerns are also being addressed in Vietnam, as mentioned in the Background Note for this meeting.

The MDG 3 on gender parity and access to education by girls at all levels in education should also be viewed through a human rights perspective. It reflects the state obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979). This Convention establishes women's right to education, both as entitlement and as empowerment. It lays down the obligations of the States parties to "take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in order to ensure them equal rights with men in the field of education", and "in particular to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women" access to education at all levels and in all its form.

In this process, elaboration of legal framework on the right to education of women and girls deserves special consideration, as underlined by the Ministerial Declaration at the 2010 High-Level Segment of the ECOSOC, stressing the need for supporting "legislative developments" for women's empowerment. This would provide leverage in accelerating progress towards the MDG 3. Evolving national legal frameworks is in fact a responsibility Governments assume when ratifying human rights treaties. Moreover, the importance of such national framework must be recognized for devising policy measures. In this context, education and training programmes must be developed aimed at empowering girls and women, as in case of Bangladesh, for instance.

The Background Note prepared for this meeting treats the MGD 4: child morality; MGD 5: maternal health; and MGD 6: education and HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, altogether. They are indeed interwoven within the framework of the right to health, which in turn has strong linkages with the right to education.

The right to health is established by the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR, 1966). The General Comment on the Right to Highest Attainable Standards of Health, elaborated by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, confirms several obligations of the States parties to the Covenant, such as ensuring reproductive, maternal (pre-natal as well as post-natal) and child health care. This General Comment further emphasizes the importance of educational dimensions of the right to health, such as "providing education, and access to information concerning the main health problems in the community, including methods of preventing and controlling them; as also appropriate training for health personnel, including education on health and human rights." (para. 44).

The educational dimensions of the right to health are also reflected in Outcome Document of 2010 MDGs Review Summit, which recognizes the importance of developing appropriate policies and actions to promote health education. Evidence indicates that the education of mothers has a positive effect on child survival. Experience in the Philippines, for instance, shows that having a mother with primary education reduced child deaths by almost half. Effective school health programmes which integrate health, nutrition and sanitation education and services into schools have been proven to contribute to improving health status.

Education is thus an important tool in advancing towards the MDGs 4 and 5 and can be precious in saving an estimated half a million women who lose their lives each year from pregnancy and birth related causes.

As regards MDG 6, the 2010 UNDP MDG Report indicates that knowledge of HIV among young people is still very low in many countries. Educational inequalities often combine with other forms of disadvantage to aggravate the prevalence of HIV amongst vulnerable groups. Health education provides the way forward – it promotes a better understanding of HIV and other major diseases, through providing knowledge of infection pathways, prevention methods and safer sexual relations.

A human rights perspective on MDG 7 on sustainable development would give prominence to principles and norms necessary to guide State action. The concept of sustainable development as expressed in MDG 7 calls for "new ethics of conservation." It seeks to meet the needs of the present without compromising those of future generations. In this respect, it is important to refer to the Convention on Biodiversity (1992) which establishes State's "responsibility for conserving their biological diversity and for using their biological resources in a sustainable manner."

Education too plays a central role in the promotion of sustainable development. The United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014, DESD) aims to promote the integration of the principles, values, and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning. The UN General Assembly Resolution on the Decade invited "Governments to consider the inclusion of measures to implement the principles and aims of the Decade in their respective educational strategies and action plans by 2005." In this respect, it is noteworthy that several governments are attempting to use adult literacy programmes and other non-formal learning activities within their plans for adapting to the implications of climate change.

The provisions in the Convention on Biodiversity also have educational dimensions. The Convention lays down obligation for the contracting parties to "promote and encourage understanding of the importance of and the measures required for the conservation of biological diversity" as well as its propagation through "educational programmes." It underlines the need for international cooperation, as appropriate, "in developing educational and public awareness programs with respect to conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity."

Harmonizing Goals with rights and adapting targets to different realities

In order to increase alignment between MDGs and human rights, the publication *Claiming the MDGs* by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) recommended States to harmonise the targets and indicators with international human rights standards. They placed strong emphasis on aligning them closely with the relevant economic and social right obligations and ensuring that the targets and indicators address the human rights of women and excluded groups.

The most well-known example of adjusting MDG targets to a country situation and possibly human rights obligations, is Thailand's MDG-plus model (UNDP, MDG-Plus: a case study of Thailand, New York: UNDP) which adapted nine of the twelve domestic targets. For example, income poverty was to be reduced to 4 per cent of the population and the goal of universal education was extended from primary to secondary education.

While concluding, let me underline the importance of basic principles of "**equity and social justice**", as reflected in the United Nations Millennium Declaration (A/RES/55/2) adopted by the UN General Assembly. These principles are invaluable in imparting dynamism to the process of full realization of the right to quality education for all – both as *entitlement* in terms of access and as *empowerment* in terms of quality. They also deserve to be kept in sight in a reinvigorated vision of the MDGs, going beyond 2015. I hope very much, our deliberations today would help us in sharpening our focus on how to accelerate progress towards all MDGs driven by a human rights perspective.

Thank you.