



**General Assembly Thematic Debate on the  
Millennium Development Goals**

**“Recognizing the achievements, addressing the challenges and  
getting back on track to achieve the MDGs by 2015”**

**Background paper<sup>1</sup>**

**Panel discussion on Education**

**Tuesday, 1 April 2008,  
15.00 – 18.00**

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<sup>1</sup> This background paper is based on the 2008 EFA Global Monitoring Report “Education for All by 2015: Will we make it?”, [www.efareport.unesco.org](http://www.efareport.unesco.org), and the United Nations Statistics Division - UN Millennium Development Goals Report 2007, [unstats.un.org](http://unstats.un.org).

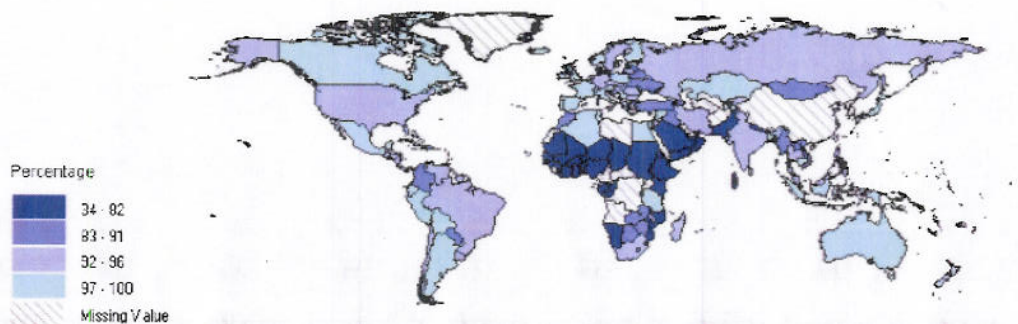
## MDG 2: Achieve Universal Primary Education

### MDG 3: Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015

	Africa		Asia				Latin America & Caribbean	Commonwealth of Independent States		
	Northern	Sub-Saharan	Eastern	South-Eastern	Southern	Western		Europe	Asia	
Progress toward achieving Universal Primary Education	high enrolment	low enrolment	high enrolment	high enrolment	high enrolment	moderate enrolment	high enrolment	high enrolment	high enrolment	
Net enrolment ratio in primary education (%)	1990-1	82	54	99	94	74	81	87	91	89
	2004-5	95	70	95	94	90	86	97	90	94

Line 1 (progress) - The words describe current levels. The colours show the trend towards meeting the 2015 target. Key: Dark Green = target met. Light Green = almost met, or on target. Orange = some/negligible progress, but insufficient to meet target. Red = no change or negative progress.

Line 2 (level) - Net enrolment ratio in primary education (percentage) – Key: Please refer to map key below.



Net enrolment ratio in primary education (2000-2006) (percentage)

Source: UN "Millennium Development Goal Indicators Database" (2007)

### Facts and figures

- Globally, 570 million primary age children are enrolled in school. But there are still around 72 million primary age children who are not enrolled in school.
- More than half of the world's out-of-school children are girls, and seven out of ten live in sub-Saharan Africa or South and West Asia.
- Abolishing primary school user fees in Malawi, Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya has helped more than one million extra children to enrol in primary school, in each country.
- Girls' net enrolment ratio (NER) in primary school (as a proportion of boys' NER) has improved from a global average of 88% in 1991 to 96% in 2005. Gender parity has already been achieved at primary level in 118 countries.
- More than 18 million extra teachers will be needed over the next decade to provide every child with a quality primary education. It is estimated that sub-Saharan Africa will need an inflow of 4 million teachers in order to maintain stock and to achieve universal primary education (UPE) by 2015. This includes 1.6 million new teaching posts that will need to be created.
- The impact of HIV/AIDS could add an additional US\$1 billion to the annual bill for achieving UPE.
- It is estimated that up to US\$10 billion additional aid is needed annually to achieve the UPE and gender goals.

## **The balance sheet at the mid-point to 2015**

1. The number of children starting school has increased sharply since 2000 in regions farthest from universal primary education (UPE). This is one of the most promising educational trends since 2000. But poverty and low education quality are limiting the gains made.

2. Between 1999 and 2005, the number of children entering primary school for the first time grew by 4%, from 130 million to 135 million, with a jump of 36% in sub-Saharan Africa - a major achievement given strong demographic growth in the region. Overall participation in primary schooling worldwide grew by 6.4%. Net Enrolment Ratios (NER) grew fastest in the two regions farthest from achieving MDG2, sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia: from 57% to 70% and 77% to 86% respectively.

3. However, projections for countries with relevant data suggest that without further acceleration, 58 of the 86 countries that have not yet reached UPE will not achieve it by 2015.

4. Net enrolment ratios stand above 90% in more than half the countries of North America and Western Europe, Central and Eastern Europe, East Asia and the Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean. Ratios are lower in the Arab States, Central Asia, and South and West Asia. The challenge is greatest in sub-Saharan Africa where more than one-third of countries have rates below 70%.

5. The number of children out of school has dropped sharply, from 96 million in 1999 to around 72 million by 2005, with the largest change in sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia, regions which continue, however, to harbour the largest percentages of children not in school. South and West Asia is the region with the highest share of girls out of school.

6. Poverty and marginalization remain a leading cause of exclusion. Households in rural or remote communities have less access to primary education. But many children living in urban slums are also being left behind, particularly in African cities. Significant disparities exist also between indigenous and non-indigenous populations, and disabled children continue to suffer from blatant educational exclusion.

7. MDG2 specifies that both boys and girls should receive a full course of primary schooling. The MDG 3 gender parity goal set for 2005 has been missed. Worldwide, 118 countries out of the 188 with data are on track to achieve or have already achieved gender parity at the primary level. Gender disparities stem first and foremost from disparities in enrolment in the first grade.

8. Enrolment in school is only part of the challenge. The other is ensuring that children stay in school long enough to master basic competencies, with trained teachers in a child-friendly learning environment. In half the countries with available data for 2004, less than 87% of pupils who began the first grade of primary education reached the last grade. The median completion rate is lowest in South and West Asia (79%) and sub-Saharan Africa (63%).

9. Some countries show a 20% gap between those who enter the last grade of primary school and those who complete it. In most developing countries completion rates to the last grade of primary education are virtually the same for boys and girls. For those that do finish, evidence from several sources suggests that up to 40% do not reach minimum achievement standards in language and mathematics. It is of concern to note that the number of pupils per teacher increased in sub-Saharan Africa and in South and West Asia since 1999.

10. Commitment to UPE is reflected in both national financing and international aid. Countries where primary school enrolments rose sharply generally increased their education spending as a share of GNP. Public expenditure on education rose by over 5% annually in real terms in sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia. Total aid commitments to basic education increased from US\$2.7 billion to US\$5.1 billion in 2004 before declining to US\$3.7 billion in 2005. Preliminary data show an upward trend in bilateral aid to basic education to \$5.4 billion in 2006.

### **Progress has happened through universal and targeted strategies**

11. More robust sector-wide policies and increased investments in education are driving change in many countries. Governments have taken initiatives to reduce the financial burden of schooling on households. Fourteen countries have abolished primary school fees since 2000, a measure that has promoted enrolment of the most disadvantaged children. Several countries, for example, Burkina Faso and Brazil, have established mechanisms to redistribute funds to poorer regions, to target areas that are lagging in terms of access to education and to offset economic barriers to schooling for poor households. Conditional cash transfer programmes have increased access to school in several middle-income Latin American countries. Such programmes typically provide financial subsidies to poor households or individuals based on conditionalities, such as enrolment or regular attendance.

12. Specific strategies to encourage girls' schooling have paid off in many countries, including Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, India and Yemen. These include community sensitization campaigns, early childhood centres to release girls from caring for their siblings, free uniforms and learning materials. Further, targeted measures to reach some of the most excluded and marginalized groups - child labourers, indigenous groups, the disabled, nomadic and pastoralist communities - include legislation, alternative learning models (bridging and catch-up courses, equivalency programmes), and better primary school infrastructure in rural and disadvantaged areas. School-based health and feeding programmes are associated with higher attendance in primary school. Measures aiming to improve quality and equity also include distribution of textbooks to disadvantaged/priority areas and the deployment of teachers to underserved areas.

### **Key outstanding challenges**

#### *Reaching every child*

14. First, schooling must be affordable. Governments could implement across-the-board fee abolition or adopt phased-in or targeted approaches. These measures call for overall education sector reforms to ensure that countries can cope with enrolment increases, particularly to ensure that there are enough schools in remote and rural areas and urban slums. Second, the poorest families require additional financial support to send their children to school. Specific policies are needed to reach working children, indigenous groups, linguistic minorities, children with disabilities and those affected by HIV/AIDS. Each group has specific needs to which education systems must respond if they are to be genuinely inclusive.

#### *Training teachers for quality education*

15. MDG2 will not be achieved without recruiting, training and retaining large numbers of teachers, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia. Shorter and more flexible training models, use of distance education, more on-the-job training, sufficient salaries and appropriate work conditions are key policy areas. Countries that depend on large numbers of contract teachers must ensure that they receive training and are integrated into one career stream.

#### *The right learning conditions: financing quality inputs*

16. Safe and healthy physical environments (e.g. appropriate sanitation for girls), adequate learning and teaching materials, gender responsive child-centred curriculum and sufficient hours of instruction (at least 800 hours/year) are imperative for quality learning. Initial instruction in the mother tongue improves literacy acquisition. Children must also be fit for learning: school feeding, health, prevention, protection and care programmes can boost attendance and performance.

#### *Attention to fragile States*

17. Some 37% of out- of- school children live in 35 states defined as fragile by OECD/DAC. It is crucial to meet the educational needs of children in conflict and post-conflict situations and to provide learning opportunities for young people who missed out on primary education. This requires urgent and effective action by the international community, including promotion of partnerships, capacity development, improved strategies and new financing mechanisms to meet the dire needs of countries in emergency, post conflict and transition situations.

#### *Increasing national financing on primary education*

18. Partnerships with non-governmental organisations and the private sector can play an influential role in extending primary education provision. Such arrangements require that appropriate roles and responsibilities be carefully defined. More broadly, ensuring the right to education calls for responsive, participatory and accountable systems of educational governance and management – systems that promote access for all children and good quality teaching and learning. This notably calls for improved management capacity at all levels of government.

#### *Increasing development assistance*

19. Official Development Assistance (ODA) to education remains well below the US\$9 billion required just to reach UPE. ODA is still not targeted to the neediest countries. Donors should raise to at least 10% the share of basic education in bilateral sector aid and further increase multilateral aid to education to close the financing gap. Additional resources for the Fast Track Initiative will promote donor coordination and harmonization, and help mobilize funds for basic education.

#### *Connecting primary education with wider educational opportunities*

20. Ensuring that adults, particularly mothers, are literate has an impact on whether their children, and especially their daughters, attend school. Early learning and pre-school programmes improve children's well-being, prepare them for primary school and give them a better chance of succeeding once they are enrolled. The provision of quality secondary education is an impetus for students and their families to consider learning on a longer continuum.

#### *Education underpins the MDGs*

21. The two education-related MDGs are part of the larger educational framework of the six Education for All (EFA) goals which aim to achieve basic quality education for everyone, from young children to adults. Realising all six goals is a key strategy in supporting the overall MDG agenda, in particular to reducing poverty, improving child and maternal health, and empowering women.

### **Key questions for debate**

- What are the most strategic ways to support children who are missing out on schooling? What are the most effective measures for giving access to quality learning to the most marginalized and disadvantaged groups? What comprehensive affordable strategies promote a child-friendly learning environment?
- Encouraging girls' access to education is also linked to broader social reforms that promote gender equality. In countries where girls remain at a stark disadvantage, what measures can be taken to empower women, in particular through more support for literacy and life skills programmes?
- Quality education depends to a large extent on the quality of teaching. What are the best strategies for drawing more teachers to the profession and giving them adequate training, as well as retaining them?
- Given competing demands on limited resources, what is the potential for increasing national spending on basic education? What experience of innovative approaches to mobilizing national resources exists? What forms of governance and management encourage greater equality and quality in education? What political and strategic challenges need to be addressed in donor countries to move towards greater, longer-term and more predictable aid to basic education?
- In situations of fragility or instability which require multi-dimensional support, what are the best channels and modalities for delivering aid effectively?