

ISRAEL

The Israel Education Experience

Statement by

Professor Sergio DellaPergola

The Shlomo Argov Chair on Israel-Diaspora Relations
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel
sergioa@huji.ac.il

Commission on Population and Development
Forty-fourth session

Agenda Item 6:
Contribution of population and development issues to
the themes of the annual ministerial review in 2011

United Nations, New York
14 April 2011

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The 2011 Annual Ministerial Review will focus on "Implementing the internationally agreed goals and commitments in regard to education". There has been tremendous progress towards universal primary education during the past decade, especially in developing countries. Limited access to education, high drop-out rates and grade repetition, and poor quality of education, however, remain significant challenges that stand in the way of fully achieving this goal.

I would like to briefly share some observations about Israel's standing in regards to the 2011 AMR goal as part of our efforts assess the state of implementation of the education-related goals and objectives of the United Nations Development Agenda. Israel faces many of the same educational challenges of other developed countries, and I shall refer here to five different and crucial aspects of the problems that we encounter.

The first issue is the implementation of full and general access to schooling. Under existing laws, education in Israel is compulsory until age 14 and free in public schools until the end of high school at age 18. Israel stands 9th in the world in mean years of study, and 22nd in expected years of study. The gap between these two measures indicates that there is still room to achieve more extensive access to post-secondary education. Educational enrollment is basically universal at the elementary level, and the net enrolment rate reaches 87 percent at the secondary level. About 70 percent of young adults aged 25 to 35 today continue their education beyond high school in the available system of universities, colleges, and other tertiary educational institutions.

The second issue relates to ensuring equal opportunities to study for all citizens. Given that Israel's large immigrant population emanates from countries with huge variances in their levels of development, it is often a challenge to ensure that young immigrants adapt to the school system equally. In some cases, these challenges cause some students to become estranged and drop-out from the school system. Israel has continued to undertake efforts to minimize such occurrences. We are proud that the sustained exposure of children to the educational system over time has helped to narrow educational gaps between different sectors of the population – defined in terms of ethnicity and countries of origin. Differences, however, have not disappeared altogether, and efforts must be invested to reach full equalization. In regards to gender equity, women in Israel have higher educational attainments than men at all educational levels from high school to doctoral degrees.

A third issue in education is ensuring the right of all citizens to equal and good public education, and their other right to choose the cultural orientation of such education. This issue may be acute in countries, like Israel, with large ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities. Israel chooses to give parents a choice of four parallel state-education systems. These systems are: the mainstream Hebrew language state system, the state-religious system, an independent but state-supported more religious system, and the Arab language system.

A fourth issue, pertinent to the main topic of this 44th CPD session, is the availability of education to sexuality, reproductive health, and family life. Israel has introduced these topics of instruction at the high school level in most educational systems. By including these subjects in the curriculum, Israel seeks to better prepare younger generations for the responsibilities of adult life.

A fifth and final issue is the relationship between education and fertility. We have already noted here the recent emergence of a direct relationship between educational attainment and family size. This is a new trend that is also appearing in other more developed societies in Europe, North America, and Asia. The greater empowerment of women and men generated by higher education allows for more confident choices regarding preferred family sizes, and the achievement of those targets in a more efficient manner. In turn, improved employment and income conditions allowed for by higher education tend to generate a greater sense of satisfaction and optimism toward life, which are strongly correlated with the presence of children.

Additionally, through its Agency for International Development Cooperation, Israel partners with developing countries to utilize education as a means to promote improved health in impoverished regions. These programs include health education for mothers and education on sexual health and prevention of HIV/AIDS among adolescents.

The Israeli case confirms the crucial role of education, and the need to continually expand public and private investment in the several facets of the educational process and its interaction with other aspects of society.

Thank you Mr. Chairman.