

**Statement by Mr. Thomas Stelzer
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**Regional Meeting for Asia and the Pacific
For the 2011 ECOSOC Annual Ministerial Review
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Mr. Vice-President
Honourable Ministers,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to join you, Mr. Vice-President of the Council, in extending my sincere thanks to the Thai Government for hosting today's timely conference; and to the UN system partners, especially UNESCO, UNICEF and ESCAP, for their essential contribution in making it happen. A warm welcome to all our distinguished participants from across the Asian region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The state of education in Asia today is as varied and complex as the region itself. There is cause for hope — and plenty of room for alarm as well. Let's begin with the glass half-full.

Big gains have been made in primary education over the past decade. South and West Asia, for example, cut their out-of-school population by more than half between 1999 and 2007, from 39 to 18 million. In the process, school enrolment rose from 74 to 86%, driven mainly by progress in India.

In Central Asia, meanwhile, enrolment hovers at 92%, though on current trends, universal primary education in the sub-region will be achieved by 2015.

East Asia and the Pacific are another story. Japan, with 100% enrolment, contrasts with some of the Pacific islands, which are sliding backwards.

One worry is the twin-headed monster of late-entry and early dropout. In East Asia and the Pacific, two-thirds of children enrol late. Yet travel west and the challenge is retention; in certain parts of South Asia, a slim majority of students complete primary school.

Distinguished guests,

Let's not confuse enrolment with learning.

Why? Look no further than the many children who graduate without basic proficiency in reading, writing and math.

Poor education results cannot simply disappear. Just ask one of South Asia's nearly 400 million illiterate adults.

Even good education results, though, are hardly a cure-all, as young graduates increasingly find themselves shut out of today's labour market. Structural unemployment is partly to blame, but so too is the growing skills mismatch between what's taught in the classroom and what's demanded in the workplace.

Is our education agenda fully addressing the huge and evolving challenges before us? Is there a need to look with fresh eyes at the post-2015 development framework? For its part, ECOSOC will focus in 2012 on ways to spur job creation by making graduates more workforce-ready, together with demand-side measures like creating more flexible labour markets.

Nor should we stop there. Actions which promote social inclusion, improvement in health outcomes and progress in sustainable development can be better integrated into formal teaching just about everywhere.

Meanwhile, the cost of *inaction* is steep, a fact self evident with the developments in the Middle East.

Excellencies,

Today, the “education paradox” is more pronounced than ever — with education serving equally as a high-speed escalator, for those with it, and as a mighty roadblock, for those without it.

Try finding a decent job without education; or fighting diseases like HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis; or making sure fewer women die from childbirth and their children live to adulthood; or protecting the environment. No easy tasks.

We need to get education right — specially access and quality — and go from there. ECOSOC was established more than 60 years ago to ensure this.

I look forward to your ideas, experiences, and policy recommendations.

Thank you.