Dear Colleagues

Thank you sincerely for affording me the opportunity to interact with you during this stimulating and educative Phase 1 of the e-discussion on the quality of education. Please find below a summary of key points raised and recommendations made during the discussion. We are pleased to confirm that the recommendations you made on both questions will be a part of the e-discussion reporting input for the ECOSOC Annual Ministerial Review process.

Sincerely

Dr. Mmantsetsa Marope
Director
Division for Basic to Higher Education and Learning

Summary of Phase 1 E-Discussion

1. Given that the quality of teaching is critical to students' learning, how can the training and working conditions of teachers be improved in contexts with resource constraints?

Resources as a critical constraint to the training and working conditions of teachers:

Several participants of the e-discussion acknowledged that to varying degrees, the shortage of resources is a key constraint to improving the training and working conditions of teachers in both developed and developing countries. However this may not be an insurmountable constraint. Participants overwhelmingly focused on ways to mitigate the potential adverse impact of limited resources and less so on increasing resources. This was refreshingly striking. Some of their examples for reducing the impact of financial constraints on teacher training and working conditions were:

- Better management of available resources to produce intended outcomes. A point was made that while resources are a constraint poor management of resources may be a more critical constraint than the absolute size of the resource envelope. A lot can be achieved within the same envelope or without additional resource if only those resources are well managed. Furthermore, a key issue seems to be community respect in exchange for "a job well done", and that is not so much affected by resources, because most human communities are willing and able to understand that "a job well done" is relative to resource availability and context.

- Related to efficient resource management is the reduction of unnecessary expenses such as expensive cars for government officers should be seriously considered.

- A focus on non-financial incentives such as providing adequate teacher professional support, promoting their innovative attitude and skills, motivating them to be innovative in all situations, easing bureaucratic burdens on them and improving accountability measures can improve teacher training as well as their working conditions even in resource poor contexts.

- A recognition that quality teaching need not be expensive especially when it's tailored to context and made to fit purpose. Before assuming that financing is a critical constraint, it is important to unpack what is meant by "quality" teaching but is should not be assumed a priori to be expensive

- The decentralization of teacher professional support to make it more affordable, sustainable and contextually responsive. This is most suitable in remote and hard to reach areas. Examples include building the capacity of decentralized education authorities to deliver professional support to teachers; building "teacher support networks" to be lead and coordinated by competent teacher and to serve as spaces for research and sharing experiences, building and sharing materials, training and in classroom support.

- Incentivizing teachers that participate in decentralized professional support services such as awarding them diplomas.

- Using affordable and locally available materials to create teaching and learning materials. Also the use of local experts such as community members to teach and share their rich knowledge and experience instead of always reaching for external expertise. An example was given of the Waldorf Pedagogy movement from Brazil.

Policy and Operational Recommendations for improving teachers' working conditions and training:

- Improve revenue collection such as through taxes and allocate some of those resources toward improving teacher training and working conditions.

- Improve accountability and governance, block resource leakages and ensure that resources reach schools.

- Set common standards for Teacher Training Colleges and appoint independent bodies involving public, private and civil society actors to ensure quality assurance of teacher training institutions.

- Appoint committed and strategic leaders to head education systems and teacher training colleges.

- In addition to their qualifications, recruit teachers for their passion, commitment and love of children.

- Engage teacher unions and PTAs constructively to improve teacher working conditions and implement the teacher code of conduct. As much as possible, recruit teachers from local communities. This should improve their punctuality while reducing absenteeism. Easy access to schools should also reduce teacher's hassle factor and thus improve their motivation.

- Reduce the burden of non-teaching tasks like that of census enumeration, election duty and providing mid-day meals in some parts of the world and treat teachers as specialized cadres.

- Treat teacher training as a continuous process. It could now be based on self paced curriculum, trained through the use of information technology, like farmers who get information about markets and products from IT Kiosks.

- Use ICTs to and distance education to cost effectively scale up teacher training programs

- Reform teacher training methods toward more participatory and observation based methods as a way to transform teacher effectiveness once they are in service

2. Which interventions are most effective for retaining secondary-age students in school by preparing them with a foundation for lifelong learning and for labor market participation?

The e-discussion pointed to several causes of dropping out of school and implicitly, mitigation strategies. In their order of significance, these causes include both direct and indirect costs of schooling; poor quality of education and thus perceived low value for money; supply factors such as lack of schools and/or distance away from school. For girls in particular, gender related health issues and safety feature significantly in addition to the aforementioned constraints.

Policy and Operational Recommendations for retaining secondary school learners by giving them a foundation for life-long learning and preparing them for labor market participation

- Use ICTs to leverage the expertise of the limited pool of qualified teachers and keep students engaged in their education processes. An example cited in the e-discussion is the use of virtual high schools.

- Include work experience part of the curriculum and examination grades

- Promote collaboration between schools and vocational and technical training institutions which provide real ´´on site´´ training in vocational skills. Examples from Save the Children´s project in Colombia include agricultural training in school farms, and the building of tourist packages with students training as guides.

- Ensure that such vocational training opportunities are based on a rigorous assessment of local market conditions; include business element in the strategy; are integrated into school curricula; and if possible bring real immediate benefits to school and students so that projects are more sustainable (e.g. school feeding or income from farms).

- Promote collaboration between schools, local trades, industries and employers to create job placements for students and inculcate the value of both school and work. At the same time, introduce student support and mentoring systems and create a support system for them to find work placements.

- Support and encourage the use of internet for vocational guidance

- Improve the perceived value of schooling and of education by improving the quality of learners' educational experience and by changing their perception (and those of their parents) of their private returns on investment in education. The latter may require public education and awareness raising campaigns