

BACKGROUND NOTE

2011 e-discussion on *Education: Closing the Gap* Annual Ministerial Review of United Nations Economic and Social Council

I. THE 2011 ANNUAL MINISTERIAL REVIEW

The [Annual Ministerial Review](#) (AMR) is a function of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) mandated at the 2005 World Summit¹. Its purpose is to assess annual progress made towards the [Millennium Development Goals](#) (MDGs) and the implementation of other goals and targets agreed at the major UN conferences and summits over the past 15 years, which constitute the United Nations Development Agenda. See Annex I for further details.

Each year the Annual Ministerial Review focuses on a specific theme within the UN Development Agenda. This year's theme is "*Implementing the internationally agreed goals and commitments in regard to education*".

In addition to assessing progress on the MDGs, the AMR contributes to scaling up and accelerating action to realize the broader UN Development Agenda. At the 2011 AMR – to be held in July in Geneva – the report of the Secretary-General will provide a succinct overview of progress in education. The report is expected to highlight the critical role of education in economic and social development; address the urgency of sustaining progress in education outcomes in times of global crises; examine the need for education policies that not only strengthen education systems but also ensure policy coherence across sectors; make the case for safeguarding aid to education and aid effectiveness; discuss widening the circle of education partnerships and enhancing their impact; and introduce a number of emerging and future education challenges. The report will also include a number of recommendations for consideration by ECOSOC.

The 2011 AMR process is anticipated to lead to a Ministerial Declaration and concrete initiatives that will build upon and advance work being undertaken in education.

II. OBJECTIVE AND STRUCTURE OF THE E-DISCUSSION

The AMR e-discussion is an annual event that engages experts, practitioners and policy-makers from various regions and stakeholder groups in a global dialogue on that year's theme. It provides a vehicle to develop recommendations for UN Member States to help strengthen their efforts to address some of the most significant challenges in education. It also serves to provide the intergovernmental process – especially ECOSOC – with constructive ideas about efforts to reduce inequities in education worldwide. Contributions made by e-discussion participants will be synthesised into an outcome document and channelled into various parts of the AMR process as appropriate, including the report of the Secretary-General, the regional and national review processes and the global review at the ECOSOC Substantive Session. The outcome document will also be made available online.

The 2011 e-discussion *Education: Closing the Gap* will be organized into three parts around the topics (1) Quality in education; (2) Access to education; and (3) Innovation in education. Expert guest moderators will guide and enrich the discussion. The e-discussion will be hosted by [MDGNet](#) and will run from Tuesday, 1 February 2011 to Friday, 4 March 2011.

¹ A/RES/60/1, para. 155

As the 2011 AMR theme is broad, a series of questions have been formulated to elicit your views and facilitate discussion. The subsequent sections provide some background context on the selected topics.

III. E-DISCUSSION PART ONE: QUALITY IN EDUCATION

Questions

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

A. Much of the focus in the education sector since 2000 has been on increasing the number of children in schools, in particular in primary education. Though many countries have made significant progress in increasing enrolment or spending in the education sector, much less attention has been paid to learning outcomes and the quality of education. In many countries, higher net enrolment rates have yet to fully translate into higher literacy rates. In some countries with poor quality education, children complete primary school without basic literacy and numeracy skills. Millions of youth are dropping out of school because of poor education quality and lack of relevance.

B. Students must be at the heart of efforts to improve learning outcomes and educational attainment. In particular, attention should be given to the teaching-learning process, including among others: ensuring teachers' subject mastery and verbal skills, designing good quality curricula which provide life skills and facilitate a transition into the labour market, providing relevant and affordable books and materials, providing education in the local language for the first years of schooling and addressing issues such as predisposition, temperament, peer pressure and socialization. UNICEF's [Child Friendly Schools](#) (CFS) programme is one such framework for quality child-centred education.

C. While there are ongoing challenges to achieving universal quality primary education, the international community must also look more closely at the issue of quality secondary education and entry into the world of "decent" work. Evidence shows that availability of quality secondary education is a key determinant for completion of a primary school cycle, because secondary education is associated with greater economic benefits than primary education. Quality secondary education includes a balance of academic disciplines, practical and social skills and civic education, which can help to ensure young people's successful transition to tertiary, vocational education or employment. Quality vocational training initiatives and informal and low-threshold types of training are important components of any education and training policy, particularly for marginalized groups.

D. Despite many countries' efforts to commit domestic resources to education, the lack of teachers and quality of teacher training are a major bottleneck in improving quality (and enhancing access). As net enrolment rates continue to increase, many countries face severe teacher shortages. [UNESCO estimates](#) that 9.1 million new teachers are needed by 2015 to reach the education goals². Issues of

² UNESCO, Institute for Statistics (2010) *Information Sheet No. 5: The Global Demand for Primary Teachers – 2010 Update*.

teacher remuneration, absenteeism and incentives require further analysis of good practice in teacher training and management.

E. A number of actions can promote improved quality in education. International testing of learning outcomes and skills has encouraged better data collection on learning and improved international comparability of learning achievement. Greater transparency and accountability in education services are also necessary for improving quality, whether via international testing or enhanced access to data on education governance. Perhaps most importantly, strong political will is often an important determinant for quality, along with the amount of financial resources devoted to education. Putting in place the right incentives can help improve the functioning of key institutions. It can help enhance the involvement of teachers, parents and local officials in decision-making processes, improve resource allocation, and improve human resources management.

IV. E-DISCUSSION PART TWO: ACCESS TO EDUCATION

Questions

1. Early childhood care and education can mitigate social disadvantage and lead to improved learning achievement. How can integrated approaches to education and child and maternal health care be targeted more effectively to children from the poorest households?
2. The benefits of educating women and girls have been widely documented. What concrete steps can be taken to get girls into school and keep them there?

A. While much progress has been made on achieving universal primary education since the [Education For All](#) (EFA) Dakar Framework for Action was agreed in 2000, an aggregate analysis hides the large and often persistent inequalities, disparities and combined forms of exclusion that continue to leave tens of millions out of school. Low levels of enrolment are concentrated not only in specific regions but also in certain segments of the population. Girls in particular are being left behind. [Recent UNESCO analysis](#) demonstrates that 60 percent of countries face gender disparities in primary and secondary education and as many as half will not achieve the goal of gender parity in education by 2015³. In addition, progress towards other EFA goals - in particular the targets on early child care and education (ECCE) and adult literacy - has been particularly slow. Access expansion must be equity-based, complemented by targeted interventions to reach marginalized groups.

B. Exclusion from education is rooted in deeply ingrained social, economic and political processes, and unequal power relationships. While poverty and gender continue to thwart progress on inclusive education, other forms of stigmatization – such minority ethnic and language status, disability and HIV/AIDS – continue to keep millions of children and youth from attending school. In addition, conflict is a particularly potent source of marginalization worldwide. Over half of the children

³ UNESCO, Institute for Statistics (2010) *Global Education Digest 2010: Comparing Education Statistics across the World*.

currently out of school live in conflict-affected fragile states, based on analysis from [a recent report by Save the Children](#)⁴.

C. According to UNESCO's [2010 EFA Global Monitoring Report](#), many of the measures which have proven to be effective in reducing inequalities are affordable, even in the poorest countries. The most successful of these have included: lowering financial barriers through the elimination of school fees, bringing schools closer to marginalized communities, developing second chance programmes, improving the learning environment in disadvantaged schools, enforcing laws against discrimination, providing incentives through social protection programmes such as conditional cash transfers, school feeding programmes and school health programmes that help to reduce absenteeism.

E. Beyond school enrolment and quality learning within, ensuring that children are adequately prepared before they begin school can lead to better learning outcomes over time. Investment in pre-school teaching is a cost effective way to enhance learning in primary school and has great potential equity gains. The degree of pre-school provision varies significantly across countries. Public investment should be geared towards narrowing disparities by targeting marginalized groups, who tend to reap particularly high benefits in relation to pre-school learning.

F. Maternal education can also bring a major boost for children's educational attainment. A mother's level of education has a strong positive effect on the enrolment of her children, especially that of girls. Implementing literacy programmes for the large number of female adults and out-of-school youth, as well as promoting life-long learning therefore can make a major contribution to improving access and enhancing learning outcomes.

V. E-DISCUSSION PART THREE: INNOVATION IN EDUCATION

Questions

1. How can non-state actors (including civil society organisations, faith-based groups, private philanthropies and the private sector) best contribute to the achievement of education and learning for all?
2. What innovations, including through the use of technology and through new financing arrangements, are needed to make education more appropriate for the modern world?

A. To achieve the education MDGs and EFA goals, all sectors of society and a broad range of stakeholders must engage, ranging from parents, teachers and local school boards to district and national authorities, policymakers, investors, non-governmental and civil-society organizations, international institutions and donor governments.

B. Given the clear linkages between education goals and the other MDGs and the catalytic role which education can play, education needs to be factored in the design and implementation of national development strategies. Increasing educational attainment levels are shown to be intrinsically linked to

⁴ Save the Children Alliance (2009) *Last in Line, Last in School 2009*

the long-term poverty reduction efforts. One important example is the positive implications of women's and girls education for their health and the health of their families. Also, the important role which education can play in promoting a transition towards a more sustainable consumption and production pattern is now also widely recognized. This interdependence needs to be reflected in stronger intersectoral coordination and more joined up policy making in government.

C. While national governments have primary responsibility for delivering education services, and ensuring equity and quality, non-governmental (including faith-based) organizations, private and civil society groups are often making a significant contribution to the achievement of the education goals. It will be important to harness further those energies both at the country and global levels. It would also be worthwhile to understand better the comparative advantages each organizational type brings to education financing and service-delivery. This is essential to improving coordination among different stakeholders and enhancing efficiency.

D. Enhancing the role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for education is another area of opportunity. ICTs – through Open Educational Resources and distance-learning opportunities, among others – offers a number of promising developments for enhancing quality and increasing access to education, but little is known about which mechanisms work most successfully in which contexts.

E. The global commitment to align aid for development with national priorities, as articulated in the Paris Declaration, and to "make the money work", continues to challenge current approaches to allocating development aid, including for education. The potential of mutual assessment reviews in the education sector – with concrete performance targets in national education plans and aid policies – should be taken up as a critical means to reinstate trust between providers and government.

F. Some major global education programmes, such as the [EFA Fast-Track Initiative](#), the [United Nations Girls' Education Initiative](#), the [Global Campaign for Education](#), the [International Task Force on Teachers for EFA](#) and the [Inter-Agency Standing Committee Cluster for Education in Emergencies](#) have united various actors for spearheading innovative education financing initiatives and policy guidance. These have been important for bringing various stakeholders together to mobilize education resources, but their records are mixed.

G. National governments must prioritize education in their budgets if education goals are to be met, and donors need to honor their commitments to support such national leadership with external aid. However, in the current economic climate, there is also an urgent need to look beyond traditional sources of education funding to new partnership and innovative financing mechanisms, which could catalyze current spending on education and push efficiency gains. Innovative financing options – such as international financial transaction taxes, professional sports levies, education ventures funds, contributions from migrant remittances – could help raise the profile of education and promote innovation in education whilst simultaneously mobilizing new resources and filling financing gaps. New partnerships, including stronger South-South and North-South-South cooperation, can also generate increased financial and technical resources for education, as witnessed, for example, by the [E-9 Initiative](#) among nine of the most highly populated countries of the South.

ANNEX I

The ECOSOC Annual Ministerial Review

At the 2005 World Summit, leaders mandated⁵ the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to hold an annual ministerial substantive review (AMR) to assess the progress made towards the MDGs and the implementation of the other goals and targets agreed at the major UN conferences and summits over the past 15 years, which constitute the United Nations Development Agenda (UNDA). The first AMR was held in Geneva on 3-4 July 2007.

Format. The AMR takes the form of a two-day ministerial-level meeting during the ECOSOC high-level segment in July. It consists of:

- a *global review* of the United Nations development agenda for systematic review and monitoring of progress made in the implementation of the UNDA,
- a *thematic review* related to a subset of the UNDA that is agreed upon by the Council in the multi-year programme of work for the AMR, and
- *national voluntary reviews* where countries present the progress they have made in implementing their national development strategy.

Not an event, but a process. The AMR is not limited to the two-day event but is, rather, a process including the preparation spanning many months before the session and the follow-up afterwards. In 2011, the following activities are being organized to lead up to the review:

- An *e-discussion* hosted on UNDG's MDG-Net will capture important feedback and insights from the country level in February and March.
- A global AMR *preparatory event* is planned to take place in New York.
- The 15 countries volunteering to make national presentations at the 2011 ECOSOC substantive session in July are envisaged to hold *national consultative meetings* with key stakeholders, including from civil society and the private sector, on the implementation of their national development strategies prior to the High-level segment in July.
- In preparation for the AMR thematic debate, five *regional ministerial meetings* are planned to be held.
- An *Innovation Fair* showcasing innovative programmes and projects will promote an exchange of practical examples of what has worked to help identify policies that merit scaling-up.

Strengthening the AMR in 2011. Preparations for the 2011 Annual Ministerial Review aim at two major overriding objectives: (i) to strengthen the AMR as the major mechanism for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of commitments contained the UN Development Agenda; and (ii) to mobilize support for the realization of the agenda, including through the global partnership for development.

⁵ A/RES/60/1, para. 155