

30 November 2008

**Statement of Mr. Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann,
President of the 63rd Session of the General Assembly,
at the High-Level Discussion on “Financing Education to Achieve the Education for
All Goals” on the Occasion of the Follow-up Conference on Financing for
Development**

Your Highness,
Mr. Secretary-General,
Mr. Director-General,
Excellencies,
Friends All,

I am very pleased to join you at this special event during this very productive Conference on Financing for Development in order to highlight the crucial issue of Financing Education, particularly for vulnerable populations living in situations of conflict and natural disasters. I wish to thank Her Highness Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser Al-Misnad for inviting me here in her capacity as UNESCO Special Envoy on Basic and Higher Education. I am honored to join her and Director-General of UNESCO, Koichiro Matsuura, and thank them for making this issue a focus of our attention during our gathering in Doha.

As His Highness, the Emir of Qatar, pointed out in his opening address to the Conference yesterday, no society can develop unless its people have the education and the resources to contribute to that development. The essence of our meeting here in Doha is to reinforce the commitments, by donor countries and developing countries alike, to allocate sufficient human, financial and material resources to social programmes for the development of our single most valuable resource – our children, our peoples.

If the importance of such investment is self-evident, why is it so difficult to achieve?

It has taken the hard work and advocacy of UNESCO and other members of the UN family like UNICEF, UNDP and the UN Population Fund, to make the right to “education for all” a central part of our collective work at the United Nations. We have come a long way since the ground-breaking conference on Education for All: Meeting Basic Learning Needs which took place in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990. This was the first of the development conferences that have set the new people-centered development agenda of the United Nations.

But we must increase our efforts to find innovative ways to ensure that our global agreements – the Millennium Development Goals and the outcome of this meeting in Doha are two examples --- promote programmes for literacy and quality education that truly advance our societies.

Today, it is a shameful fact that developing countries continue to struggle to provide this basic right to free, compulsory education. This struggle is made only more difficult by the terrible confluence of crises that now threaten to tip millions of people into the swelling ranks of the extreme poor. The global recession is inevitably hurting the chances of meeting the two Millennium Development Goals relating to education as well.

And the civil conflicts and the wars of aggression currently devastating countries like Iraq and Afghanistan are draining important financial resources for development in those countries and elsewhere. Armed conflict is also disrupting primary and secondary education for tens of millions of children in areas of conflict, from Palestine to Colombia, from Sudan to Sri Lanka.

We think of a country like Somalia, whose public educational system has eroded into oblivion since 1991. That means an entire generation of young people has received no formal education. For Somali youth, there is no recourse but to become part of the self-perpetuating violence that feeds on poverty, illiteracy, ignorance and neglect. It is a tragedy that we must contemplate yet another generation of girls and boys being born into such hopelessness.

The United Nations is struggling to come to terms with these vulnerable populations in conflict zones. We are, thanks to significant reforms, responding much more effectively to natural disasters that continue to occur at an accelerating rate. Increasingly complex humanitarian assistance and recovery efforts now recognize the importance of an educational component for boys and girls and women as well as ex-combatants. These people need basic skills to strengthen the recovery efforts in post-conflict societies and reduce the chances of lapsing back into violence.

Underlying the failure to provide free, safe and well-resourced schools for children in conflict zones is the fact that, unlike the enormous expense that is required for campaigns against HIV/AIDS, for example, education remains a relatively inexpensive investment that produces pervasive benefits to society. In emergency and reconstruction situations, education saves lives and helps to restore the broader quality of life. It becomes a wellspring for the affirmation of hope.

The United Nations is confronting the fact that its work lacks coherence in this area and is refocusing its attention on the right to education, especially in these difficult circumstances. I believe that progress will accelerate when we address the problem of education as a systemic challenge that requires its integration into other social programs, especially health care, job creation, advancement of women and community organizing. The United Nations is especially well-equipped to explore such holistic approaches. However, it is notable that the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education recently reported that the right to education in emergency situations is the biggest gap, and that it is growing.

In part inspired by the work of UNESCO and dynamic civil society organizations initiatives, I have committed the General Assembly to address this crucial issue as a priority during the 63rd session. I have advised Member States that I am convening an informal debate next spring on the theme of access to education in emergency, post-crisis and transition situations caused by man-made conflicts and natural disasters.

I have repeatedly urged Member States to devote special attention to the rights and the needs of children youth and adults and, in particular, girls and women in situations of armed conflict and natural disaster.

Our Assembly thematic debate will provide the opportunity for the world community – all 192 Member States – to address our shortcomings and ensure improved monitoring of current initiatives in reaching out to these children. By safeguarding the right to education in emergencies, Governments and the international community will send out a forceful and hopeful message about their future.

In closing, I would like to take this opportunity to commend Her Highness Sheika Mozah bint Nasser Al-Misnad for her commitment to this issue. Her advocacy on behalf of the growing populations disrupted by natural disasters and armed conflicts sets an example for all of us. Undoubtedly her persistence will create educational opportunities that bring normalcy even to the most troubled of environments.

Dear Friends, Your Highness, I know that I can count on your cooperation and invite your personal participation in this initiative. Our meeting in Doha provides us with opportunities like this to share best practices and explore new areas of cooperation on these issues – issues of life and death for our peoples and our societies. I look forward to receiving your views now and in the months ahead.

Thank you.