Equality in Education: The Universal Challenge

Millennium Development Goal 2, which calls for every boy and girl to complete primary schooling, is the only goal that is universal in its scope. As such, it reminds the world community of the need to focus explicitly on those children who might currently be excluded from the classroom.

Children living in the least developed countries, the poorest communities, and the most impoverished households are less likely to be enrolled in, or be able to regularly attend school, as are children in rural areas, children with disabilities and those living in areas affected by armed conflict. Children from ethnic and linguistic minorities face additional barriers as they struggle to learn the language of instruction. Getting children into school is only the beginning, however. Ensuring that they attend school regularly and complete their studies with the skills that will allow them to achieve future success are the ultimate objectives.

In many countries, girls are less likely to attend school than boys, particularly at higher levels of education. Gender parity for all levels of education, a key target of Millennium Development Goal 3, is an essential component of transforming gender relations and guaranteeing that boys and girls are provided with equal opportunities to reach their full potential. In 2005, 54 countries were found to require additional efforts to achieve this goal. They must be supported to undertake the initiatives to achieve equality in education by 2015.

Ensuring that every child receives a primary education will require additional resources, but this goal cannot be seen as optional or unattainable. Putting every boy and girl in the world in a good-quality primary school would cost between $7 billion and $17 billion per year – a relatively small amount compared to other government expenditures. The benefits of such an investment would be immeasurable in terms of the health, productivity and social well-being of children today and of future generations.

MDG 2 and MDG 3 call for governments and international donors and agencies to include all children currently excluded from education. The universal challenge of these goals embodies the spirit of the Millennium agenda, which seeks to reach out to the excluded, especially children.