

PROVIDING QUALITY EDUCATION

[This document, together with other information on the Special Session on Children, is available on the official site:

<http://www.unicef.org/specialsession>]

This document contains a summary of the following events:

Achieving Education for All

Improving the quality of education

Achieving gender parity

Early childhood care and development

◆ ACHIEVING EDUCATION FOR ALL

“The most important capital is human capital.”

– *Abdoulaye Wade, President of Senegal*

“Quality education is not a mystery. It can be achieved with political will.”

– *Caroline Barebwoha, 15, Uganda*

“Why wait for 2015 to have Education for All? Why not now?”

– *Nine-year-old schoolgirl from the Netherlands*

“The commitment...to girls’ education stems from an overall commitment to human development, and a conviction that investments made to this purpose are highly rewarding.”

– *Suzanne Mubarak, First Lady of Egypt*

The goal was set in Dakar two years ago, and reaffirmed as a core objective at the Special Session, of achieving quality basic education for all by 2015. Commitment to the goal was reflected in the large attendance of up to 300 delegates at panel meetings on the key issues of achieving genuine quality together with gender parity, and on early childhood care to lay the base for later success in school.

Consensus has grown that the Dakar goal is feasible despite the challenges. According to UNESCO estimates, of 155 developing countries, 36 have achieved universal primary education: on current trends, 31 nations are likely to reach the goal by 2015, but 88 nations are unlikely to be guaranteeing the five years of schooling considered essential for basic literacy and numeracy.

Both in panel discussions and in NGO meetings, delegates repeatedly stressed the importance of closing the financial gap, especially for the poorest nations. The means must also be found to abolish the user fees for textbooks, uniforms and other school expenses that currently foreclose education to millions of children, especially in Africa.

◆ IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION

The discussion of quality issues started from the premise that access without quality is tantamount to no access at all, former senator Dr. Saisuree Chutikul of Thailand pointing out that quality education is a right laid down in the CRC. As children themselves have said, there is little point in going to school if it does not equip them with learning skills and skills for life. The investment in education therefore goes to waste.

Emmy Simmons of USAID reviewed the best practices learned from the agency's experience in a number of countries, and Ezio Castelli, President of the Association of Volunteers in International Service, USA, Inc., presented the AVSI experience working with teachers and communities in Albania and Uganda.

Key points emerging from the discussion carry implications for action:

- Quality is non-negotiable for all stakeholders, including governments, donors and teachers. As noted by Elie Jouen, Deputy Secretary-General of Education International, teachers are pivotal to achievement in the classroom.
- Perceptions of quality vary. A broader definition should be adopted that would encompass the learners' contribution, the content, processes, environments and outcomes.
- Quality is critical for establishing gender parity and influencing parents to send their daughters to school.
- Three recommendations by the Global Campaign for Education would improve quality rapidly, especially for girls. First, ensure that schools are safe and seen to be safe for girls, a concern also raised by UNICEF Special Representative Mia Farrow. Second, make education more responsive to the needs of girls. And third, ensure that costs are not an impediment. Donors must be ready to finance recurrent costs as well as capital costs.
- Donor support for improving quality should focus on national leadership and ownership, funding requirements, teacher quality, and a relevant curriculum. Children should be consulted to define what they view as relevant.

The separate panel meeting on child labour as an obstacle to Education for All placed similar emphasis on quality as paramount. The high drop-out rates from inadequate education systems draw children into the labour market, whereas quality schooling answering their needs can serve as a magnet to pull them back to the classroom.

◆ ACHIEVING GENDER PARITY

Nane Annan, spouse of the United Nations Secretary-General, opened the discussion by speaking of the importance of girls' education from her own personal experience. Too many girls face cultural and other barriers that keep them out of school or prevent them from learning properly. Redressing the gender imbalance – the goal set for 2005 – is an urgent priority requiring effective strategies and sustained commitment.

Recent field experience has shown that targeted actions for girls are necessary for eliminating gender disparities; that all education must be quality education if gains are to be sustained; and that education sensitive to girls is also good for boys (the converse is not necessarily true). Minister Murli Manohar Joshi of India's Ministry of Human Resource Development described several of his nation's successful projects to reduce the numbers of girls not attending school. Suzanne Mubarak, First Lady of Egypt, shared her country's experience under the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative. After community schools and one-classroom schools had opened up the world of education to rural communities, and to girls in particular, Egypt has developed a comprehensive national agenda for girls' education.

Eveline Herfkens, Netherlands Minister for Development Cooperation, outlined various practical measures required of the international community if the global goals for education are to be met. Dr. Mamphela Ramphele, Managing Director of the World Bank, urged a compact or partnership between the industrialized and developing countries, between national governments and local communities, while WFP Global Ambassador on Hunger, George McGovern commented that malnutrition limits schoolchildren's ability to learn.

Speakers, panellists and child delegates called on governments and the international community to take a number of actions:

- Governments to abolish school fees and address the other costs of schooling for girls, including opportunity costs such as the loss of household labour
- Gender stereotypes to be eliminated from textbooks; gender equality to be taught and practiced in schools as well as in teacher training
- The World Bank or another institution to work out the detailed costing for gender equality in education – both the cost of achieving it and the price for not achieving it
- All countries to strengthen their partnerships under the Girls' Education Initiative with all possible partners – national, international and local, from donors and NGOs to school staff, parents and pupils
- Countries to introduce specific actions benefiting girls, and to strive always for quality education
- All partners to work towards overcoming the cultural obstacles to girls' schooling
- Every child to receive a nutritious school meal each day.

◆ **EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND DEVELOPMENT**

Early childhood is the period when what we do for children will count the most, both for them as individuals and for their nation's economic development. But investments are often low.

Nevertheless, Dr. Fraser Mustard, founding president of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research, observed that brain development is most dynamic in the early years and that even the poorest parents can enhance it by close interaction with their child. All agreed that the family is key, warranting investment to enable parents to be the warm, responsive, informed caregivers they wish to be.

President Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal told how his background as an economist had convinced him that the early years are critical. Accordingly he created a ministry for early childhood, and a number of villages are now home to child-care centers that combine the best modern expertise with the traditional wisdom of Senegal's cultural heritage.

Subsequent presenters offered other notable examples of services to backstop the family, ranging from child-care centers in Canada and the Philippines to the work of adapting the Sesame Street television programme in 20 nations. Topics raised in discussion included the importance of fully integrating programmes for early childhood care; ensuring that the promotion of breastfeeding receives due attention; and enlisting the corporate sector as a valuable partner and resource.

We know that early childhood programmes improve achievement at school and a nation's productivity. And they even offer the promise of fostering peace in the world; UNICEF Ambassador for Sports Johann Koss was one of several speakers who made the point that children learn tolerance – or intolerance – at a very young age.