



Report of the E-Discussion

**EDUCATION: CLOSING THE GAP**

1 February – 4 March 2011

Hosted by MDGNet (UNDG) in collaboration with the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

Moderators

Dr. Mmantsetsa Marope, Dr. Nicholas Alipui and Mr. Nicholas Burnett



## **Summary**

The e-discussion on *Education: Closing the Gap* was hosted by MDGNet (United Nations Development Group) and supported by teams from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) from 1 February to 4 March 2011. The e-discussion generated 106 responses from more than 29 countries, presenting an opportunity for the international development community to formulate critical policy messages and an action agenda to the UN Economic and Social Council's 2011 Annual

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## **Introduction**

### **Background and Purpose**

Despite the gains in primary school enrolment over the past decade, a global learning crisis threatens to stall progress on the [Education for All \(EFA\)](#) agenda and education [Millennium Development Goals \(MDGs\)](#). Recent data on education show that quality and equity have become the most important challenges to education systems, particularly in low-income countries. Although access to school remains a persistent challenge in some developing country contexts – particularly in areas characterized by high levels of horizontal inequality and in conflict-affected and fragile states – it has always been an intermediary means to the overall goal of increasing children’s learning, skills development and knowledge. For young people to be enabled to make the transition to adulthood equipped with the competencies needed for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a renewed commitment to equitable, quality education that draws on innovative approaches to education delivery and financing is needed.

The e-discussion on [Education: Closing the Gap](#)<sup>1</sup> was organized in order to bring together experts, practitioners and policymakers, from within and outside the UN system, to exchange ideas and perspectives on the global learning crisis. The e-discussion is one of several consultations that take place in preparation for the 2011 [Annual Ministerial Review \(AMR\)](#)<sup>2</sup>, which will assess the progress made in achieving the internationally agreed development goals (IADGs) in regard to education. This report aims to provide a synthesis of the e-discussion, including a description of the organization of the discussion forum, a brief overview of relevant trends in education, an analysis of the contributions made by participants, and a summary of key messages for policymakers and other professionals working in the education sector.

### **Organization of the E-discussion**

Hosted by [MDGNet \(UNDG\)](#) and supported by teams from [UNDESA](#), [UNESCO](#)

**Part 1: Quality in Education**  
**Moderated by Dr. Mmantseta Marope, UNESCO**

**Background**

Education provision, especially at the primary level, has increased due to the convergence of the Education for All (EFA) movement, the education MDGs and the progressive recognition of the indispensable role education plays in the achievement of other MDGs. Since the creation of the EFA framework in 1990, 97.3 million children have enrolled in primary education<sup>4</sup>. By 2008, primary net enrolment ratios (NERs) of 90 percent and over had been attained in North America and Western Europe, East Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, Central Asia and Central and Eastern Europe. The Arab States and South and West Asia reached 85 percent in the same period. Sub-Saharan Africa reached 76 percent, marking an 18 percentage point increase since 1999<sup>5</sup>. Between 1999 and 2008 eligible children who were still out of school declined by 39 million. Sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia accounted for 80 percent of this decline.

This progress notwithstanding, the global target of 100 percent primary NER remains a challenge. Currently 69 million children globally remained out of school and though projections are preliminary, 56 million children could still be out of school by 2015<sup>6</sup>. Progress in expanding access to other levels of education has been modest or slow. Globally, secondary gross enrolment ratios (GERs) rose from 52 percent to 67 percent between 1991 and 2008, respectively. From 1999 to 2007, the tertiary education GERs rose from 18 percent to 26 percent worldwide<sup>7</sup>. The global average for access to early childhood education (ECE) remains low at 44 percent in 2008.<sup>8</sup> At all levels of education, access remains significantly inequitable across and within countries based on income levels, location, language and gender.<sup>9</sup>

The undeniable progress in the expansion of primary education access has not been matched by comparable improvement of education quality and relevance. International and regional learning assessments such as [PISA](#), [PIRLS](#), [SACMEQ](#) and [SERCE](#) concur that an unacceptably high proportion of students complete basic education without having acquired the skills, knowledge and competencies commensurate with their grade levels. Quality is particularly low for children from poor households and from less developed countries. For instance the 2006 PIRLS, which assessed reading skills of grade 4 students in forty countries against four international benchmarks, demonstrated that the vast majority of students in developed countries performed at or above the intermediate benchmark. The 2007 SACMEQ III assessment of learning outcomes in 14 southern and eastern African countries highlighted low levels of learning achievement in most participating countries. In two of these countries, over a third of grade 6 students had failed to acquire even the most basic literacy skills, implying that many were unable to read fluently after five to six years



## **Discussion Points**

### ***Quality teaching is not determined by resources alone***

E-discussion participants acknowledged the shortage of resources as a key constraint to improving the training and working conditions of teachers in both developed and developing countries. However, regardless of the level of resources, participants forcefully argued for making effective use of available resources as a critical starting point for improving results. Refreshingly, the debate highlighted that poor management of resources is a more critical constraint than the absolute size of the resource envelope. One participant summarized the main objective of teacher training despite potential resource constraints as follows:

*to be imaginati*





*so much  
affected by resources, because most human communities are willing and able to understand*

Luis Crouch

Communities can also ensure accountability for a job well done by monitoring teachers' performance and children's learning outcomes within local schools. An e-discussion participant, who recently conducted an evaluation of community-based accountability in classrooms and schools in the context of sub-Saharan Africa, also underscored the community's role in enhancing teachers' motivation in resource-constrained environments:

*though these teachers were less well trained (in terms of formal qualifications) their motivation*

the local tourism industry. A related experience in Nigeria proved to be beneficial for secondary school-aged populations:





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, can therefore make a major contribution to improving access and enhancing learning outcomes.

### **Guiding Questions for Part 2 of the E-discussion**

1. Early childhood care and education (ECE) provides enormous benefits and can mitigate the effects of deprivation and contribute to improved learning. From a local, national and global perspective what policy options have been effective in making ECE a reality for children and reaching the most disadvantaged or excluded children?
2. The benefits of educating women and girls have been widely documented. What experiences can you share on the bottlenecks, policy initiatives, and implementation efforts that have secured incremental and sustainable progress in the last 10 years?



education to the private sector. While some participants recommended the development of

*Social change is neither upgrading the individual (through secular education and training, or religious conversion) nor of an exclusive focus on changing social and political structures.*







education frameworks. However, little is still known about which mechanisms work most successfully in which contexts.

### **Guiding Questions for Part 3 of the E-discussion**

1. How can non-state actors (including civil society organizations, 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 new financing arrangements are needed to make education appropriate for the modern world?

### **Discussion Points**

*Non-*



- (2) clear linkages and synergies between informal programmes and formal learning opportunities;
- (3) official recognition by the state education system of non-formal learning programmes with concomitant resources;
- (4) a clear outlining of the responsibilities of the state and non-state within the national education strategy.

Mary-Luce Fiaux Niada

If innovative practice within partnerships is not linked to the broader educational framework, results could occur in isolation from the rest of the sector and could fail to be taken up where successful.

*...ds of excellent that cannot be taken to scale and fizzle out, but rather introduce appropriate, applicable and sustainable changes that have*

Michael Daniel Ambatchew

***The possibilities and limitations of ICTs for education***

Madeleine Laming





## **Recommendations emerging from the discussion**

### ***Partnerships with non-state actors***

To create efficient public-private partnerships in education systems, partners / policy-makers need to understand the responsibilities, liabilities and comparative advantages of the various stakeholders. As suggested by a number of contributors, this should occur within a national policy framework in which governments ensure overall coordination, coverage and responsibility for large-scale impact, and civil society and the private sector are critical to ensuring quality and sustainability in implementation.

Strengthen school-to-work transitions by involving the private sector and civil society in the design of skills training and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) programmes. The private sector can work with education systems to identify skill shortages in labour markets and can offer on-site training and apprenticeships to youth in secondary and tertiary education. Civil society can link with schools to implement service-learning curricula, which gives young people experience working on social issues of local relevance.

Encourage the intermediation between local communities and state education systems by civil society organizations. Civil society organizations can help fill the gaps in implementation that occur between international agenda-setting, national education planning and local households' take-up of educational opportunities. They should serve not just as a supply-side interpreter for state institutions but also as a demand-led intermediary helping to bring the needs and priorities of local communities to state institutions.

Enhance advocacy to be less technical and specialist in nature so that it links more directly with people, thereby making it more persuasive and raising its profile.

### ***Innovating to make education appropriate for the modern world***

Shift the focus of innovation from teachers to learners. Too much emphasis is placed on the delivery of education by teachers and educators, which puts teachers at the centre of reforms in learning, rather than children and youth.

Build a better evidence base on innovative education strategies by bringing together experts from diverse disciplines to address gaps in knowledge. For example, greater collaboration between education specialists and researchers from neuroscience and psychology could lead to more informed, innovative solutions to learning challenges.

In order to improve education quality, encourage pedagogical and curricular innovations that emphasize creative and collaborative knowledge builders – learning to learn, learning to communicate, and learning to think critically – to address 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges and opportunities.

Education strategies that aim to promote the empowerment of children, women and those from other marginalized groups (including children with disabilities and indigenous peoples) should encompass both formal and non-formal strategies. In certain cultural contexts, failure to address inequity and disempowerment in non-formal, community spheres could slow progress in formal settings.

While investment in the expansion of education infrastructure and teacher recruitment is important, recognize the relevance of multi-grade schooling in many remote and marginalized communities – including those in conflict-affected fragile contexts – and adapt teacher training to improve learning outcomes in these settings.

Integrate the use of high-quality learning resources through affordable ICT platforms for both students and teachers in order to improve the learning process.





**Dr. Supote Prasertsri,**  
Pannasastra University of  
Cambodia

**Ernesto Schiefelbein,**  
Universidad Autonoma de  
Chile