Uneven provision of early childhood education in East Asia must be addressed - UNESCO

Bangkok, 28 November 2006 - While pre-school is universal in most Western European nations, much needs to be done to increase pre-primary school enrolment rates in developing countries, including in East Asia where only 40 per cent of children aged 3 and above have access to pre-primary education.

According to the latest edition of the Education for All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report, among countries in East Asia, Malaysia has the highest pre-school enrolment of 108 per cent, with Lao PDR and Cambodia having the lowest at 8 per cent and 9 per cent, respectively, highlighting the considerable gap between countries in the region. Thailand also has a gross enrolment ratio in pre-primary education of 90 per cent, while Viet Nam has 47 per cent, and the Philippines 40 per cent, further emphasizing the divide.

Yet, studies have shown that early childhood education boosts a child’s physical well-being, cognitive and language skills, and social and emotional development. “Given their positive influence on health, nutrition and education outcomes, early childhood programmes are a good investment in human capital,” Sheldon Shaeffer, Director of the UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education said during the regional launch of the EFA report.

“The skills children acquire from ECCE [early childhood care and education] programmes are a foundation for all further learning,” he noted. This is why ECCE is the first goal of the EFA initiative, which calls for the provision of continuing quality education for all, and which countries committed to meet by 2015.

Education and the goals of EFA are also critical to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). “There is a strong relationship between the fulfillment of the MDGs and EFA goals. Each set of goals are interdependent and must be addressed simultaneously to be achieved,” Joana Merlin-Scholtes United Nations Resident Coordinator said during the launch.

According to the 2007 Global Monitoring Report which tracks countries’ progress in meeting the EFA goals, research have shown that adequate health and nutrition are required for learning. Yet, child survival and child well-being indicators for many countries in East Asia remain alarmingly high. The report notes that on the average, 44 of every 1,000 infants born alive will not reach the age of 5 in East Asia. The numbers are higher in Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar where over 100 children for every 1,000 newborns will not survive beyond 5.

The report, which for this edition focuses on ECCE, notes that measures designed to reduce mortality and morbidity are a first step towards establishing the comprehensive care and education components for young children. So is increased government spending for ECCE and adopting a holistic approach encompassing education, health and nutrition.

“Countries like Thailand and Viet Nam have made early childhood a national priority in recent years. This has led to the adoption of new national policies, expanded provision of ECCE, increased attention to quality, and additional financial support.” Shaeffer said as he called on other countries to follow the example but also to focus on children under three. “Many countries lack programmes focused on the health, nutrition, care and education of the under 3s which is a critical period in the child’s life.”
He urged countries in the region to include ECCE policies in their national agenda, policies which are sensitive to culture, recognizes linguistic diversity, is inclusive, of good quality, and are attuned to children living with special needs or under situations of emergency or conflict.

The EFA Global Monitoring Report, which is prepared by an independent team and published by UNESCO, also presented findings of its annual assessment of progress towards the other EFA goals. According to the report, only two countries in East Asia – the Republic of Korea and China – are close to achieving the measurable EFA goals of primary education, adult literacy, gender parity and quality of education. The EFA Development Index or EDI also shows Cambodia and Lao PDR needs significant improvements in the four areas to meet EFA by 2015. (For more highlights of the 2007 EFA Global Monitoring Report findings, see the accompanying Fact Sheet.)

**East Asia countries covered in the report are** Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, China, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Indonesia, Japan, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Macao (China), Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Viet Nam

*The internationally agreed definition of pre-primary education covers all programmes that in addition to providing children with care, offer a structured and purposeful set of learning activities, either in a formal institution or in a non-formal setting. Three is the official starting age of pre-primary education in most countries.*

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