Great strides have been made towards achieving Education for All (EFA). But as we move toward the 2015 deadline, what gaps remain? How do we address them? And what comes next? UNESCO Bangkok Director, Mr. Gwang-Jo Kim, discusses EFA and the future of education in the Asia-Pacific region.

Q: In the lead up to 2015, what has been done to achieve EFA in the Asia-Pacific?

EFA now constitutes an integral part of the national agenda in most countries in the Asia-Pacific region; this is excellent news. Yet the statistics differ from country to country. Overall the region appears to have done well, but the numbers disguise crucial information; to obtain a true picture of the region’s progress, it is important to consider the finer details and to look at statistics, country by country, and also at the sub-national level. Moreover, not everything can be captured by statistics, and therefore we need also look at other evidence to inform us about the progress that has been made. Over the past decade, the number of out of school children has declined by 39 million, but still we must remember that 40% of those who remain out of school live in the Asia-Pacific region.

Q: What challenges still remain?

While many countries in the region made great strides towards achieving Universal Primary Education (UPE) and increasing their literacy rates, disparities between countries are great. Despite the progress that has been made, it is alarming that the Asia-Pacific region is still home to almost two thirds (65 per cent) of the world’s population of illiterate adults or, to put it another way, over 500 million illiterate adults. South and West Asia as a sub-region alone had over 400 million illiterate adults in 2009, accounting for over half of the world’s total illiterate population. Even in the countries where literacy rates have been improving, obtaining a perfect score will be difficult; the nearer you get to 100%, the harder each step. For those countries, reaching the last five per cent will be tough.

Another fundamental challenge concerns quality. Enrolment has increased dramatically, but is the quality of the education sufficient to teach pupils the skills that they will need in today’s society? Do we focus sufficiently on learning outcomes, including not only those cognitive skills, literacy, numeracy, critical thinking, but also occupational skills and responsible citizenship? Are we sure that the education we provide today will provide youth with the skills they need to drive positive growth and change for the world of tomorrow? While great improvements have been made in improving access to education, the quality of that education must improve further yet. These are major challenges, and I am confident that countries have the capacity to deliver, but it will not be easy.

Q: What changes are occurring in the Asia-Pacific region and with what implications for the future of education?

Many countries are moving toward middle income status which breeds new social and economic pressures and this in the context of climate change, technological change, and demographic change. And in an increasingly globalised world, the pace of change is accelerating. Mobile phones which were practically non-existent 20 years ago have now reached the most marginalised of communities; the impact future technologies could have is impossible to tell. Increasingly, people are aware of the need to care for environment, but this change may have come too late, as climate change begins to ravage the globe. Dramatic demographic changes such as rapidly aging populations are taking many communities by surprise. The way in which so many changes are interacting, combined with the dramatic readjustments after the recent global financial crisis, means that change is occurring at a dizzying pace.
You ask what this means for education. It means we have a responsibility to equip young people with the requisite skills for a changing world. They must be able to adapt to changing economic situations, they must develop a new technological literacy, they must even adapt to the changing nature of nature itself. Today’s youth are tomorrow’s leaders; they must also be able to implement change themselves.

In addition, education must serve as an equaliser, promoting empowerment for all communities. As countries enter middle income status, people are on the move: from rural areas to urban areas, from poor countries to rich countries. We need to address how education can move with these communities. Some societies have growing populations, while others are aging. For some, birth rates are declining. Education policy now needs to adapt to address a wide variety of circumstances.

At the same time, these very countries are also starting to demand more from their education systems in terms of quality; yet another struggle to overcome. Not only are these countries struggling to achieve EFA for those hard to reach communities, they are also dealing with the demands of increasingly wealthy populations wanting more for their children in terms of quality education. These two different demands place a considerable and uneven burden on the education system.

**Q: How can countries adapt their education systems for this changing environment?**

It is fundamental that we realise the importance of education; not only at the school level, but at the broader societal level. The social outcomes of education are often forgotten, yet educators should consider encouraging social responsibility to be an essential part of their role. Education should not be, as unfortunately it so often is, purely for furthering economic status. It should instead foster the values needed to improve society as a whole: social responsibility, environmental awareness, equality and so forth. In this way education can develop society in an equitable and sustainable manner.

At the same time, the quality of education needs to improve. If education systems can deliver quality education to the population as a whole, then this will certainly help society to grow in an equitable and sustainable manner. Part of the problem is that quality is so difficult to define and assess. There are, however, ways in which quality can be improved: attracting better teaching staff, improving curriculums and assessing students’ learning and readjusting education accordingly. With many of the hurdles preventing access to education overcome, the quality dimensions of education should also be given increased focus.

Now I should stress, the approach must vary from country to country. Let’s not forget how different countries of the Asia-Pacific are. I was recently in Azerbaijan where I was asked if they could simply follow Korea’s example in order to construct a successful education system. My answer was no. Why? Because the people are different, because the economy is different, because the natural resources are different and because the population structure is different. That is not to say that Azerbaijan cannot learn from the experiences of other countries. Indeed, it should draw from good practices and where appropriate, integrate these practices in to its policies. But ultimately, it’s about drawing on knowledge and experience and adapting successful practices to suit the unique situation of each individual nation.

I would also like to add one additional piece of advice. In these changing times education systems should be flexible. Change needs to be accommodated. Educators should not only teach youngsters, but also teach the aging population. If internal human resources are insufficient, countries should be ready to use foreign experts or capacity from outside. Successful education systems need to adapt it to the local context, the local population structure and, in this day and age, to the changes occurring within the wider world. Education systems need to be flexible, open and inclusive.
Q: What role do you think UNESCO should play in discussion on establishing the post-2015 development agenda?

I would stress two functions. UNESCO Bangkok, serving as the Asia-Pacific Regional Bureau for Education, should be guiding the shaping of a renewed regional education agenda. In this role it should stimulate the discussions and thinking of regional stakeholders including think tanks and researchers, whilst also considering the broader connections between education and societal development. UNESCO should create platforms for dialogue and exchange; catalyzing critical debate, creative thinking and knowledge, which will contribute to global thinking about the international education agenda beyond 2015. The global post 2015 agenda should be developed in close partnership with our member states and remain adaptable according to their specific context and needs.

UNESCO also needs to function as an information broker between countries. Countries should learn from the successes and failures of each other, so as not to repeat past mistakes. In this capacity, UNESCO needs to conduct analysis and to generate a knowledge base with which it can engage policy makers in meaningful dialogue. UNESCO can enable countries to learn from one another. But to take on this role, UNESCO needs to do its own homework: coming up with ground-breaking and original research to inform this policy dialogue.

Q: UNESCO is hosting a regional expert meeting on EFA and the post-2015 agenda. Do you have a message you would like to convey to those attending this event?

There are three things that I would expect from the upcoming meeting. First of all, I would like the experts to bring to the table all the trends and issues that they consider to be important for education. Secondly, I would like them all to engage openly in debates and discussions about the implications of these issues. We need to hear their voices and be enriched by their perspectives. Thirdly, I hope that they will deliver recommendations for a possible agenda that will, with support from our member states and other regional and global entities, provide an important backbone to discussions on the future of education in our region and beyond. This is challenging no doubt, but I have faith they can.