UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
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on the occasion of the Regional High-Level Expert Meeting:

Towards EFA 2015 and Beyond – Shaping a New Vision of Education

Bangkok, 9 – 11 May 2012
Distinguished Guests,
Friends and colleagues

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you here today to this important Meeting on the future of education development and cooperation. This event, “Towards EFA 2015 and Beyond – Shaping a New Vision of Education”, is of particular significance. For one, it is the first regional high-level expert meeting in UNESCO’s endeavour to collaboratively, with key partners and experts, shape a new vision of education beyond 2015. It is also part of much broader international discussion on the global development agenda.

We are therefore part of something that extends much further than the walls of this conference room and the conversation we have over next three days. We are contributing to discussion that will shape the lives of so many, for so many years to come.

On this note, let me express my sincere gratitude to the Korea National Commission for UNESCO and UNICEF for supporting this event.

Allow me to also welcome our participants, whose experience, wisdom and commitment will contribute to our deliberations: eminent experts, researchers and practitioners representing education research think tanks, universities, governments, sister UN agencies, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, international and regional institutions and NGOs, and also UNESCO National Commissions, from both within and outside the Asia-Pacific region.

I recognize that many present here today are also partners within the regional EFA coordination mechanism for which UNESCO Bangkok serves as the Secretariat and co-chairs with UNICEF. The Regional TWG for EFA is a partnership that we value immensely and one that has grown in strength over the years.
Distinguished participants,

Achieving universal basic education has indeed been one of the greatest priorities, and challenges, of our time. It was in April 2000 that the international community first created the ambitious international agenda of providing Education for All by 2015. The EFA agenda was followed by a set of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), two of which explicitly target education. While notable achievements have been made across each of the MDGs, most significant achievements have been made in Goal 2: achieving universal primary education. In 2006, in almost all regions, the net enrolment ratio exceeded 90 percent, with many countries achieving near universal primary enrolment. At the same time, some have argued that the MDGs have overshadowed the wider scope of education development and cooperation enshrined in the EFA framework. The education-related MDGs have focused on universal primary education (UPE) and gender party, but with what implications for the much broader EFA agenda?

We all know that education lies at the heart of development and as such, each and every MDG is inexplicably linked to education. We know that education is key to socio-economic advancement, justice, equality and the recognition of the dignity of every human being. This is supported by the Global Initiative on Education to be launched by the UN Secretary-General, ensuring that education remains a priority in his five year Action Plan. This is a major achievement which reinforces the fundamental role of education in the international development agenda.

It also reaffirms the importance of EFA in light of achievements already made. It has now been 22 years since the inception of EFA in Jomtien, right here in Thailand, and 12 years since the renewed EFA framework with targeted goals was established. Since then, the EFA movement has both mobilized countries through shared goals and contributed to appreciable progress in education. We have also learnt many lessons from EFA implementation, particularly here in our region.

In the Asia-Pacific we’ve made great progress. We’ve also suffered many challenges. On the one hand, enrolment rates have improved considerably with nine of every 10
children of primary age in the Asia-Pacific attending school in 2008 – a remarkable achievement. On the other hand, the Asia-Pacific has the largest number of illiterate adults of any region in the world with 518 million of the world’s 793 million illiterate adult population. We see also multiple barriers to education including poverty, child labour, group-based disadvantages, location and livelihoods, disability, HIV and AIDs.

Meanwhile, disparities in learning achievement vary widely both within and across countries as international assessments serve to demonstrate. Collectively, what we see is a diversity of results across the region. Not only is there diversity, but there are wide disparities between and within countries as regards access to schooling, equity and quality of education.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are now less than three years from the EFA target year. The ‘review’ process has by now well and truly begun. Indeed, preliminary discussions on post-2015 agenda is being held at UNESCO, the World Bank, UNICEF and other bilateral and multilateral agencies, regional development banks and civil society institutions. Reflections have also commenced at the broader UN level on a possible vision for education in relation to the UN development agenda. This has been reflected in the Report of the Secretary-General to the upcoming ECOSOC Session in July 2012. These reflections are linked to the discussions on the post MDG agenda and other development agendas such as Rio + 20 – which will be discussed in a little over a month time in Brazil.

UNESCO’s work on the post 2015 education agenda was initiated by the creation of its Education Research and Foresight Team at UNESCO Paris in 2011. UNESCO Bangkok is, however, the first Regional Bureau to pioneer discussion on a regional vision for the future of education development and cooperation. Our task, therefore, is to initiate the process, spark debate and share ideas for how the future of education in the Asia-Pacific might appear post-2015. A monumental task, yes, but one not beyond our reach.
Over the next three days, we will discuss the complex developmental trends and challenges of our region and their specific implications for education. I would encourage, as much as possible, open and frank discussion and creativity in our approach. I hope that we be encouraged to really think outside the box. Let’s think about not only a new framework for education development and cooperation but the creative approach we might take. I believe wholeheartedly that creativity will underpin our ability to resolve rapid developmental and societal changes of the 21st century. Let’s make sure we are also creative in our thinking about education and what lies beyond 2015.

To this end, there are a number of important questions we should consider. These questions may in fact guide our discussion throughout the meeting. I challenge you now to really pause, to cancel all other thoughts, to think carefully (and creatively) and ask yourself the following:

- What has been missed by the EFA agenda?
- What lessons can be drawn from EFA and the MDGs?
- What key trends should we investigate further?
- Should we continue to draw upon target goals?
- Or should these goals be broadened to include new challenges?
- Should there be a separate agenda for education?
- Or rather, a key part of the broader development agenda?
- Should an education agenda be universal? Context-specific? Or both?
- How do we ensure education policies can respond to diverse needs?

Let these questions stay with you throughout this meeting. Don’t be shy to write them down, draw upon them directly in your discussion, use these questions to explain and then validate your perspectives and use them to formulate your recommendations.

I further expect that the meeting will provide some initial thoughts on what future policy directions are required for a new vision of education and what should be the key areas of this agenda. The findings of the meeting will also provide inputs for the work of
international groups being established by UNESCO for the purpose of revisiting the Delors report. I am looking forward to your advice as to what forward-looking analytical work and research should be undertaken to feed into the process of developing the post-2015 education agenda.

In the process of establishing recommendations, it is my hope UNESCO and regional research partners find greater scope for cooperation. It is my hope that we spark further sharing of ideas, knowledge and that we foster greater cooperation. Indeed, this Meeting is not an end in and of itself. It is, rather, only the start. It is but the first of many steps needed in building a new vision for education. UNESCO plans to establish a core high-level expert group that will help to lead this important work.

Let me conclude by saying that as honorary high-level experts, there is not one of us in this room that has not been granted a formal education. It’s very possible that we forget, despite our passion for education and the great work that so many here have achieved, just how fortunate we ourselves have been. We could not have this discussion without you. You could not be here with us without the education you have had. Let us be humbled by this fact and let that be the spirit that underpins the discussions we have.

I wish you all most fruitful deliberations over the next three days. I wait anxiously and excitedly to hear the outcomes of your discussions. I sincerely hope that the lessons drawn from this meeting will serve as a basis for renewed commitment to enriching the lives of all through education.

Thank you