PRESS RELEASE

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

Bangkok, 28 November 2006 – While pre-school is universal in most industrialized 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*.

Early childhood care and education or ECCE is the focus of the 2007 Education for All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report, which tracks countries’ progress in meeting the Education for All (EFA) goals. The report was released at the Asia regional launch, held in Bangkok, on 28 November.

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 that Cambodia and Lao PDR need significant improvements in the four areas to meet EFA by 2015.

Among countries in East Asia, Malaysia has the highest pre-primary education gross enrolment rate (GER) of 108 per cent. The GER can exceed 100 per cent due to early or late entry to school, and/or grade repetition. Lao PDR and Cambodia have the lowest pre-school enrolment at 8 per cent and 9 per cent, respectively, highlighting the considerable gap between countries in the region. Thailand has a GER of 90 per cent, while Viet Nam has 47 per cent, and the Philippines 40 per cent, further emphasizing the divide.

The report notes that increased government spending for ECCE and adopting a holistic approach encompassing education, health and nutrition are first steps towards establishing comprehensive care and education components for young children.

Studies show 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.

“The skills children acquire from ECCE 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 by 2015.

“Countries such as Thailand and Viet Nam have made early childhood a national priority in recent years. This has led to the adoption of new national ECCE policies, expanded provision of ECCE, increased attention to quality, and additional financial support,” Shaeffer said. He called on other countries to follow the example. He urged countries in the region to include ECCE policies in their national agenda which are sensitive to culture, recognize linguistic diversity, are inclusive and of good quality, and are attuned to children with special needs or in situations of emergency or conflict.

Shaeffer also urged countries to focus on children under 3. “Many countries lack programmes focusing on the health, nutrition, care and education of the under-3s which is a critical period in a child’s development.”

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 is interdependent and must be addressed simultaneously to be achieved,” Joana Merlin-Scholtes United Nations Resident Coordinator said during the launch.

The EFA Global Monitoring Report is prepared by an independent team and published by UNESCO. For more highlights of the 2007 EFA Global Monitoring Report findings, see the accompanying Fact Sheet.

**East Asian countries** covered in the report are Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, China, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Indonesia, Japan, Lao PDR, Macao SAR (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. The official starting age of pre-primary education in most countries is 3.*

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