Education for All at risk

Global recession threatens to thwart the 2015 target date

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Unesco Assistant Director-General for Education Nicholas Burnett has revealed the impact of the global recession on Education for All (EFA) goals, and how education can contribute to social cohesion and economic recovery.

Twenty-eight million primary-school-aged children in the Asia-Pacific region were not in school in 2006, according to the 2009 Education for All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report.

This is a decrease of 15 million from 1999, but the number is still too high.

Worldwide, 75 million children of primary school age were not attending school in 2006.

EFA is an international commitment agreed upon by governments, international non-government organisations, UN agencies and development partners in 1990, collectively reaffirming the notion of education as a fundamental human right.

The six EFA goals include the expansion and improvement of early childhood care and education, achievement of universal primary education, lifelong learning and life skills, adult and youth literacy, elimination of gender disparities in primary and secondary education, and improvement in all aspects of quality of education.

These goals were endorsed in April 2000 by more than 1,100 participants from 164 countries at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, to achieve EFA by 2015.

Among countries in Southeast Asia, Thailand has one of the highest net enrolment rates in pre-primary education, at 84 percent in 2006, for children between three to five years of age. While EFA progress has been made in the Asia-Pacific region, it has been uneven, depending on the goal and country.

"The real question is the impact of the crisis on the poorest countries and on the most marginalised populations. The financial crisis has erupted into a full-fledged economic crisis that threatens to drive between 50 and 90 million people into extreme poverty," said Mr Burnett.

The East Asian financial crisis of the 1990s offers some insight. A regional study by Unesco/International Institute for Educational Planning found that health and education budgets declined in several countries, including Thailand.

Parents withdrew older children from school and delayed the entry of the youngest. Child labour increased in several countries.

But paradoxically, demand for the public provision of education rose in East Asia as parents pulled children out of private schools.

This trend was observed at all levels of education.

Mr Burnett said public spending and aid levels must at least be maintained.

Weak fiscal capacity will limit the scope for the world's poorest countries to insulate their citizens from the crisis. Research by the 2009 EFA Global Monitoring Report team finds that 43 out of 48 low-income countries lack the capacity to provide a pro-poor fiscal stimulus.

Quality is another major concern for governments, said Mr Burnett.

"There is no magic formula for providing a decent quality education. But there are essentials, such as safe classrooms and, of course, teachers. One of the major challenges we face is to recruit more teachers and provide [more] training and give adequate compensation," Mr Burnett explained.

By 2015, 4 million teachers will be needed in East Asia and the Pacific, and 3.6 million will be needed in south and west Asia, according to the 2009 EFA Global Monitoring Report.

Thailand's teacher-to-pupil ratio at the primary level decreased from 21 students to one teacher in 1999 to 18 students to one teacher in 2006.

Factors affecting the quality of teaching around the world include teacher absenteeism, low teacher morale due to poor salaries and working conditions, and the effect of HIV/AIDS on teacher mortality rates.

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