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Right to Primary Education for All Children

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“Education is the most powerful weapon which we can use to change the world”
-Nelson Mandela

Introduction:

Poor education is the root of many of the world’s ills. Without basic education, young children are not conditioned to think critically for themselves. The cycle of poor education and poverty reinforces all major social problems and stands in the way of all social reform. Currently, around 75 million children do not have access to education for a variety of reasons. Women and ethnic minorities have disproportionately lower rates of attendance across the globe. Primary education deficiencies exist on every continent and in nearly every country in the world.

In many areas of the world, those in power are aware of the freedom that comes with education and do whatever they can to restrict others from attaining the same education. This can ensure that the powerful stay powerful and the powerless cannot do anything about it. The United Nations Charter’s preamble specifically states that we must “promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom.” This simply cannot happen if generations remain uneducated and illiterate.

Background:

The global efforts to ensure the right to primary education has been a principal task of the ECOSOC and United Nations General Assembly through the end of the 20th century and into the 21st century. Various General Assembly resolutions in addition to the Millennium Development Goals have all promoted the progress made towards eradicating illiteracy across the globe and making inclusive, positive and safe educational institutions available to all children. Despite these efforts, many children across the developing world lack access to education through persisting inequality and marginalization along lines of sex, health and cultural identity.

Various factors such as unemployment, illness and illiteracy of parents doubles the risk of children within an education system dropping out. High dropout rates are one of the highest impediments to the goal of universal primary education; another impediment to this goal and a contributing factor to drop out rates is that an estimated 50% of out-of-school children live in conflict-affected area. Half of the 58 million kids live in conflict-affected areas which has led to a serious issue in that one in four children in developing regions is likely to drop out. A number of NGOs and non-profit organizations strive to keep data on progress towards universal education and the implementation of the MDGs such as the Azim Premji Foundation which

states that 781 million adults and 126 million youth worldwide lack basic literacy skills with 60% of those individuals being women.

Figure 1: Global Net Enrollment Rates For Primary Education

High dropout rates remain a major impediment to universal primary education

Proportion of pupils starting grade 1 who reach the last grade of primary education, 1990, 2000 and 2011 (Percentage)



Source: United Nations Development Program, "The Millennium Development Goals Report 2014", http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/MDG/english/UNDP_MDGReport_EN_2014Final1.pdf

Despite impressive strides by international efforts, progress in reducing the number of children out-of-school has slackened. According to the Millennium Development Goals 2014 Report, net enrollment in primary education has been increasing by seven points from 83% to 90% as the global community sees a decrease in overall number of children out-of-school. To better understand the level of progress, note that the overall number in 2000 was 100 million children out of school which decreased to 60 million by 2007 and 58 million in 2012. The stagnating efforts arise from the conflicts raging in these developing countries compromise the safety of children going to and from school, as well as delaying and possibly restricting the access NGOs and other on-the-ground aid organizations to provide the critical services needed in these numerous regions. Areas not affected by conflict have made impressive gains in their initiative to increasing literacy rates as it has seen youth literacy rates for the 15 to 24 years of age population increase globally from 83% in 1990 to 89% in 2012.

Primary Education Issues:

Lack of resources and ability

This is probably the largest problem that keeps the number of educated children low in many countries. Sadly, it is also a very difficult one to fix. In some countries, the government wants to educate its citizens, but simply cannot afford to do so. Education requires money spent for schools, materials, teachers, transportation, and plenty of other expenses. Least developed countries and others in economic turmoil simply cannot afford to educate all their citizens properly. Furthermore, if one generation is poorly educated, they will struggle to be able to properly educate the next. In terms of education, intellectual capital is just as important as financial capital, and many countries with a cycle of poverty are lacking in both categories.

Even when aid is given to countries for educational purposes, there is always the chance that the money doesn't go to the right places. Governments can have other needs that they consider more important and spend aid that should be going to education on defense and more nefarious things. Any resolution passed must ensure fiscal responsibility for all involved.

Discriminatory practices

Discrimination from education, or at least from equal education opportunities, occurs around the world. Sometimes it is done intentionally; for example, certain Muslim countries such as Afghanistan actively restrict girls from gaining education, or at least equal education when compared to boys. Some ethnic minorities are left out of the education possibilities where differences and rivalries occur. Wherever there is a ruling ethnicity, there is a strong chance that the ethnic minorities aren't getting the best educational opportunities they can. While it is hard for other countries to first prove and second fight back against this discrimination, it is a necessity for granting primary education for all.

Discrimination in regards to education also occurs unintentionally due to economic factors. Many African countries have schools, but lack the transportation systems to make sure all children can get to school. Furthermore, many children in poverty have to work to support their family and may not have time to go to school during the day. This issue isn't only prominent in the least developed countries. In China, the United States, and European nations, there is a persistent achievement gap between majority and minority students due to the economic disparities between these groups. One example is the Native Americans in the United States, who have roughly a 51% high school graduation rate compared to the 80% average for the United States. Chinese ethnic minorities, such as the Tibetans, experience similar difficulties with attaining the same level of educations as others.

Who decides the curriculum?

How can you differentiate a poor education from a good education? While the specifics may require educational professionals to answer, ECOSOC-NGO should set some standards for

ensuring all children around the world gain essential information. Literacy and basic arithmetic should be the number one topic regardless of agenda. This can obviously become very political, but the countries must come together to work it out. NGOs should use their areas of expertise to suggest and promote the pertinent and age-appropriate knowledge related to their subjects.

Primary Education is a Western Ideal

One point of contention for many countries is that the Millennium Development Goals idea of primary education is a very Western ideal of education. Before globalization ensured that every country was interconnected to at least some degree, countries' perceptions of education varied quite vastly. In China, it was believed that public education wasn't as necessary for certain social classes, but the most elite in the government had to take difficult civil exams. African tribes focused on small groups of children educated by elders about what they considered to be important. When you juxtapose these ideas to the highly industrialized teaching methods in the United States and Europe, it is clear that it can be met with resistance. Any resolution passed must include cultural understanding.

What has the UN done already?

During the 1990 Convention on the Rights of the Child, education for every child was a common goal and 140 parties have signed the treaty. Under Article 28, the CRC states "make primary education compulsory and available to all." Article 29 outlines that "the education of the child shall be directed to:

- (a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;
- (b) The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;
- (c) The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own;
- (d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and person of indigenous origin and;
- (e) The development of respect for the natural environment.

2. No part of the present article or article 28 shall be construed so as to interfere with the liberty of individuals and bodies to establish and direct educational institutions, subject

always to the observance of the principle set forth in paragraph 1 of the present article and to the requirements that the education given in such institutions shall conform to such minimum standards as may be laid down by the State.”

Many other articles placed education to the forefront as well, such as Article 19 which emphasized the importance of education in protecting children from violence, abuse and exploitation.

In 2000, the United Nations established the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The second MDG was “to achieve universal primary education,” and all of the others (such as combatting HIV and promoting gender equality) were directly connected to education as well.

ECOSOC made education a primary goal in 2011. As part of their Annual Ministerial Review, they published a packet titled “Education from ECOSOC 2011.” The delegations agreed to continue stressing the importance of educating all children, regardless of race, ethnicity or ability. However, they did not pass a single resolution that focused on education. Clearly they could have done better then, thus it is your duty to do so now.

Landmark UN Resolutions:

A number of resolutions have been passed in the efforts at ensuring universal primary education as well as means to increase literacy rates in that those rates are at the heart of basic education. General Assembly Resolution A/C.3/52/L.11/Rev.1/29 October 1997 recalls efforts put forth in previous resolutions 43/104, 44/127, 46/93 and 50/143 which all have reiterate the calls for more international efforts to promote literacy and the right to education as unalienable. Many of these efforts in the resolution are to eliminate illiteracy rates and eliminating the gender gap in education.

Four years later, GA/Res/56/116 established a deadline for efforts on universal primary education known as the UN Literacy Decade. The goals of this initiative, which began January of 2003 were aimed at reaffirming the Dakar Framework for Action which strives to achieve a 50% improvement to adult literacy by 2015. The initiative does call on governments to redouble efforts to achieve decreased illiteracy rates and call for more inclusive policies to provide strategies for the poorest and most marginalized groups to achieve the Decade goals. The resolution further reiterated that literacy for all is at the heart of basic education and openly invited NGOs and member states to intensify efforts at implementing the Dakar Framework.

The Human Rights Council also passed a resolution seven years later in regards to the importance of achieving the Millennium Development Goal of equal access to all levels of education by 2015. Resolution 8/4 also expressed concern at the 72 million children (57% girls & 37 million living in conflict-fragile states) out of school and the further 774 million adults who lack basic literacy skills despite progress towards education for all. The HRC commended efforts by NGOs and UN councils in promoting the right to education, but urged states to guarantee that right to be recognized by taking means to eliminate obstacles to access to

education. States can do this by ensuring that primary education is compulsory, accessible and free to all through the promotion of renewal and expansion of formal education of good quality. These members can also put emphasis on developing of quality indicators and monitoring instruments in implementing improvements to quality education. Another crucial component to this effort is the improving of school infrastructure and ensuring a safe school environment.

Role of the NGO and ECOSOC today:

In the Economic and Social Council, delegations have a responsibility to ensure that UN agencies and its partners, in this case non-governmental organizations (NGOs), help countries and their citizens progress. Education is a core necessity for economic and social growth to take place. ECOSOC is where the UN policies come from, and it's the delegates of the ECOSOC who should push the world closer towards universal primary education.

Non-Governmental Organizations have to make sure ECOSOC is set on the right path. NGOs have the closest connection to the people whom the UN is trying to help. They have workers inside these countries trying to help build schools and teach in underdeveloped countries and know the most about what specific issues and resources are needed for fixing and teaching.

Country Positions:

No country is perfect when it comes to giving universally equal education and therefore must all focus on how to both fix themselves and address those issues in the global community.

North and South America

The United States of America and Canada, along with most Latin American countries, have universal primary education installed. Their issues mostly stem from disparities in education amongst internal groups. In the US, certain ethnicities are underrepresented in the educational system. Latin America have similar issues, as poor and indigenous populations have smaller rates of primary education attendance. The United States has a federal Department of Education, but the majority of the educational planning and curricula stem from local and state institutions.

Many Central American countries additionally face hurdles in the pursuit of universal primary education due in a large part by a number of local dangers towards children attending school is gang dominated regions of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. These factors contribute to lower rates of primary education attendance and means of alleviating those risks with be up to the council.

Europe

Europe has well-established universal primary education. With the lack of ethnic diversity in most countries, they do not experience the same difficulties in regards to leaving certain groups

behind like the United States and others do. Due to their success, the European Union is focusing its education efforts outward. The EU is the main donor for the Education for All Movement, which aims to increase primary education rates in impoverished regions worldwide, especially in Africa.

Africa

The countries of Africa, primarily sub-Saharan countries, have the lowest primary education rates and have many variables contributing to this commonality. The economies are struggling, political instability and in-fighting is all too common in these countries and makes it difficult for inside and outside groups to push forward efforts aimed at improving the situation. 32 million primary-aged children in sub-Saharan Africa alone do not go to school. While the literacy rate in Africa has been growing, the number of illiterate people has actually risen since 1990. An all-encompassing approach with goals in both the long and short term future is essential to improving this dire situation.

Greater Middle East

The GME region has experienced great political instability, which has clearly had a great negative impact on education, even though education is of incredible importance to the culture. Literacy rates are high in Jordan, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and Syria, but very low in Yemen, Mauritania, Morocco, Sudan, and Algeria, among others. Even though overall literacy rates are low, what is more shocking is that rates among women are 20 to 40% lower than the average. It is obvious that the biggest issue in this region is discrimination against women when it comes to education. The reasons for their underrepresentation in the government and societies becomes clear when you see how few opportunities to attain equal education affects women in this region. This is a prime example of how incredibly important being educated is for allowing people a chance at bettering their lives.

Asia-Pacific

Many Asian countries place a great importance on education, especially for the elites of the society, however it is a universal goal as well. China boasts almost full universal primary education as a result of their federal government's control over the curriculum and necessary reforms.

In Southeast Asia, the primary education rate is around 90%, meaning there is still some work to do but they have improved immensely over the past few decades. Quality of education and aid to ensure the best standards for schools and materials should be the focus for these states.

Many countries in the Pacific struggle from environmental and economic issues that impede their ability to focus resources on educating their citizens. According to UNICEF, "political instability can often lead to the closing of schools" in the region as well.

NGO Positions:

It is the duty of the NGO Forum to produce resolutions that outline the best ways to reach as many children as possible with positive results. In Africa, NGOs are already very active.

Even the NGOs that are not specifically about literacy or education have an incredible amount of stock in the education of children. The United Nations has consistently emphasized that children need to learn more than just how to read and do basic math. It is just as important for children to learn environmental responsibility, rights and responsibilities, and more. Focus on how your organization can teach children life lessons that are pertinent to your group's overall mission, or how your organization can help make a difference in the world.

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