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Press Conference

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PRESS CONFERENCE ON LAUNCH OF UNESCO REPORT ON EDUCATION

The number of children starting primary school around the world had increased sharply since 2000, but the poor quality and high cost of schooling, along with high adult illiteracy rates and insufficient aid were undermining chances of achieving education for all by 2015, Nicholas Burnett, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Assistant Director-General for Education, said today at a Headquarters press conference.

Presenting the *2008 Education for All Global Monitoring Report*, Mr. Burnett said that, since the 1999 World Education Forum in Dakar, there had been significant progress towards universal primary education, much faster than during the 1990s, and girls, in particular, were benefiting. There had also been a major increase in spending on basic education by developing countries, as well as a major increase in aid to basic education.

Despite that positive trend, however, there were still 72 million children out of school and 800 million illiterate adults. Disparities within countries existed, and aid, while increasing, remained insufficient to match needs.

He said UNESCO's goals for education overlapped with the Millennium Development Goals regarding universal primary education and gender parity. "Without such things as literacy, without education, the MDGs as a whole are unlikely to be achieved," he said.

The *Report*, launched today by UNESCO, presented a portrait of mixed results at the midway point to the 2015 target, he said. It showed primary school enrolment increasing by 36 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa, and 22 per cent in South and West Asia, between 1999 and 2005. The abolition of school fees had favoured access for the most disadvantaged. Gender parity had been achieved in several countries, and the number of out-of-school children had declined since 1999, from 96 million to 72 million. Domestic spending and aid increases since 1999 had boosted efforts, he added.

Nevertheless, major concerns persisted, he said. Governments were not steering their budgets towards the much needed areas of early childhood education and of reaching the poorest and most disadvantaged. In addition, parity at the secondary school level lagged far behind primary school enrolments, with 37 per cent

of countries achieving parity at the secondary level versus 63 per cent at the primary level. Adult literacy also remained an urgent challenge, with 774 million adults, or 1 in 5, unable to read. That figure included 1 in 4 women, which was of particular concern since women's literacy strongly influenced children's education.

Poor education quality also hampered efforts, he said. The *Report* stated that less than 63 per cent of pupils reached the last grade of primary school in 17 sub-Saharan African countries, and 78 per cent in half the countries of South and West Asia. Increases in the number of teaching staff had not kept pace with enrolment growth, and 18 million primary school teachers would be needed if the 2015 goals were to be met. Based on projections of current trends, 58 of the 86 countries that had not reached universal primary education would not achieve it by 2015, and 90 would not achieve parity at primary and secondary levels.

He stressed that major policy changes were needed to achieve the goals, along with more attention for early childhood education, literacy and quality. The *Report* stated that too many donors were putting excessive priorities on secondary education. France, Germany and Japan allocated less than one third of their aid to basic education, and most of it, to post-secondary education.

The *Report* drew attention to a winning combination in countries -- including Burkina Faso, Yemen and Zambia -- where well-targeted policies and higher domestic spending were bolstered by external aid. "This combination is making a difference," Mr. Burnett said. "There is a clear model of success that must be more widely promoted if [education for all] is to be achieved and if the MDGs are to be achieved."

(The full report and additional information is available online at <http://www.efareport.unesco.org/>).

Responding to questions about the definition of literacy, Mr. Burnett said that UNESCO defined the term as the ability to read a simple sentence without difficulty. The issue, however, did not concern the definition, but rather how literacy was measured, he said, emphasizing that self-reporting often led to an underestimation of the scope of illiteracy.

When asked about Asia's report card on education, he said progress had been mixed. For instance, in India, major strides had been made to combat illiteracy, but owing to factors, including population increases, the actual number of people who were not literate had not fallen. Meanwhile, in China, well-targeted, domestically funded programmes aimed at geographic areas and specific age groups, with systematic follow-ups had made the country the region's highest achiever.

Addressing questions on funding, Mr. Burnett pointed to donors whose aid went either to basic education or to post-secondary studies. UNESCO's role was to highlight areas of need, and not to organize the provision of aid. Financial shortfalls existed, with massive underfunding in Africa. An estimated \$11 billion was needed annually for education, which was almost triple the current actual amount of \$4 billion.

"Time is running out," he said. "For every year that these resources are not available, even more resources would be needed in subsequent years in order to catch up."

Responding to a question about how Brazil could succeed in meeting some Millennium Development Goals, but not in others, he explained that, while gender parity progress had been made at the primary school level, parity was problematic at

the secondary level, complicated by a backlog of adults who were not literate and a lack of programmes for that group.

Regarding UNESCO's position on a "One Laptop per Child" programme, he said he did not have a statement on the topic, but the organization was taking a "hard look" at the use of information and communications technology in general.

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