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UNICEF chief calls for accelerated action on out-of-school children



UNICEF chief Anthony Lake addresses opening of UNGEI conference in Dakar, Senegal

18 May 2010 – The new head of the United Nations Children’s Fund ([UNICEF](#)) has appealed for greater efforts to ease the plight of nearly 60 million “forgotten children” who are out of school, with only five years remaining to achieve the globally agreed target of ensuring universal primary education.

Anthony Lake, the agency’s Executive Director, told a conference yesterday in Dakar, Senegal, that action has not been swift enough towards reaching the primary education target, just one of the eight Millennium Development Goals ([MDGs](#)) world leaders pledged to achieve by 2015.

“The sad reality is that if our progress continues at its current pace, by 2015, there will still be approximately 56 million children out of school,” he said. “And worse: You can count on those children being the hardest to reach, living in the poorest countries, with the highest and hardest barriers to overcome.”

Mr. Lake, who took office earlier this month, was addressing a meeting entitled “Engendering Empowerment: Education and Equality,” also known as “E4.” It marked the 10th anniversary of the UN Girls’ Education Initiative ([UNGEI](#)), bringing together UN agencies and others to close the gender gap in education.

Children from the poorest 20 per cent of their societies – the so-called ‘fifth quintile’ – are much less likely to attend primary school than their peers in the wealthiest quintile, he pointed out.

Also, girls from impoverished rural households are the most likely to be excluded from primary school, while children from indigenous and minority groups, as well as those with disabilities, are the least likely to be able to attend or stay in school.

“These are the forgotten children, marginalized simply because of the economic and social inequities in their societies, left behind simply because they were born poor or female, or of the wrong caste or in the wrong countries,” Mr. Lake stressed.

Ignoring the needs of marginalized children, he said, would be “morally indefensible and strategically short-sighted.”

Participants at the Dakar gathering discussed how to boost funding for education and gender equality, as well as advocating for governments to make positive changes in their national education policies.

But the UNICEF head emphasized that “education alone does not equal empowerment,” noting that countries can enhance gender parity in schools while still failing to translate such gains into increased women’s participation at all levels of society.

“The time has come for us to accelerate our efforts – and to look beyond gender parity to a broader agenda,” he said.

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