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UN Economic and Social Council shines spotlight on expanding access to education



ECOSOC President Amb. Lazarous Kapambwe of Zambia

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An estimated 67 million school-age children worldwide are unable to attend classes because of financial, social and other obstacles, a senior United Nations official has warned as the world body's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) met to discuss how to ensure that everyone has access to a decent education.

Lazarous Kapambwe, the President of ECOSOC, told yesterday's opening in Geneva of its annual high-level segment that it was vital that governments take measures to boost school attendance and the quality of education offered.

“Education for all” is the focus of this year's ECOSOC high-level segment, which brings together top UN officials, government ministers, experts and policy-makers.

Mr. Kapambwe noted in his speech that more than 52 million additional children enrolled in primary schools in the decade to 2008, as part of global efforts to improve access to education, one of the Millennium Development Goals ([MDGs](#)).

“Yet some 67 million still remain out of school,” he said. “Poor quality is another concern. Standardized tests in numerous countries reveal a significant number of students lacking basic reading, writing and maths skills, even after years of formal schooling.

“Secondary school graduates themselves are often ill-prepared for the workforce – witness the stubbornly high levels of youth unemployment across much of the world.”

Mr. Kapambwe stressed that, to make genuine progress, governments need to focus on recruiting, training and retaining good teachers, improving accountability and embracing cost-effective technology.

“The potential for success is very much alive,” he said.

Deputy Secretary-General Asha-Rose Migiro [voiced](#) concern that an expansion of primary school enrolment appears to be stalling after substantial improvements a decade ago.

“Moreover, the pervasive nature of poor-quality education in rich and poor countries serves up additional notice that getting kids into school is only half the battle,” she said.

General Assembly President Joseph Deiss warned that while many countries have experienced progress on education, substantial gaps and disparities still exist between the rich and the poor, the rural and urban dwellers, and boys and girls.

The world’s most vulnerable countries, such as landlocked States and nations emerging from conflict, are finding it particularly difficult to make progress in ensuring every child has access to at least a primary-level education.

In his speech Mr. Deiss also called for ECOSOC to “assert itself as the forum to which those involved in global governance, such as the G-20 [group of economies], multilateral institutions and specialized economic programmes, must come to demonstrate their accountability.”

After the high-level segment formally opened, ECOSOC heard speeches from several UN officials, including Irina Bokova, the Director-General of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO](#)).

This was followed by a special “face-to-face” debate about education, human rights and conflict, which featured Ms. Bokova and leading figures from academia, the human rights field and government.

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