

**SMMUN VIII**  
**UNITED NATIONS CHILDREN'S FUND**

**ACHIEVING UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION**

**Introduction**

One of the most fundamental obligations of any community is to educate its children. When that community is the international community at large, the obligations are clearly codified in the second of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG's): achieve universal primary education by 2015. For the world to truly leave no child behind, its citizens, leaders, and institutions must jointly acknowledge the necessity of eliminating existing barriers to education, especially for girls. As the delegates of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) discuss and debate the best ways to achieve universal primary education no later than 2015, they will need to frame their resolutions in the context of a synergistic multistakeholder dialogue amongst national governments, international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGO's), civil society representatives, parents, teachers, and students.

**Scale of the Problem**

Progress has been made in recent years in terms of bringing millions of new students into classrooms but according to United Nations statistics, 72 million primary education age<sup>1</sup> children were not enrolled in school in 2005. Of these 72 million children, approximately 57% were girls, reflecting the persistence of particularly pernicious gender biases throughout the world. While 88% of primary age children throughout the developing world were enrolled in 2005, only 70% of primary age children in sub-Saharan Africa were enrolled.<sup>2</sup> In the worst cases, including Burkina Faso, Chad, Ethiopia, Niger, and Somalia, less than 50% of primary age children are currently enrolled in school.<sup>3</sup> These gaps, as well as those between urban children and rural children and between wealthy, middle-income, and poor children, act to delay and/or prevent sustained progress towards overcoming poverty, discrimination, and inequality. These disparities of opportunities afforded by the world's children become even more inexcusable when one considers that the amount of money projected to achieve universal primary education, approximately \$9 billion annually, equals only one week of global military spending.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Primary education typically consists of grades 1-5, with the student ages ranging from approximately 5-11.

<sup>2</sup> All statistics were taken from: United Nations, *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2007* 2007 p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> UNICEF, "Progress for Children: A World Fit for Children Statistical Report" Number 6 December 2007 p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Statistics from Oxfam International.

## **Obstacles to Universal Primary Education**

The existing obstacles to universal primary education are considerable but the means to overcome those obstacles already exist. When analyzing the obstacles to universal primary education, four major areas are immediately apparent: 1)lack of schools, teachers, materials, and transportation for students; 2)discrimination against girls and other marginalized students; 3)enrollment fees for public education; and 4)schools that are unsafe and/or not “child-friendly.” Children who are internally displaced or refugees face additional obstacles, both legal and logistical. Iraqi refugee children in Jordan and Syria constitute a large and growing new school community within those countries and these refugee children do face considerable obstacles to their education. In 2006, 43 million primary education age children were unable to attend school because of armed conflicts.<sup>5</sup>

## **Millions of Children Left Behind**

The progress made in enrolling tens of millions of children in schools around the world is encouraging but the statistics of 72 million primary age children still not enrolled in school are nonetheless quite sobering. In many parts of the world, there are simply not enough schools to adequately address the educational needs of the students. Even where schools exist, there are often very few teachers, many of whom are either terribly underpaid, paid very irregularly, or not paid at all. Qualifications for teachers vary immensely and when a qualified teacher leaves the profession or moves to another area, it is frequently very difficult to find a well-qualified replacement teacher. Even though laudable progress has been made in bringing many first-time students to school, huge numbers of them drop out before completing the primary grades, often because their teachers are poorly qualified and cannot provide the high-quality education these children need. Far too many schools also lack needed materials including textbooks, paper, pens and pencils, any form of educational technology, or even bathrooms. Millions of children also face formidable physical obstacles Making the necessary investments to provide free, high-quality public education to all primary age children is vital to ensuring that all children have the academic and life knowledge as well as skills needed to survive today.

Before examining each of these root causes more thoroughly, it is important to remember that there are millions of children who either attend private schools or are home-schooled by their parents or other caregivers. In many countries, these children do not appear on any state attendance or enrollment lists and this can inflate the numbers of children listed as not being in school. Many of these private schools and home-school initiatives provide high-quality education but there are critical concerns about how to ensure quality as well as how balanced the education provided is. Additionally, school enrollment figures and actual school attendance numbers vary widely. Children may still be counted as enrolled but actually attend school very infrequently; ensuring that those enrolled actually attend and complete their education is essential. UNICEF estimates that “in Eastern/Southern Africa, enrolment is as much as 13 percent higher than

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<sup>5</sup> *BBC News*, “Wars ‘robbing youths of school’” September 12, 2006.

attendance.”<sup>6</sup> Inflating enrollment statistics without actually increasing attendance may be a quick and inexpensive way to theoretically meeting a state’s commitment to the Millennium Development Goal of universal primary education by 2015 but it does very little to raise the level of human development within that state.

### **Some children don’t need to go to school**

While parents and teachers are all too familiar with the feigned illnesses and complaints of children who would prefer not to go to school on any given day, there are, tragically, tens of million of children who would like to go to school but are not allowed to attend. Girls comprise the largest group that faces direct discrimination when seeking education. Governments, both national and local, often spend more money on the education of boys than girls and many leaders, whether cultural, political, or religious, contend that the education of girls is either unnecessary or prohibited. While girls suffer the most obvious and well-documented discrimination when they try to attend school, they are by no means the only group of children who face such discrimination. Ethnic and religious minorities are often discouraged and/or prevented from going to school, many immigrant children face serious hurdles when attempting to attend school, and children who are physically and/or mentally disabled frequently cannot attend school. According to the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization’s *Education for All Monitoring Report 2005*, “estimates suggest that there are 150 million children worldwide with disabilities and that fewer than 2% of them are enrolled in school.”<sup>7</sup>

When conducting larger scale statistical analyses of global school attendance and enrollment data, three primary indicators stand out for the children who are not attending and/or enrolled in school: 1) they come from the lowest 20% of families as measured by annual income; 2) they live overwhelmingly in rural areas; and 3) the mothers have very little to no educational background.<sup>8</sup> According to the latest statistical “Progress for Children” report from UNICEF, the researchers concluded that “household wealth is the strongest determinant of school attendance in developing countries.”<sup>9</sup> While enrolling the children of these families will rarely immediately alleviate the poverty into which they were born, some governments have created new programs to provide families with direct financial incentives and assistance to encourage them to ensure regular school attendance for all of their children. In 1993, the government of Bangladesh introduced the “Food for Education” (FFE) program where poor children who attended school at least 85% of the time would receive foodgrain subsidies from the government. Xin Meng and Jim Ryan, researchers at the Australian National University, determined that the program was successful at increasing school attendance, achievement, and improving graduation rates

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<sup>6</sup> UNICEF, “Progress for Children: A World Fit for Children Statistical Report” Number 6 December 2007 p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> UNESCO, *Education for All Monitoring Report 2005* 2005 p. 143.  
The entire report made be found at: <http://www.efareport.unesco.org>

<sup>8</sup> UNESCO, *Education for All Monitoring Report 2007* 2007 p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> UNICEF, “Progress for Children: A World Fit for Children Statistical Review” Number 6, December 2007 p. 15.

for the recipients.<sup>10</sup> Children who are above the traditional age for their grade level, especially if they are more than 2 years older than the traditional age, often experience even greater difficulty completing their education. Worldwide, 17% of secondary age children attend primary school but in Eastern and Southern Africa, the total is 39% and in Western and Central Africa, it is 29%.<sup>11</sup> While many of these students may trace their difficulties to learning disabilities and/or behavioral issues, in far too many cases, these students first enrolled in school at advanced ages for their grades and frequently find themselves falling behind their younger classmates.

### **Paying for access: enrollment fees for public schools**

Enrollment and uniform fees serve as considerable barriers to school attendance and enrollment in many developing countries. The well-known international charity, Save the Children, has consistently argued that eliminating school fees will significantly increase school attendance and enrollment, especially for girls in sub-Saharan Africa. Save the Children points to Uganda's success. Uganda eliminated school fees for primary school in 1997 and saw its total school attendance by girls double within 3 years.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, Uganda still charges considerable school fees at the secondary level and most students cannot afford them. Furthermore, school fees disproportionately tax the poorest citizens, many of whom are already poorly served by existing educational institutions. When families face significant financial barriers to educating their children, many children, especially girls, will effectively be denied the education they need to serve as productive citizens and workers.

As different countries eliminate school enrollment and uniform fees, they find that the massive increases in enrollment and attendance can at times overwhelm existing education infrastructures. When the government of Tanzania reintroduced free primary education in 2002, its enrollment figures surged. While the enrollment and attendance of these students is crucial, it is certainly just as crucial that each of them receive a high-quality education. At the Mivinjeni Primary School on the outskirts of Dar-es-Salaam, the student-to-teacher ratio soared to 46:1<sup>13</sup>, placing undue strains on the teachers, administrators, and increasing the already ever-present difficulties in providing all children with high-quality educations. Ensuring that every child receives a high-quality education must be addressed, too, but it will be extremely difficult to ensure that if large numbers of children do not attend school.

### **School isn't a good place to be**

The concept of school violence is, tragically, all too familiar throughout many parts of the world. A recent study of school violence in Togo revealed that "eight out of

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<sup>10</sup> Xin Meng and Jim Ryan, "Evaluating the Food for Education Program in Bangladesh" August 6, 2003. Found at: <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/papers/asarc/Meng-Ryan.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> UNICEF, "Progress for Children: A World Fit for Children Statistical Review" Number 6 December 2007 p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> *BBC News*, "School fees 'barrier for girls'" September 5, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Milton Nkosi, "Tanzania looks beyond free schooling" *BBC News* July 15, 2005.

10 children said they were regularly beaten at school,” presumably by teachers, and that “one girl in 25 said she had suffered sexual violence.”<sup>14</sup> Bullying by other students is all too common and has led to students withdrawing from or quitting school as well as seeking violent revenge. In early 2007, approximately 75% of British children aged 11-16 reported being bullied at school.<sup>15</sup> While stories of shootings and other violence in schools attracts far more news coverage than the overall quality of education and the treatment of students, the quality of the educational experience matters immensely. Schools that routinely mistreat their students, especially girls, ethnic and religious minorities, and students with disabilities, create learning environments that are not conducive to high levels of achievement and student progress. While school attendance and enrollment figures continue to climb worldwide, there are widespread concerns about a decline in educational quality and an increase in retention rates, overage students, and dropouts.

### **Creating an Effective Multistakeholder Dialogue on Universal Primary Education**

The international community is actively promoting sustained partnerships between the appropriate and interested entities for any given issue. As with most other issues, national governments need to take the lead with respect to the education of their citizens. National governments must emphasize the importance of increasing their own direct investments into the education of their citizens, rather than funneling money for education into the military. British journalist Christina Lamb noted that Pakistan’s low literacy rates were “the result of spending only two percent of the gross national product on education – one of the lowest levels in the world – compared to thirty percent on defence.”<sup>16</sup> National governments have the institutional and legal authority necessary to ensure universal primary education for all of their citizens but many need to develop a more effective and far-reaching educational infrastructure to meet this laudable of educating all children. When national governments work effectively with other countries, international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGO’s), and civil society partners, they can improve and expand the educational opportunities for their populations. Greg Mortenson, the founder of the US-based Central Asia Institute (CAI) that builds schools in Pakistan, noted that “by building relationships, and getting a community to invest its own land and labor, we can construct and a maintain a school for a generation that will educate thousands of children for less than twenty thousand dollars. That’s about half what it would cost the government of Pakistan to build the same school, and one-fifth of what the World Bank would spend on the same project.”<sup>17</sup> This effective and efficient use of capital must be replicated many times over to produce the positive impacts that are so urgently needed around the world.

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<sup>14</sup> *BBC News*, “Togo pupils ‘beaten by teachers’” April 10, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> *BBC News*, “Violence ‘a problem for children’” May 21, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Christina Lamb, *The Sewing Circles of Heart: A Personal Voyage Through Afghanistan* Perennial New York 2004 p. 98.

<sup>17</sup> Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin, *Three Cups of Tea: One Man’s Mission to Promote Peace...One School at a Time* Penguin Books New York 2006 p. 227.

Building schools is absolutely essential to providing educational opportunities but the various stakeholders in this multilateral dialogue on universal primary education must also seek to develop ways to acquire more educational materials, incorporate appropriate technologies, and hire more, well-qualified teachers to provide students with the high-quality education that they deserve. In 2005, newly inaugurated President Pierre Nkurunziza of Burundi announced that he would abolish school fees for Burundi's children. This laudable step has increased school enrollment and attendance tremendously in Burundi but now schools find themselves, as in Tanzania and many other countries, vastly overcrowded. For 1320 students, the school has only eight unisex latrines, classes sometimes have 80 students apiece, and there are nowhere near enough textbooks for the students. UNICEF, in conjunction with local parents and international donors, has donated large amounts of teaching materials and improved the sanitation and latrines for the school but much more needs to be done to ensure that all students enjoy the high-quality education that they deserve.<sup>18</sup>

The UN System has implemented a new program for achieving gender parity in primary education called the UN Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI). UNGEI was established at the Third Education for All Conference in Dakar, Senegal in April 2000 and its lead UN agency is UNICEF. UNGEI's effectiveness is dramatically enhanced through its partnerships, including its Global Advisory Committee; these partnerships include: UNESCO, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the World Bank Group's donor agencies, and a growing number of NGO's. To improve the overall educational prospects for girls throughout the developing world, UNICEF is partnering with national governments and community organizations and providing equipment, supplies, teacher training and assistance to community partners, such as in the new "warehouse school" in Moribaya, Guinea, about 30 miles outside of the capital, Conakry.<sup>19</sup>

As NGO's stake out an increasingly crucial role in ensuring that all children have access to high-quality education, they must provide not only building materials but also, at times, teachers. The NGO Teachers Without Borders operates Community and Teaching Learning Centers (CTLC's) in over 12 countries throughout the world, using "existing facilities and are often outfitted with libraries (such as dictionaries, references, educational material of general interest) and computers, face-to-face classrooms, and break-out spaces, used primarily to serve several essential functions for community sustainability."<sup>20</sup> By focusing on teacher training and community educational development, Teachers Without Borders and related NGO's are able to incorporate community concerns into their educational mission; they also provide important volunteering opportunities for teachers to work in other countries.

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<sup>18</sup> Patricia Lone, "In Burundi, the promise of universal primary education struggles with limited resources" February 6, 2006. Found at: [http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/burundi\\_30935.html](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/burundi_30935.html)

<sup>19</sup> Michele Alan Badarou, "UNICEF and partners support local community schools for Guinean girls and boys" October 29, 2007. Found at: [http://www.ungei.org/infobycountry/guinea\\_1590.html](http://www.ungei.org/infobycountry/guinea_1590.html)

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.teacherswithoutborders.org/html/ctlc.html>

## **Conclusion**

Enrolling tens of millions of primary age children in school is a lofty yet necessary goal. Without an education, children frequently lack the necessary knowledge and skills for full citizenship, gainful employment, and even for their own, as well as their children's, health. As the countries and related actors of the international community devise solutions to the problems posed by 72 million primary age children not enrolled in school, they must always bear in mind that the education that these children receive needs to be of the highest quality.

## **Guiding Questions:**