

Statement by

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“Halfway to 2015, Halfway to Universal Primary Education? Strategies to Supporting Children in Africa”

Allow me to start by congratulating the African Educational Trust on its 50th Anniversary and to say how much I appreciate having been invited to participate as a speaker at this very occasion. I wish to express my thanks to the Africa Educational Trust for its strong commitment to education in Africa. I recall its historic mission to support those struggling for the liberation of their countries or those who had become refugees through the provision of access to quality education when this was otherwise unthinkable.

Twenty six years ago, I was one such person who came to the UK as a person fighting for the independence of Namibia. After my high school education under Apartheid colonialism in Namibia, I decided to study law but was told by a white school inspector that as a black child, my intelligence was much lower than that of a white person and that I will not be able to study law. AET sponsored my studies and today I am a holder of an LLB Honours, an Utter Barrister’s Degree and managed to do my pupillage thanks to the commitment of the AET.

This 50th Anniversary coincides with the Day of the African Child which was celebrated across Africa on the 16th June under the theme “Right to Participation: Let Children Be Seen and Heard”. 16 June holds a special place for me as it was in 1976, while I was a student at the University of Western Cape that Soweto exploded. I was part of those who took to the streets in protest against Bantu education and got expelled that same year.

The education which we enjoyed during colonialism was an education for domestication and subservience rather than for liberation and emancipation. The UN Declaration on Human Rights states that all are born free and equal. It follows therefore that all individuals should have access to learning opportunities of equivalent if not equal standard or quality, and not be compromised by disadvantages in health, wealth, race or sex. Too often in our histories, many policy choices have left too many children without access to education or quality education or deprived them of the attention of inspiring and committed teachers.

During the last decade, countries have recognized that progress in development should not only be measured by economic growth indicators but also have by social indicators such as rights of most vulnerable groups particularly of children. In this context, the World Declaration and Plan of Action on Children, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the African Common Position on Children – Africa Fits for Children, the MDGs all formulate commitments or renewed commitments for children's welfare that should be achieved within a time-frame.

All the above-mentioned blue-prints called for national programmes to be developed to achieve the goals and commitments. Unfortunately, overall in Africa, implementation has been slow. In most countries policies and national plans of action on children's well-being are non-existent. Gender disparities in education still remain a significant problem.

Also, many of these commitments were more focused on reduction of children mortality, malnutrition, access to safe drinking water, reduction of adult illiteracy rate, and protection of children in difficult circumstances. At the turn of the century, and with a view to adapting to new realities, the obligations focus on, among others: non-AIDS-related child mortality; reduction of mother-to-child transmission of HIV; universal primary education with emphasis on education of girls; eradication of polio; vaccine for preventable diseases, malaria and diarrhea; protection of children in armed conflict and demobilization of child soldiers; and protection of children against violence, neglect, sexual exploitation and trafficking.

The African Union adopted a Declaration and Plan of Action of an Africa Fit for Children in 2001. Six years later in 2007, the African Ministers in charge of Children held their the 2nd Pan African Forum on Children to review progress on the 2001 Plan of Action and adopted a Call for Accelerated Action on the 2001 POA. One of the priority areas in the Plan is Realizing the Right to Education which states that education is the basic right that allows every child to develop his/her full potential. To ensure the realization of that right, Governments are expected to, among others: give every child a chance to go to school without any gender discrimination; provide quality, free and compulsory basic education; take into account the special learning needs of children; strengthen the teaching method by utilizing the new information and technologies.

In adopting this Plan, governments obligated themselves to a variety of priority actions including:

- Implementation of the goals of the Second Decade of Education for Africa,
- Provision of quality child friendly schools with measures that will enhance quality of learning and reduce drop outs of children
- Ensuring universal access to comprehensive quality basic education for ALL children

- Strengthening of Education Management Information Systems for such data as access, retention, achievement, educational processes, teaching techniques and learning outcomes;
- Developing and expanding sports and promoting extra-curricular activities for children.

We acknowledge that educational opportunities continue to be a major challenge in Africa. The evaluation of the first Decade of Education for Africa (1997-2006) revealed that most of the goals were not achieved and urgent action is still required. Hence, the adoption of the Second Decade of Education in Africa, (2006-2015) with a comprehensive Plan of Action to ensure that the targets set are met by 2015. The Education Decade recognizes all facets of education, including vocational, higher education and formal schooling as important to African advancement. The Ministers thus recognized the review of the Decade on Education as an opportunity to reflect on progress and to define renewed efforts for pursuing objectives. Education remains a key priority within the AU and its NEPAD programme. As part of this overall programme, various actions were implemented such as the establishment of a scholarship programme, promotion of basic education through the establishment of an observatory on basic education, popularization of science and technology to mention a few.

Education remains important to society and the challenge of achieving access to quality educational opportunity confronts all. Many poor communities are willing to invest in the education of their children as one of the means to lift themselves and their children out of poverty

Achieving access to education is imperative because education will give life to strong and vibrant democracies and to sustained economic success. As improved economies promise higher levels of employment and work, so too will they contribute to political and social stability and strengthen the capacity of the citizen to exercise democratic rights and to participate effectively in decision-making.

Africa has made progress in expanding primary education access. For example, some African countries have introduced free and compulsory education. However, access to secondary schooling and to expand our post-secondary education remains a challenge. In addition, higher education has a specific and important role in national development. It can enhance the achievement of our development goals through promoting scientific research and intellectual development. We also need an education system which links closely to the labour market as in many cases; even highly qualified persons cannot find jobs or has inappropriate skills which the labour market needs.

There are so many education goals and targets (Education For All, MDGs, and others) that are all inter-linked. Too many African countries will not meet the target for universal primary education by 2015.

What more should be done to promote success?

- International support
- Develop achievable plans
- Allocate sufficient resources to pursue the goals

Allow me to once again thank and congratulate Africa Educational Trust and to reiterate the importance of its continued commitment to promote access to education in Africa as well as its significant contributions to the development of human capital.

I thank you.