

**50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY RECEPTION FOR THE AFRICA EDUCATIONAL TRUST  
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**“Halfway to 2015; Halfway to Universal Primary Education?”**

*Summary of Remarks by  
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Halfway to the milestone year of 2015 it is evident that for the world to achieve either the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) or the six EFA Dakar Goals (Education for All), we must generate smart strategies and invest extraordinary efforts and resources to education in Africa as an urgent priority. Starting from an extremely low base, countries in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) have made great progress through political will manifested in sound policies and increased domestic investment, as well as with increased and more consistent external support from their development partners. From 1999 to 2005 gross enrolment rates in SSA increased by 61% in pre-primary, 36% in primary, 55% in secondary and 66% in tertiary education. Despite such progress SSA accounts for 44% of all children out of school worldwide, with 41 million children of primary school age (52% girls) being denied access to education. Indeed more than 60% of SSA countries have primary net enrolment rates below 80% and more than one-third are below 70%. These countries have the highest primary school repetition and drop out rates worldwide, and participation at secondary level remains low at less than 20% GER for many. Their enrolment levels in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) was only 6% in 2005 and only a tiny percentage have access to tertiary education at around 5% GER.

It would seem that Africa is challenged by a cruel paradox. On the one hand impressive progress has been made by African countries and their development partners through strong commitment to investing more efficiently in sound national education policies and plans as a high priority. On the other hand Africa still lags badly behind other regions and many countries will fail to achieve the education related MDGs or the EFA goals by 2015. Three factors are at the heart of this paradox. First is the low base from which most of these countries started. Gains achieved to date show that it is possible to overcome this disadvantage of a low starting point.

The second factor stems from inefficiencies in SSA education systems, characterized by high percentages of over-aged learners at all levels and prone to high rates of repetition and drop out. These characteristics account for significant wastage of the scarce resources that are invested in education by SSA countries and their partners. All research evidence indicates that investing more in the early years of education can help to address these problems. Investment in early childhood development and education programmes (ECDE), especially for the most disadvantaged children, can help to ensure that most children start school at the right age, as well as reducing the rates of repetition and drop out, while also improving the performance of children for much of the primary cycle. The

investment in early years also helps to address disparities and inequalities in education due to poverty, disability, rural location, urban slum locations, gender, ethnicity, etc. The disadvantages associated with these disparities start early and deepen over time, so that without investment in the early years (ECDE) children from disadvantaged backgrounds are constantly playing catch-up in education from primary through secondary and beyond

Third, and most importantly, there are the multiple threats to progress represented by the hostile environments within which education systems operate for progress towards the MDGs and EFA goals. These threats may be in the form of emergencies due to natural disasters or civil conflict. They may also take less dramatic forms in terms of deepening poverty and reduced quality of life, environmental degradation and repeated droughts, political impasse and social tensions, or disease burden and pandemics. Indeed these less dramatic threats often combine in complex ways to pose an even greater problem for development than natural disasters and civil conflicts. Africa seems prone to more than its fair share of these threats and this represents a major challenge for progress. However, threats are not just barriers to the achievement of education and development goals. They can often result in a debilitating stagnation of progress and even a reversal of hard won gains. It is for this reason that the smartest way of working on education in Africa is to safeguard countries from such threats that can undo all the progress being made to date.

Against this background UNICEF commends the leadership that has consistently been demonstrated by the United Kingdom Government. Pronouncements by Prime Ministers Tony Blair and Gordon Brown (including while he was Chancellor) and the resulting increased investments in Africa by the U.K. Government have been exemplary in terms of development partnership for African countries. UNICEF has also been privileged to work with the Africa Educational Trust over many years and can attest to the pivotal role that AET plays with consistency in its countries of operation. Long before the current deep interest in addressing so-called fragile States became fashionable there have been those like UNICEF, AET and many others who have persistently struggled to restore learning opportunities for children in times of emergency and to help rebuild education systems ruined by such emergencies, as well as to safeguard gains for education in the often fractious environments that prevail in post-crisis countries. These efforts are being realized and major donors are beginning to make smart investments in this area of work. The most impressive example to date is the investment of over US\$ 200 million by the Netherlands Government in a UNICEF programme on Education in Emergencies and Post-Crisis Transition Countries. We are pleased that the U.K. Government has also joined this effort with an expected initial contribution of GBP 20 million, while the European Commission has also expressed its intention to join this year as well.

Through this type of support UNICEF and partners like AET can help emergency and post-crisis countries address the major threats to progress in achieving the MDGs and EFA goals. Already progress in education is being speeded up in countries like Southern Sudan, Somalia and Uganda (Northern). We look forward to working more closely in the future with AET and other partners. What is emerging as most innovative and promising is the way in which efforts are now being made not only to restore learning and to rebuild

or strengthen education systems, but also to use education interventions help reduce the fragility caused by threats to the environment in which education systems operate.

For example Swaziland is one of several countries in eastern and Southern Africa that are affected by multiple threats due to repeated drought and food insecurity as well as high levels of HIV/AIDS infection and gender-based social violence. The combined effects of these multiple threats has undermined the traditional safety nets of society and the fight back is now being organized through schools as the line of defense. A programme called “Schools for Learning - Plus” is being used by the Swazi Government with support from UNICEF and other partners, to address care and support of children affected by these multiple threats, whilst also strengthening communities to work through schools in order to safeguard children from these threats.

Again in four West African countries that have been plagued with civil conflict for many years, efforts are being made not only to help rebuild the education systems, but also to address some of the most urgent threats. In particular investments are being made in an innovative programme for adolescents and youths who have missed out on education due to years of civil war in these countries (Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Cote d’Ivoire). Major investment is also being made on high quality schools in border communities that have long been incubators for conflict. These schools are designed not only to provide high quality education for children, but also to link with the wider community and help improve the quality of life (a major source of grievance) in these border communities.

As we learn to work smart in these sorts of ways we can begin to see the light at the end of the tunnel for education in Africa. Investing in the early years is a high priority, more so for the most disadvantaged groups. UNICEF is currently working on a very innovative addition to the ECDE cluster of programmes, with the Child-to-Child Trust at London University. Through this “Child-to-Child for School Readiness” initiative we hope to support quality work in schools so that children already attending school can influence their younger siblings at home through play, introducing them to the world of school and preparing them for learning. Investing in quality primary education is also a high priority so that efficiency can be improved to provide a sound platform for domestic and external resources to be utilized for maximum benefit. UNICEF concentrates its efforts in this area on its child friendly school models that offer a comprehensive approach to quality and can be expanded to take on board a wide range of emerging concerns relating to the physical environment, safety and security, health and well being as well as pedagogical excellence within the school. As countries master the business of providing good quality primary education, development partners can increasingly devote their support to other levels of education such as secondary, TVET and tertiary. All of these are critical for the sustainable development of sub-Saharan countries and their prospects in a competitive global economy. UNICEF therefore renews its commitment to work with key donors like the U.K. Government and with trusted partners like AET to better support the countries of sub-Saharan Africa in their quest to achieve the MDGs and EFA goals by 2015.