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GENERAL ASSEMBLY THIRD COMMITTEE SOCIAL, HUMANITARIAN AND CULTURAL COMMISSION

DESCRIPTION OF THE COMMITTEE

The General Assembly (GA) is the main decision-making body of the United Nations. It includes all 192 member states; each member state has one vote. The GA addresses issues involving all aspects of the UN's work, including humanitarian, peace and security, and human rights matters, and it can refer threats to peace to the Security Council for deliberation. Resolutions produced by the GA are not binding—the GA cannot force countries to take action on any issue—but because they are supported by a majority of countries in the world, they are important international documents.

The GA is divided into six committees. The Third Committee of the General Assembly deals with social, humanitarian, and cultural issues. Though the smaller specialized commissions of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) address similar topics, the Third Committee allows all 192 UN member states to engage in debate over these important issues.

TOPIC: RIGHT TO EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION

Education is widely considered a basic **human right**, vital to personal and societal development and well-being. By providing a means for sustainable living, education ends generational cycles of **poverty** and disease.

Attending primary school also offers children a safe environment, with support, supervision and socialization. Here children learn life skills that can help them prevent diseases such as HIV/AIDS and malaria, along with receiving life-saving vaccines, fresh water and nutrient supplementation at school.¹

However, not every child has access to **primary education**, meaning full-time education suited to the requirements of students up to the age of 12 years.



Children in Mozambique play in a UNICEF-funded school

Source:

http://www.unicef.org/har08/index_esaro.html



Ninety-three million children of primary school age are not in school, despite most countries having made primary education compulsory. Eighty percent of these children are located in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.ⁱⁱ

The United Nations **Millennium Development Goals** (MDGs)-eight goals that the United Nations member states agreed upon achieving by 2015-regard universal primary education to be interlinked with its other goals such as gender equality and empowering women.ⁱⁱⁱ

The second goal the MDG's calls for is the achievement of universal primary education (UPE) by the year 2015. However, achieving this goal of universal primary education has proven difficult, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa and in South Asia where the greatest changes need to be made.

A considerable international effort has been made to improve access to primary education, showing that the number of children of primary school age who are out of school has declined markedly in recent years, from 115 million in 2002 to 93 million in 2005-2006.^{iv}

This is substantial progress but more efforts need to be concentrated in regions where reaching the last few percent of children out of school may be a particular challenge, requiring different strategies and investment.

RIGHT TO PRIMARY EDUCATION

"We desperately need to end the global education crisis. Close to 1 billion people have never had access to education and 1 in 4 women lack basic literacy skills. Yet, all of this can change. We know the world can afford it and that a combination of political will and resources can make education for everyone possible. Yet due to government's current complacency, it will not be achieved within our children's lifetime. It's time for governments to respond to the demands of children and stop with their excuses"

-Kailash Satyarth, President of the Global Campaign for Education

Source: Oxfam International

BACKGROUND

Family poverty is the greatest barrier to primary education as sending children to school may result in the loss of their income or help at home. According to Action Aid, ninety-two countries require payment for children to attend a primary school.^v

Furthermore, schools may charge fees or require uniforms and supplies that families cannot afford. As such, when faced with maintaining survivability of a household, many parents see education as a burden rather than an investment.^{vi}

Also, uneducated parents are less likely to send their children to primary school than those who received primary education themselves. Access to primary education is greatly affected when



parents feel or believe that the costs of sending children to school are not worth the value of the children's labor at home or elsewhere.

Also, the legal frameworks around education can be weak, as even though compulsory and/or free education laws exist, they may not be enforced. Corruption and local bureaucracy has tremendous impacts on primary education as money set aside for creation of schools or hiring of more teachers either does not make it through for its original purpose, or is dragged through unnecessary complications so as to delay setting up education infrastructures. Access to primary education is greatly limited when children do not have a school to attend or enough teachers or supplies to withstand greater enrollment.

Safety

Issues of safety and security of children attending school away from home also contribute to reasons why parents do not prioritize primary education. If children have to travel long distances to school, parents are less likely to allow taking the journey because of risks to their personal safety.^{vii}



A teacher in Ethiopia waits in an empty classroom, a common scene in countries that suffer or have suffered from war.

This is particularly true in war-torn areas or regions that are likely to have sporadic conflict breaking out.

Source: <http://www.unicef.org/childalert/hornofafrica/behind.php>

Parents do not see, however, the link between granting access to primary education and the emergence of more tolerance and less violence in the future.

Finally, children are more likely to drop out of school if it is irrelevant to their particular situation. If the curriculum fails to address facts and skills for life, including education on rights, gender equality, health, nutrition, HIV/AIDS, and peace along with literacy and numeracy, children would not be able to relate to what they observe in their surroundings and what they learn in school. The importance of bridging this gap is understated in most primary education systems and more must be done to address these concerns.

Gender Inequality

The single most important factor preventing girls from attending and achieving in school is gender discrimination. Girls and boys both have problems to overcome in terms of access to primary education; however, for the girls these obstacles are, for the most part, more frequent and more difficult, simply because they are girls. UNICEF reports that of the 93 million children not in school, 57 percent of those children are girls.^{viii}

Early marriage and pregnancy are widespread and common in many countries, and most have laws prohibiting pregnant girls from attending school or returning to school after birth. Studies



have shown, however, that education leads to lower fertility rates. Research in the Caribbean, Latin America, and Western Asia report that women with a secondary education or higher have three fewer children on average than those women who have had no education.

Social conditioning and removal of a family burden are reasons why child marriage is so frequent in less developed countries. Also, many societies have lower expectations for girls during the early years of a child's life where girls receive less care and attention compared to boys. As such, a systematic mentality of girls not being good enough or desired enough as children is created that limits achievement or expectations for girls themselves. Teaching self-confidence to face off against social pressures is needed to have more access to primary education.

Issues of safety and security are also heightened and supercharged with regards to girls. Physical violence in school, including sexual abuse and rape, is directed towards girls much more than boys since girls are perceived as weaker and more likely to accept oppression.^{ix}



Girls in Madagascar walk back home from a UNICEF-funded school

Source:

http://www.unicef.org/har08/index_madagascarar.php

Also, the lack of female teachers as role models or confidants can make girls feel less secure in the school environment while studying curricula that perpetuates gender discrimination and stereotyped roles. Not only is there a lack of female teachers, but reports in Kenya, as well as in other countries, have shown that teachers undermine girls in classrooms, and tolerate the bullying of girls by their male classmates.^x

Despite progress that has been made toward achieving universal primary education by 2015, UNESCO reports that 86 countries are still at risk for not achieving gender equality by 2015. Out of 149 countries with data, 94 of those countries had missed the gender parity target for 2005.^{xi}

While numbers have improved over the years, a lot of changes need to be made in order to achieve UPE for both boys and girls by 2015.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTION

Since the issue of boys holding a preeminent role in society over girls is a gender discrimination engrained in many cultures, how should the UN go about addressing this problem?



PAST INTERNATIONAL ACTION

In the past much work regarding the right to primary education has been completed by the United Nations Children's Education Fund (UNICEF). UNICEF works in 157 countries, calling on development agencies, governments, families, religious groups, civil society and donors to step up efforts on behalf of education for all children. UNICEF's strategies to support access to primary education are adapted to the local situation. Interventions have typically included:^{xii}



A girl in Indonesia holds a UNICEF school kit which includes books, pencils, crayons, and sharpeners.

Source:
<http://fieldnotes.unicefusa.org/2008/07/>

- Policy support and technical assistance to governments and communities to increase access for children who are hardest to reach or suffer from most discrimination;
- Assistance in preparing for and responding to conflict and other crises so that affected children's rights to basic education are fulfilled in safe, stable and gender-sensitive environments;
- Promoting quality in education as a means to encourage access.
- Support for the development and implementation of specific actions to reduce the gender gap, while increasing overall enrolment and attendance;
- Programs to eliminate cultural, social and economic barriers to the education of girls; and,
- Outreach to locate excluded and at-risk girls and get them into school.

UNICEF has also worked hard in promoting life skill-based education to allow for more relevant and related content in the learning of children and in order to better pass on the grave problems and promising solutions facing the world today.

In 2004, ECOSOC passed resolution 254 entitled 'The right to education' which elaborates further on the issue of access to primary education.^{xiii} The UN Development Program (UNDP) is working to achieve the MDGs by 2015, of which one of the goals is universal primary education. Funding has been provided by the UN member states to meet the objectives of the MDGs; however, investment does not guarantee that infrastructure will be developed. While the international community has acknowledged access to primary education as an important priority and UNICEF provides support to many disparaged communities to increase such access, there is still more that has to be done if the world plans on meeting its 2015 deadline.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FORMULATING A RESOLUTION

When formulating resolutions, delegates should consider focusing on providing quality teaching for primary education aged children as well as solving problems that UNICEF has been unable to fix. Additionally, they should consider the issue from the unique perspective of the UNHRC. As such, the following ideas should be addressed:^{xiv}

- **Environments:** At the very least, they ought to be healthy, safe, protective and gender-sensitive
- **Content of education:** Relevance of curricula and materials, especially with regards to life-skills
- **Processes:** Teacher-student ratio, recruiting more teachers to act as counselors, community support
- **Outcomes:** Assessments revealing national goals for education and positive participation in society
- **Students' background:** Being in tune with the experience children bring into the classroom

However, more important than ensuring quality education is available for children, the committee should codify ideas on how to provide access to such education for children.

The barriers to education mentioned in the background section ought to be referred to and innovative international actions should be articulated. Questions of poverty, gender inequality, and legal inadequacies are of vital interest to the UNHRC with regards to issues intercepting a child's right to education. Resolutions should tackle these problems with unique viewpoints, keeping in mind their country policies, and should restrain themselves from simply throwing money or offering charity to overcome such obstacles. While funding is important for plans to get off ground, delegates should first come up with an idea of how to minimize the influence of a problem affecting access to primary and then work funding into the plan.



This is a school in Afghanistan that brings education to those who cannot afford it. It receives funding and books from UNICEF.

Source:
fieldnotes.unicefusa.org/images/afghan_school.jpg

When considering plans to include in resolutions, keep in mind the framework mentioned above and the social conditions of the children at hand. Also, the UNHRC has limitations in terms of its jurisdiction and what it can and cannot do. As delegates, you have much flexibility in suggesting recommendations to the committee for increasing access to primary education and you are encouraged to look at problems and issues not mentioned in this background guide.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

When researching your country policy, keep the following questions in mind so as to better understand your stance and possible solutions on the topic:

1. How many children are not getting access to primary education in your country?
2. What is the ratio of boys-girls enrollment in primary education for your country?
3. What does your country find the main reasons for restricted access to primary education?
4. Has your country begun any programs to increase access to primary education regionally or around the world?
5. Does your country contribute to UNHRC and UNICEF efforts to promote primary education? If so, how much?
6. What are three proposed plans your country would support in order to increase access to primary education on a worldwide scale?

TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Human rights: rights to which all human beings are entitled from birth

Poverty: deprivation of common necessities that determine the quality of life (food, shelter, clothing, and safe drinking water)

Primary education: full-time education suited to the requirements of students up to the age of 12 years.

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): eight goals that the United Nations member states agreed upon achieving by 2015; universal access to primary education is one of them



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