

TASK FORCE: Education

Children in the Developing World Face Major Hurdles in School Attendance and Access to a Good Education

UN Task Force outlines strategies to improve access to quality education in developing countries

17 January 2005, New York—World leaders have committed to the goal of providing universal primary education to all children globally by 2015 and affirmed the right of every child to a quality education.

Reaching these ambitious goals requires pursuing a number of solutions that have proven to be effective at boosting enrolment, including eliminating school and uniform fees, creating or improving school food and health programmes, and strengthening the role of advocacy groups and non-governmental organizations in debates about education systems, according to a report by the UN Millennium Project's Task Force on Education and Gender Equality.

The UN Millennium Project Task Force on Education and Gender Equality spent two years analyzing education initiatives around the world with the understanding that better education is fundamental to improving economic and social conditions in poor countries. The team was led by **Nancy Birdsall**, founding president of the Center for Global Development; **Amina J. Ibrahim**, national coordinator for Education for All at the Ministry for Education in Nigeria; and **Geeta Rao Gupta**, president of the International Center for Research on Women. The report—*Achieving the Millennium Development Goal of Universal Primary Education*—was one of two released today from this task force as part of a detailed global action plan for fighting poverty, disease and environmental degradation in developing countries.

Based on a range of studies, the task force reported that current donor support to ensure that every child is enrolled in a quality primary school, at US\$1.2 billion annually, is much less than what is needed, estimated at between \$7 and \$17 billion annually between 2005-2015.

“With more than 100 million children out of school at present, the aim of making up so much lost ground in the next 12 years is an heroic ambition whose realization will require something quite different than more of the same,” the report said.

The UN Millennium Project Task Force on Education and Gender Equality offered a series of recommendations focusing on developing countries and donor countries to improve both quality and access to schooling. For developing countries, these include:

- **Educating girls and women to break the cycle of low education:** Support adult literacy programmes designed for women and young girls.
- **Encouraging hard-to-reach children to attend school:** Depending on local conditions, introduce and scale up specific interventions such as removing school fees, introducing conditional cash transfers and school feeding programmes, and actions to improve the security of girls, as ways of attracting out-of-school children to school.
- **Enhancing postprimary education:** Identify and implement strategies to increase access to postprimary education especially in cases of unequal access.
- **Improving accountability through local control:** Promote mechanisms for local control of education, in which parents and other citizens are given an explicit role in holding schools and teachers accountable for delivering results.
- **Improving the quality and availability of information:** Focus efforts on improving transparency at the school level, and data and programme evaluation at the national level.

- **Setting international standards to assess acquisition of skills and knowledge:** Establish a clear way of understanding what children are learning and where they are deficient.
- **Strengthening the role of civil society organizations:** Create an environment in which civil society organizations are recognized as legitimate participants in debates about the education system.

For donor countries, the recommendations include:

- **Displaying bold political leadership and making firm financial commitments:** Make “Education for All” and the “Fast Track Initiative” work.
- **Reforming the donor business by committing new funds in a new way:** Implement a strong, coordinated global effort that rewards and reinforces countries’ measurable progress.
- **Reporting on donor commitments and actions through a transparent accountability framework:** Just as developing countries are asked to report on their spending and achievements, donor agencies should similarly be asked to report in a standardized way on financial commitments and disbursements, as well as adherence to agreements about harmonization of development assistance.
- **Investing in genuine evaluation of education sector interventions:** Assess how well specified interventions and reforms work to improve enrolment, retention and learning in different contexts.

Creating a blueprint for action to achieve universal primary education is crucial to meeting the 2000 Millennium Summit commitments, where world leaders agreed to make the fight against poverty—and all of its faces—in developing countries their priority. The summit inspired the Millennium Development Goals, which are built on the recognition that, from health to the environment, from education to gender equality, a growing list of development issues can no longer be managed solely within the boundaries of a single nation.

The UN Millennium Project Task Force on Education and Gender Equality is one of the 10 Task Forces commissioned by the UN Secretary-General in 2002 to develop a practical plan of action for enabling developing countries to meet the Millennium Development Goals and reverse the grinding poverty, hunger and disease affecting billions of people in the world, largely in developing countries. The 10 task forces together comprise some 265 experts from around the world, including members of parliament; researchers and scientists; policymakers; representatives of civil society; UN agencies; the World Bank; International Monetary Fund; and the private sector. The UN Millennium Project task force teams were challenged to diagnose the key constraints to meeting the Millennium Development Goals and present recommendations for overcoming the obstacles to get nations on track to achieving them by 2015. As an independent advisory body directed by Professor Jeffrey D. Sachs, the UN Millennium Project submitted its final recommendations in January 2005.



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