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Statement submitted by Franciscans International, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/2011/100.



Statement*

Franciscans International is an NGO with general consultative status. Franciscans International is committed to address issues related to extreme poverty and promoting the Millennium Development Goals through its advocacy vis-à-vis national governments at the United Nations. With this focus, we routinely address issues concerning child rights and access to education.

Good education — in particular primary education — is a human right enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and in the Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, to which State parties have committed themselves.

Meeting Goal 2, target 2A of the Millennium Development Goals primary schooling for all children, is of paramount importance. Franciscans International believes that ensuring education, at least primary education for all children, helps reduce poverty and in turn address a series of other human rights issues. We see that: (a) schools represent a safe environment for children, especially in the poorest regions; (b) for poor households, school offers stimulating activities, intellectual support and creates new opportunities for children in a learning environment; (c) at school, children can socialize and learn hygiene and other good habits, including how to prevent diseases, such as HIV/AIDS and malaria.

More specifically, Franciscans International would like to draw particular attention to the fact that realizing target 2A will facilitate the achievement of Goal 3, on gender equality. In fact, ensuring universal education for all children also implies for all the girls of the world. This in turn will help to reduce early marriages, since educated girls are more likely to marry later and be better equipped to look after their children/family. Meeting target 2A will also help ensure that children, through improved education, will have better chances of survival and access to nourishment. Finally, girls who have the opportunity to attend primary school will be better motivated to find jobs. Thus they will more likely avoid falling into the hands of criminal networks, prostitution, slave-like jobs, and trafficking. Educated girls will receive better salaries at work, and will be able to participate in politics, as well as in the socio-economic context of their communities.

On the contrary, denying access to education for children will make them more vulnerable to abuse, exploitation and diseases. In particular, out-of-school children are seriously exposed to child labour, sex-work, and criminal activities and are more likely to be used in conflict as child-soldiers, or to become street children.

General assessment, positive steps

Franciscans International notes with satisfaction that according to available statistics and first-hand information received by Franciscans working at the grass-roots level, enrolment in primary education continues to rise, and has reached 89 per cent in some developing countries. Franciscans International particularly welcomes the fact that, in sub-Saharan countries, the abolition of primary school fees resulted in an increase in primary-school enrolment. Statistics and research show that, between 1999 and 2008, in sub-Saharan Africa, primary school enrolment increased from 58 per cent to 76 per cent (an increase of 18 percentage points). During the

* The present statement is being issued without formal editing.

same period, Southern Asia experienced an increase of 11 percentage points and Northern Africa 8 percentage points. In addition, the overall number of out-of-school children has decreased considerably (it amounted to 106 million in 1999, and 69 million in 2008). More importantly, Franciscans International is pleased to acknowledge that within the above-mentioned figures, the gender gap has also narrowed. In fact, during this period, the percentage of girls' out-of-school decreased from 57 per cent to 53 per cent. However, these are general figures and the situation should be evaluated through a case-by-case monitoring.

Specific challenges

Despite the above-mentioned progress, Franciscans International is seriously concerned at the persistence of a number of issues that prevent the full realization of target 2A. In particular, Franciscans International wishes to emphasize that the following challenges still remain poorly addressed: (a) the greatest obstacle to education is poverty. Poor households cannot afford to send children to school, because of school fees or other indirect costs related to education. Young girls living in poverty are 3.5 times more likely to drop out of school than girls living in rich households; (b) children living in rural or remote areas are twice as likely to drop out of school as urban children. This is reflected in the gender gap in the statistics between education for rural and urban girls. Girls are the first to be taken out of school if this poses a problem for the family (financial problems, housework, looking after family members, rural work); (c) another obstacle is represented by social, cultural and gender implications to education. In many regions, there is the perception that investing financial means to educate girls is not worthwhile; (d) indigenous children or children belonging to ethnic minorities frequently experience discrimination and exclusion from formal education; (e) civil conflicts, unrest, humanitarian crises, and natural disasters also prevent children from going to school and are serious obstacles to their right to education; (f) free primary education alone does not ensure school attendance. Primary education should be free and compulsory. In half of the sub-Saharan African countries, more than 30 per cent of primary school-aged children do not reach the final grade; (g) children with disabilities are among the most affected. For them, the development goal is seriously challenged by limited opportunities and marginalization. In countries such as Malawi and the United Republic of Tanzania, children with disabilities are twice as likely to drop out of school. Even in developed countries, children with disabilities represent the majority of those who are excluded from education. In European countries such as Bulgaria and Romania, only 58 per cent of children with disabilities have access to primary education.

FI case studies

Kenya (2010): The Government of Kenya introduced free primary education in 2003. The policy consists of a Government commitment to abolish tuition fees for primary school and to meet the costs of teaching and learning materials, wages for teachers and key non-teaching staff, and co-curricular activities. As a result of free primary education, pupil attendance and retention have improved. For instance, at the national level, enrolment in primary schools increased from 5.9 million in 2002 to 8.5 million in 2008.

Although primary education is free, significant barriers still exist which prevent children from schooling. These include direct costs such as those associated

with uniforms, instruction materials, tuition, feeding programmes and the hiring of non-school teaching staff. Schools are also unevenly distributed thus increasing difficulties of access in some regions. In certain parts of Kenya, like the northern part of the country, schools are 20-45 kilometres apart. With the increasing upsurge in enrolments, primary education experiences a number of challenges such as overstretched facilities, overcrowding in schools — especially those in urban slums — and high pupil-teacher ratios in densely populated areas. As a result, teachers have defaulted to out-dated teaching methodologies. Moreover, the disparities and the gaps between rural and urban zones and between boys and girls have not been narrowed. Many children displaced due to the 2007 post-election violence, have also contributed to declining levels of school attendance.

Recommendations

- (a) That the Government of Kenya take further steps to address persistent challenges to the provision of free primary education for all children by allocating sufficient financial resources to match increased enrolment levels. These resources should be directed at providing adequate infrastructure and more trained teachers; (b) address the lack of access to education for vulnerable children and the gap between urban and rural areas, rich and poor children, and between boys and girls.

Jamaica (2010)

A major obstacle to the full realization of the right to education, including equal access for quality education at primary and secondary level is the systematic practice of student “streaming” in the Jamaican educational system. Streaming is the practice of pre-appraisal of student aptitude with the goal of placing them in homogeneous groupings. It is a systematic practice in the Jamaican education system, even though the Jamaican education policy states that streaming is not to be practised. Most recent educational research suggests that mixed ability groupings prove more beneficial in overall education than grouping students together homogeneously.

Recommendations

- (a) That the Government of Jamaica guarantees equal access to quality education for all, by abandoning the practice of “streaming”; (b) avoid stigmatization of students with lesser abilities, and combat the practice of labelling them with pejorative qualifiers such as “non-starters”.

Solomon Islands (2010)

The October “2010 Policy Statement of the National Coalition for Reform and Advancement” commits the Government to ensuring that all Solomon Islanders have equal access to quality education. Nonetheless, access to quality education is an ongoing problem for children in the Solomon Islands. A baseline study in almost 60 communities in the Malaita Province showed that approximately 36 per cent of school-aged children are not attending school. The country suffers from an acute shortage of qualified teachers, overcrowded classrooms and limited learning resources. These factors affect the entire education sector and are exacerbated by weak school administration and ineffective community engagement in many schools. The Government’s limited reference to principles of child rights in its

education policies is also a major concern. Furthermore, primary school education is free but not compulsory. Both the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Committee on the Rights of the Child in their concluding observations voiced their concern that primary education in the Solomon Islands is not compulsory, as required by article 14 of the ICESCR and article 28 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Recommendations

(a) The Government of the Solomon Islands makes basic primary quality education compulsory, in accordance with article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child; (b) in providing equal access for all children, allocate priority spending to children with disabilities; (c) increase Government spending on education so as to develop its infrastructure, namely more professionally trained teachers, plus more schools and classrooms that are adequately equipped.

Final recommendations

In order to guarantee the achievement of target 2A, Franciscans International calls on the United Nations, United Nations agencies, Governments and national institutions to consider the following recommendations: (a) free primary education is a first step: in order to achieve this goal, Governments must ensure that education is also compulsory and that children do attend school; (b) poverty should not represent a discriminating factor in accessing educational needs. Special attention should be drawn to children from poor households. Governments should ensure that they have access to school, they are able to attend classes and that they are not affected by indirect financial costs linked to education; (c) in designing educational plans, Governments should take into consideration both personal and material requirements. This includes ensuring that the number of teachers and classrooms meet the demand and properly reflect the number of students; (d) invest in quality education. Only through good education can children be saved from poverty and slave-like conditions, thereby offered new opportunities and hopes for their lives; (e) ensure that in accessing schools children from rural communities, indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities, as well as children with disabilities, not be discriminated against. Also, that they do not face exclusion and marginalization while in school; (f) take necessary measures to address gender-based discrimination in accessing school. Curb gender-biased cultural practices and harmful traditional practices that prevent the full realization of Goal 3 for girls; (g) ensure that children experiencing war, conflict, social unrest, humanitarian crisis and natural disaster are not deprived from their right to education. Take all necessary measures to grant continuity in education to all affected children; (h) ratify and implement the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.