

# MDG 2 Achieve Universal Primary Education<sup>9</sup>

## 1. Introduction

Target 2 is stated as 'Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling'. While Target 2 contains three indicators for progress (net enrolment ratio in primary education; proportion of pupils starting grade 1 who reach last grade of primary; literacy rate of 15-24 year-olds, women and men) this paper focuses on the overall target.

The right to education for all children and young people has been enshrined in a number of treaties, including the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women.

Education has been increasingly rising up the global agenda and awareness of the challenges that need to be addressed has been transformed into many initiatives to bring primary education to all children. However, many challenges remain.

## 2. Tracking progress

Overall, the global numbers of out-of-school children are dropping too slowly for the target to be reached by 2015. While the number of children out of primary school across the world has dropped by 33 million since 1999<sup>10</sup>, there are still 72 million children currently denied their right to primary education. Over half of those out-of-school children, 38.7 million, live in conflict-affected fragile states (CAFS), and one-third are disabled. According to UNESCO's GMR 2010 as many as 56 million children could be out of school in 2015.

While some countries, such as India, have made good progress, many remain considerably off-track, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Some countries, including Chad, Haiti, Nigeria and Sri Lanka, have seen the numbers of out-of-school children increase. Clearly, since the recent earthquake in Haiti, progress there will be still more difficult. Furthermore, there is a very real danger that, owing to the financial crisis, any hard-won progress will be reversed, while those already off-track will simply slip further behind.

## 3. Barriers to achieving MDG 2

- **Insufficient funding** has been provided for education. Donors have not fulfilled their education commitments and, as a result of the financial crisis, ODA commitments are under further threat. Overall amounts of ODA are likely to diminish anyway as they are based on a percentage of GNI, which has declined. Developing countries' governments are experiencing considerable fiscal pressure which will inevitably affect spending on social policies more than other areas.
- The **EFA Fast Track Initiative (FTI)** has fallen short of expectations: it has made few financial transfers, at high transaction costs, through the Catalytic Fund, its main financing mechanism. The conditions set for accessing funding mean that CAFS rarely qualify.
- **CAFS** face multiple difficulties: not only do they have the largest proportion of children out of school, but they are generally amongst the poorest of lower income countries (LICs) and therefore in greatest need for support from

donors. However, they are particularly under-funded. Conflict itself is a significant barrier to children attending school, as violence and unrest can force both governments and aid agencies to deem areas too dangerous to operate.

- **Education is rarely prioritised by the international community in its emergency responses**, despite the proven advantages of doing so. Natural disasters and armed conflict often destroy schools and education facilities as well as displacing or killing large numbers of teachers, students and parents.
- School-level barriers such as **school fees** (applied in almost all CAFS, even though they may have been legally abolished) and/or indirect costs (such as school uniforms), inappropriate, insufficient or inaccessible facilities (such as a lack of separate toilets for girls, insufficient classrooms, or lack of adaptation of facilities for disabled people), insufficient and/or poorly trained teaching staff, lack of supplies including books and paper all affect enrolment, retention and learning.
- **Inequalities in access to education, particularly for those from vulnerable or marginalised groups.** The list of specific barriers preventing certain groups of children or young people from accessing, and benefiting from, education is long. Furthermore, **discrimination** against children demonstrating any of these factors only adds to their difficulties in accessing education. Key factors include:
  - **Family income**, with children – particularly girls – from the poorest households being the least likely to attend school. In some less developed countries, children in the poorest 20% of the population are three times less likely to be enrolled in primary school than children from the wealthiest 20%.<sup>11</sup>
  - **Location** – a significant urban-rural divide exists: four out of five out-of-school children live in rural areas. The average distance to school is considerably higher in rural areas, and there is a lack of investment in schools in those areas. This factor is often combined with others such as poverty.
  - **Gender** – girls have lower enrolment rates and higher drop-out rates than boys owing to discrimination, social and economic constraints and expectations, and a lower priority given to girls' education by families and society.
  - **Ethnicity or minority group status**, which is often linked to the language of instruction.
  - **Language** – lack of availability of education in a language understood by the child affects millions of speakers of local languages and indigenous peoples; deaf and blind people are rarely catered for through appropriate methods of communication such as sign language or Braille.
  - **Disability** – since about one-third of out-of-school children are disabled, MDG2 will not be achieved until fully inclusive and fundamental changes have been made to all aspects related to education.
  - **Violence** – takes many forms, and particularly affects girls, but the most common include violence in the home, in school, attacks against schools and children, increased levels of gender-based violence.

- **Displacement** – since the average length of conflict is 10 years and the average period of displacement is 17 years, millions of older children and young people have had little or no primary education.

Furthermore, it is at the intersections of these barriers that some of the most intractable barriers to expanding education to all children are found.<sup>12</sup> For children with more than one of the above characteristics (such as a girl from a minority ethnic group, who is poor and living in a rural area), the barriers to accessing education are particularly pernicious and their chances of getting into school extremely low.

However, it must be noted that access to education is only one aspect of MDG 2: it is also necessary to complete a full course of primary schooling. In reality, millions of children drop out before this – a factor related not only to many of the access barriers but also to the **quality** of the education provided. Millions more children may complete their schooling but leave without basic literacy, numeracy or life skills owing to the lack of quality, or inappropriateness, of the education received.

#### 4. The role of the EU

The role of the EU in regard to the fulfilment of children's right to education is three-fold: policy-related, financial and programmatic.

##### Policy Commitments

Development cooperation policy – The European Commission (EC) / EU has a well-developed policy framework for development cooperation and education, including in fragile contexts.<sup>13</sup> However, the EC's emphasis on good governance has the potential to disadvantage fragile states. The Africa-EU Partnership on the MDGs is worthy of mention since it has developed an Action Plan (2008-10) which addresses issues such as the need to focus on gender parity and disabled children, and the removal of user fees. Moreover, the EC has gone further than required simply by the MDG framework by looking also at the issue of the quality of education and the role it can play in improving quality levels.<sup>14</sup> This therefore also addresses many of the above-mentioned barriers to education, such as language of instruction.

Humanitarian aid policy – The key document guiding humanitarian aid – the 2008 Humanitarian Consensus Action Plan (based on the Humanitarian Consensus of 2007) – does not mention education. Education is typically seen as a development activity and not supported by ECHO, although the staff working document on Children in Emergency and Crisis Situations (2008) gave hopeful signs of change by dedicating one of the three sections to education in emergencies.

##### Budget Allocations

The EU accounts for over half of all aid given to education worldwide. However, while on average between 2005 and 2007, 9% of the EU's ODA was committed to education in other LICs, it was only 5% in CAFS<sup>15</sup>. It is not yet clear what the effects of such policies as the 'EU Division of Labour' will have, but there is a risk of creating further donor 'orphans', especially among CAFS.

At the high level event in May 2007, the EC announced estimated direct aid for education of €1.7 billion up to 2013, including €80 million for basic education under its thematic programme "Investing in People", of which €22 million was to support the FTI.

Between 2006 and 2008, ECHO allocated only 0.3% of its funding to education.<sup>16</sup>

##### Programming and implementation of Policy

Translating policy commitments into implementation remains a challenge for the EU, not least owing to the discrepancy between programming being done locally, while policy is developed centrally in Brussels. Moreover, new policies on division of labour, which may bring complementarity and greater efficiency among donors, also imply that the EU may well fund education less often. Human development, which includes education, is rarely chosen as a focal sector in the country strategy papers.

#### 5. Recommendations to the EU

The following recommendations relate to the EU's own strategy towards achieving the MDGs. However, we would urge the EU and its member states, both together and individually, to advocate for all these points at the UN MDG Review Summit in September this year.

##### The EU should:

- **Increase funding** for education – and particularly basic education – in order to close the financing gap. Countries seeking to eliminate school fees should be supported through financial and technical assistance. Countries with the greatest need should be prioritised, including CAFS.
- Endorse and promote the recommendations from the FTI evaluation to radically reform the FTI. In particular, address the governance and trustee arrangements, the inclusion of civil society, and the financing of CAFS. The FTI should further address the need for capacity-building to focus on issues of inclusion.<sup>17</sup>
- Invest in child sensitive social protection mechanisms such as cash transfers to protect vulnerable households.
- Ensure focus remains on improving access to education and reducing drop-out rates, especially for the more vulnerable and marginalised groups, even in countries where progress is made overall.
- Encourage countries receiving development assistance to put in place data collection systems that take into account factors such as gender, ethnicity, and language and to use that data when conceiving national education policies and curricula.
- Support education as part of every humanitarian response, through the education cluster, and allocate adequate funding to preparedness, coordination and response at country and global levels.
- Continue to emphasise quality of education, measuring not only the number of children enrolled in school but their achievement of key learning outcomes such as literacy, numeracy, rights and life skills.
- Ensure children are ready to learn by expanding comprehensive early childhood care and development programmes for children aged 0-5 years.