Arab States Regional Conference on Education Post-2015:
Towards Quality Education and Lifelong Learning for All
(Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, 27-29 January 2014)

Concept Note

Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right. It is the key to sustainable development and peace, prosperity and stability within and among countries, and thus an indispensable means for effective participation in the societies and economies of the twenty-first century confronted with an era of rapid globalization. There is enough evidence to show that education is an important catalyst for achieving all the development goals, i.e. Millennium Development Goals and national development goals. Apart from education’s well-established socio-economic role, it also has a crucial function of socialization through the shaping of personal and collective identities, the cultivation of responsible citizenship and the promotion of social cohesion, based on the principles of human rights, equity, equality, human dignity and cultural diversity. In this regard, globally, there have been concerted, collective efforts to attain Education for All (EFA) to contribute to construction of a just, inclusive, cohesive society all around the world.

The most important global education agenda that has existed since 2000 following the decade of the Jomtien EFA Agenda, EFA has helped to galvanize global education efforts, set global, regional and national priorities, monitor their progress, and focus action at all levels, with a view to achieving the six Goals of EFA by 2015, with the participation of and efforts made by all Member States of the United Nations, international organizations, bilateral agencies, civil society and the private sector. The Dakar Framework for Action adopted at the World Education Forum in Senegal, in 2000, has guided such efforts and mandated UNESCO to coordinate the EFA partners as the Secretariat for EFA.

More than ten years down the road since the 2000 World Education Forum, evidence shows that significant progress has been made in many countries, through sustained high level of investment in education, development and implementation of major policy initiatives in particular in the field of basic education, recruitment and training of teaching personnel, monitoring of learning achievement, to name just a few. Progress has been most pronounced in reaching the goal of access to primary education. Yet, the trends and patterns of such progress have been uneven within and across countries and regions. The poorest and those most marginalized and discriminated against on the basis of sex, age, disability, and ethnicity or otherwise have often been the most unreached and unreported and hence left out of the march towards the goal of getting primary education as the foundation for further learning and growth.

The case in point is well documented in the recently published latest edition of the EFA Global Monitoring Report: Teaching and Learning – Achieving Quality for All, which shows that:

- In 2011, 25% of children under 5 suffered stunting that greatly affects their cognitive ability to learn. In 2011, about half of young children had access to pre-primary education.
• Worldwide, 57 million primary school-aged children were out of school in 2011, half of them are in conflict-affected countries;
• In 2011, 69 million adolescents were out of school, with little improvement in this number since 2004.
• On the literacy front, 774 million adults were illiterate in 2011, a decline of just 1% since 2000, almost two-thirds of whom are women; and
• 250 million children – many of them from disadvantaged backgrounds – are not learning the basics, let alone the further skills they need to get decent work and lead fulfilling lives, which is costing US 129 billion annually; and
• The financing gap has reached USD 26 billion to get all children into school.

Evidence therefore clearly shows therefore that EFA is an unfinished business and that more collective efforts must be made to ensure equitable access to, and participation in, quality education, and such educational participation results in acquisition of skills for life and work, and that significantly more resources must be allocated to, and utilized in, education. In other words, it is vital to put in place a robust global post-2015 education framework to tackle unfinished business while addressing emerging and new challenges.

EFA in the Arab States: Since 2000, towards 2015 and beyond

Education for All has long been central to national and regional education development in the Arab region. In order to find out about EFA achievements and identify issues and challenges for the future development of education systems, UNESCO Member States have conducted a critical review at the national level to assess the progress made and take stock of the achievements and lessons learnt. The key objective of this national EFA 2015 review was to provide input for the national and international education agendas beyond 2015. This collective evidence-based review by national stakeholders aimed at assessing the progress achieved toward the six EFA goals and the implementation strategies employed in achieving EFA; in addition to determining the relevance of the EFA framework for the future.

While recognizing substantial progress made since 2000 particularly with regard to universalization of primary education and the elimination of gender disparities in access to basic and secondary education, preliminary analysis of the EFA National Reviews and available evidence from the aforementioned EFA GMR show that Arab states are most likely to miss the 2015 target for many of the Goals, namely ECCE, Literacy, Learning Skills for Young People and Adults and Education Quality. In general, it appears that the most pressing challenges are those related to meeting the demands for pre-primary education and addressing the low demand for technical and vocational education. Moreover, it is clear that the quality of education poses the biggest challenge in the Arab region. The GMR pointed out that in the Arab states, 43% of children are not learning the basics, whether in school or not.

It is therefore a fitting moment at which to assess progress towards the achievement of the EFA goals, a fifteen-year agenda whose ambitious targets were adopted by 163 nations in Dakar, including all the Arab States. It is also a difficult moment. In countries that have experienced instability and conflict over the years, there have inevitably been consequences for education – disruption of the school year, damage to infrastructure, absence of teachers and learners, fear of violence and attack, non-functioning education institutions, confusion and uncertainty. It is however also a moment of hope – to look forward to what education can become in the future, not only from the perspective of the international post-2015 agenda, but also in the light of what kind of society Arab populations want. It is a moment of debate and openness, with raised expectations and higher aspirations among youth as to the kind of life they wish to pursue. Education – and the demand for
better education – lies at the heart of these aspirations and will be a major factor in shaping thinking and debate as well as in realizing hopes for the future.

Preparatory Work for Education Beyond 2015

While countries continue to assess and accelerate EFA progress, they together with the wider education fraternity around the world have long been engaged in deliberating on where to, beyond 2015, i.e. post-2015 education agenda, often in the context of informing and sharing post-2015 development agenda, beyond MDGs. Informed by evidence as put forward by the aforementioned EFA Global Monitoring Report, other monitoring mechanisms and consultative processes, education is very much at the forefront of the ongoing discourse.

More concretely, at the global level, The Joint Proposal was presented and discussed at the 2014 Global EFA Meeting (GEM) organized by UNESCO and hosted by the Sultanate of Oman (Muscat, 12-14 May 2014). The resulting Muscat Agreement, which was adopted by ministers and representatives of bilateral and multilateral institutions, civil society and the private sector, represents the shared vision of the international education community key stakeholders for the post-2015 education agenda.

The Muscat Agreement outlines an aspirational, transformative, balanced and holistic post-2015 education agenda of universal relevance and with a focus on equity, quality, learning outcomes and lifelong learning. It contains an overarching goal and seven global targets, covering early childhood care and education; basic education; adult and youth literacy; skills for work and life; skills for global citizenship and sustainable development; teachers; and financing of education. The Agreement strongly supports UNESCO’s leadership and coordination role in facilitating the development of the post-2015 education agenda in collaboration with the EFA partners. It encourages UNESCO to continue facilitating the debate and to consult Member States and key stakeholders on the further development and refinement of the overarching goal and targets and the identification of corresponding indicators, as well as the development of a framework for action to guide the implementation of the future education agenda. Furthermore, participants at the GEM committed to using this Agreement as a reference for the negotiations in the global consultations on the post-2015 development agenda, in order to ensure that this latter has a strong education component.

The Muscat Agreement was then transmitted to the United Nations Secretary-General and the co-chairs of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals (OWG) of the United Nations General Assembly by the Director-General of UNESCO. It was also distributed to all Member States of UNESCO for their consideration, in order to facilitate their preparations for the global and regional consultations on the post-2015 education agenda, leading up to the World Education Forum 2015 (Incheon, Republic of Korea, 19-22 May 2015) and the high-level United Nations Summit in September 2015.

Against this backdrop, in collaboration with host governments and partners, UNESCO is organizing a series of regional conferences in the second half of 2014 and first quarter of 2015 as preparatory events for the WEF 2015. Each regional conference is a follow-up to the 2014 Global Education Meeting held in Oman in May 2014, the work of EFA Steering Committee as well as the 7th meeting of the Collective Consultation of NGOs on EFA (CCNGO/EFA). Concretely, these preparatory conferences are expected to contribute to help shape the future education agenda and the related Framework for Action for Education post-2015, by developing:

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1The 7th Declaration of the CCNGO/EFA meeting held in June 2013 affirms the strong support to the 2014 Muscat Agreement
1. **Regional perspectives** on the post-2015 education agenda, global goal and targets and regional/sub-regional concerns and priorities. The proposed global goal and each target should be discussed in light of regional and sub-regional realities, requirements and priorities. This will inform the global Framework for Action.

2. **Regional recommendations** concerning coordination, monitoring, reporting, advocacy and mobilization for the post-2015 education agenda at global and regional level.

3. Where possible, **information on existing baselines and feasible/desirable benchmarks for each target**. An overview of where countries are with regard to the proposed targets is important in order to identify aspirational yet realistic benchmarks for the region/sub-regions that will then inform the discussion on global benchmarks. In addition, some of the targets may require intermediate benchmarks, which should also be discussed at regional/sub-regional level.

4. **Regional and sub-regional perspectives** on implementation requirements, taking into account contextual specificities.

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**The Arab States Regional Education Conference on Post-2015**

Within this context, UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in the Arab States, in partnership with the Government of Egypt, will organize the Arab States Regional Conference on Education Post-2015 in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, on 27-29 January 2015. The Meeting which will bring together Ministers and senior officials of ministries of education from countries in the region in order to discuss issues, trends, challenges and future priorities for education on the basis of the national EFA reviews, and develop regional recommendations for the international framework for action to be adopted at the World Education Forum in Incheon in 2015. The conference will provide an opportunity for countries to voice their reflections and needs for education beyond 2015 and contribute to the shaping of the future of education within the broader development agenda from a regional perspective. The conference will culminate in a shared vision and understanding of EFA status in the region, a regional perspective on the proposed post-2015 global education goal and targets and regional contributions to the development of the post-2015 Framework for Action and implementation strategy.

**Objectives**

1. **On the basis of the national EFA reviews conducted by the member states, take stock of regional EFA progress**, yield lessons learnt for the future and examine issues, trends, challenges and future priorities that need to be addressed regionally for education post-2015.

2. **Develop regional recommendations on education post-2015 to feed into the global development agendas**, including the international framework for action to be adopted at the World Education Forum 2015, Incheon, Republic of Korea.

**Expected Outputs**

1. Regional EFA 2015 Review Report discussed and validated by the meeting participants.


3. Report on the proceedings of the meeting including priority actions.

**Modality**

The Regional Conference will have two parts: The first two days will be dedicated to technical dialogue on 2015 EFA achievement and post-2015 in order to shape the outcome document to be
presented to Ministers of Education, while the third day will be of ministerial nature to discuss and agree on the outcome document.

Participants

This Forum is expected to draw up to 100 participants from the region.
- Ministers of Education and Senior Officials from 17 Member States in the Arab Region
- EFA Partners
- Regional organizations
- Bilateral and multilateral agencies
- Civil society organizations
- The private sector partners

Working languages

The Conference’s working languages will be Arabic and English. Simultaneous interpretation will be provided throughout the conference, and all the written documents will be available in two languages.