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联合国教育、
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**Message from Ms Irina Bokova,
Director-General of UNESCO
on the occasion of the Education for All Global Action Week
*Early childhood care and education***

22 April 2012

Education is a breakthrough strategy that is essential for reaching all of the Millennium Development Goals. This must start as early as possible and it must be as inclusive as possible, to provide all children with access to quality early care and education. No society should leave any child behind.

Early childhood care and education is a powerful force for tackling discrimination and for bridging gaps of inequity. The benefits of early support are carried throughout life and they extend throughout society. Quality care and education can help children grow into healthy adults, able to nurture meaningful relationships, with the right skills and competences for school, work, family and community life. Failing to act early can condemn children to lives of disadvantage and marginalisation.

The importance of the early years is expressed in the first Education for All goal, which calls on governments to expand and improve “*comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.*” This is inspired by the right to early childhood care and education enshrined in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

Under the right conditions, the early years are ones of extraordinary physical and intellectual development. This is an age where children discover the world, acquire language and comprehension skills, learn to reason and

express ideas, to relate to others and live together. These are also years of extreme vulnerability. This is why inclusive early action is so important.

I wish to commend the Global Campaign for Education for highlighting this issue for *Global Action Week 2012*. This is an opportunity to recall the commitments made at the *Moscow World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education*, held in September 2010. It is a chance for all to mobilize to translate these commitments into action.

Since the 2010 World Conference, UNESCO has launched an interagency process to develop a *Holistic Early Childhood Development Index* that will assist comprehensive monitoring of early childhood development. We are also acting on the ground across the world. In Egypt, we have supported the creation of a model early childhood care and education centre in Cairo to train trainers from across the Arab region. We have worked with the Government of Seychelles to develop a national policy framework for early childhood care and education, and we are helping to design a national childhood strategy with the United Arab Emirates. In cooperation with the publisher Michel Lafon and the *Association for the Development of Education in Africa*, we have produced a book series called 'Bouba and Zaza' for African children between the ages of 3 and 8. For the Asia and the Pacific region, we have compiled parenting education guidebooks to promote stronger home environments for child development.

There has been progress. In sub-Saharan Africa, and South and West Asia, enrolments in pre-primary education have increased steadily since 2000. We must step up our efforts across the board – especially to reach the most vulnerable and disadvantaged. In 2010, 7.5 million of the 7.6 million children who died before the age of 5 were from developing countries. Close to half of them resided in sub-Saharan Africa. Between 2006 and 2010, 27 percent of the world's children suffered from moderate to severe growth stunting, with the highest rates in South Asia. In 2009, while the global gross enrolment ratio in pre-primary education stood at 46 percent, sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab States reached only 18 percent and 21 percent respectively.

We still have far to go -- to tackle inequity as early as possible and to prevent gaps from widening as life continues. Early childhood care and education is a force for human dignity that carries lifelong benefits. It is a powerful motor for the sustainable development of societies over the longer term. These are the key messages of *Global Action Week 2012*. Young children simply cannot wait.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Irina Bokova". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Irina Bokova