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ACHIEVE UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION

Target 2.A: Ensure that, by 2015, all children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling

MDGs and human rights

Often acclaimed as the most significant initiative to tackle poverty and ensure progress in human development, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) do not live up to the ambitions of the Millennium Declaration on which they are based and do not reflect the full spectrum of States' obligations. They do not relate to human rights law or set up redress mechanisms for abuses in order to ensure accountability. Nor do they address structural inequalities or include the participation of all stakeholders. The human rights framework provides guarantees, guidance and clear responsibilities.

The Right to Education Project believes that if the MDGs remain disconnected from legislation, monitoring and accountability, there will be no chance for unveiling discrimination, inequalities and violations and for claiming rights in order to achieve a proper human development worthy of its name. There is an urgent need to make the MDGs 'right'.

The right to education

Education is included in all major international human rights treaties.¹ All countries in the world have signed onto one, if not more, of these documents, thus accepting to bear duties in realising education as a right. In practical terms, this means recognising that education is not merely a policy goal but consists of entitlements, obligations and freedoms. According to UN documents and interpretation, these are reflected in 4 key elements (4As): Availability, Accessibility, Acceptability and Adaptability.²

Availability: human, material and budgetary resources should be sufficient and adequate to ensure education for all. Individuals should also be free to choose or found schools in accordance with their religious and moral convictions and with minimum standards set by the State.

Accessibility: education systems should not discriminate on any ground and positive steps should be taken to reach the most marginalised. It includes physical and economic accessibility.

Acceptability: the content of education and teaching methods should be relevant, culturally appropriate and of quality. The human rights of all those involved should be upheld in education.

Adaptability: education should be flexible so to respond to the needs and abilities of students, meet the best interests of the child, and adapt to different contexts.

MDG2 and Target 2.A

What is there

MDG2 acknowledges the immediate priority given to primary education and the importance of achieving it for all.

Target 2.A takes on board the obligation to make primary education available and accessible without sex discrimination.

What is missing

MDG2 does not mention that primary education should be free and compulsory, an immediate obligation under human rights law. It also does not reflect the quality and content aspects of acceptability and adaptability and the need to have minimum standards.

Target 2.A equals education with schooling, but "schooling does not necessarily amount to education".³ The target also overlooks additional forms of direct and indirect discrimination on other grounds against other groups.

¹ For a list of these treaties, what they entail and how to use them, visit www.right-to-education.org

² Tomaševski K., 1999, *Preliminary Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to education*, paragraphs 42-74; UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1999, *General Comment No. 13*, paragraph 6.

³ Tomaševski K., *Primer N. 3*, p. 43, at www.right-to-education.org/node/232

What this means

Without free and compulsory primary education, those who cannot afford going to school are denied a fundamental right. The ability of a family to pay for direct, indirect or hidden costs should never be the decisive factor for enjoying the right to education. Without quality education, relevant content and minimum standards, the achievement of MDG2 is undermined by drop-outs. Lack of quality also makes the goal insufficient for the full development of the individual, for future job prospects, and for the ability to fulfil the other goals and claim all other rights. Without a full reference to non-discrimination on any ground, some groups remain invisible. States may easily argue they have achieved the goal of having all boys and girls in class, but if they count only those that are visible and if they do not provide support or facilities for other groups when they are included, the target may be met but the human right is not fulfilled.

Some examples of wrong focus/violations:

- The overall MDGs' attention to developing countries neglects violations of the right to education of minority or ethnic groups in developed countries (such as Roma children in Europe).
- The push in MDG2 only for quantitative Universal Primary Education (UPE) increases class sizes thus worsening Pupil Teacher Ratios (PTR) and impacting on quality, completion, students' learning and teachers' work.
- The focus of Target 2.A only on access for boys and girls overlooks other marginalized groups such as, for example, migrants, refugees, children living in the street, and children with disabilities.

What we recommend

The MDGs have already brought about tremendous improvements. Notwithstanding progress, much remains to be done in order to achieve the 2015 aspirations in full respect of the human dignity and rights of the world's population. The Right to Education Project recommends including the following aspects in future strategies for the achievement of MDG2 and Target 2.A. This would not only reconfirm education as a powerful tool for human emancipation and advancement, but also enhance results and facilitate the task of States to fulfil legal commitments they have agreed to undertake.

- Make free and compulsory education part of MDG2 and call for incorporating the right to free and compulsory primary education in national constitutions, legislation, policies and practices.
- Ensure that education is available and accessible to all without discrimination on any ground: identify excluded groups and the barriers they face to enjoy the right to education and prioritize attention and funding on the rights of those groups and the elimination of those barriers.
- Set and respect minimum standards for quality and content (teachers' training and recruitment, curricula, learning outcomes, teaching methods, etc.).
- Guarantee regular monitoring of both quantity and quality of education, using rights-based indicators fully disaggregated by prohibited grounds of discrimination and ensuring the genuine participation of all stakeholders.
- Strengthen national and international efforts to increase available resources, monitor budgets and spread allocations equitably.

For more information, please visit www.right-to-education.org