

Yes they can: connect the goals with rights

World leaders in New York for the MDG summit must reaffirm education as a human right and as a major driver of economic and social development

By Christopher Colclough, Elaine Unterhalter and the Right to Education Project

Since the turn of the millennium global access to schooling has expanded substantially: an additional 20% of primary school-age children have enrolled in school in Africa and an extra 10% in South and West Asia. This is a tremendous turnaround, with a six-fold greater expansion during this decade than happened in the 1990s. Notwithstanding that progress, much remains to be done in order to achieve the 2015 aspirations set by the two MDG goals which focus on education.

72 million children worldwide remain out of school; almost half are in Sub-Saharan Africa and a majority of the rest in South Asia. Around one-quarter and one-seventh, respectively, of all primary school-aged children are affected in these regions. It is the poorest countries which are the least able to scale up their school systems so that all can be enrolled.

Girls make up far more than half of these numbers and with two-thirds of the world's 780 million illiterates being women, the need to meet the MDG 2 (universal primary education) and 3 (gender equality) is evident. In 2005 the world missed an initial target for MDG 3: gender parity (equal proportions of girls and boys) in primary and secondary schools was not achieved in 74 countries. This fact in itself should make the run up to the New York summit this week a moment for caution and reflection. We need to learn from experience.

Achieving the international targets for education is a crucial part of delivering basic human rights to the world's population. It is clearly in the interests of both rich and poor nations to do so, underlining that promoting human rights and sound economics support, rather than contradict each other. This is an emphatic positive message that must go to world leaders in New York.

Strong research evidence shows the myriad economic and social benefits which flow from providing access to education. On average, a further year of education increases wage-earnings of individuals by about 10%, and the quality of learning also brings economic payoffs. Thus, reducing educational inequality helps to reduce economic inequality. Countries with more schooled populations enjoy higher rates of economic growth, higher international test scores are associated with faster rates of per capita income growth, and schooling improves people's productivity in rural self-employment. More educated women are able to participate more fully politically, economically and socially. They often have fewer children, and enjoy better health from improved nutritional diets and earlier and more effective diagnosis of illness.

These largely economic arguments accord well with the human rights case for education, and thus world leaders can actually find help and inspiration from standards that have already been set by the international community. In many countries these are enshrined in law and expressed as part of immediate obligations that every country in the world has formally affirmed.

This would meet the 'puzzle' that global and national rights activists have with the MDGs: that they are silent on so many of the norms, legal obligations - and even the aspirations - contained in other UN declarations, as well as national constitutions and international treaties, including the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Children's Rights Convention and Women's Rights Convention.

Noticeable omissions from the MDGs relate to the lack of targets on women's literacy, the lack of recognition given by the indicators to women's work in the agricultural and informal economy, where the majority worldwide are employed, and the absence of indicators to monitor levels of violence against women, even though the epidemiological tools to register this have improved markedly. Similarly, the international goals are silent about making education free and compulsory, even though these are minimum human rights norms and are enshrined in the all human rights treaties.

Another illustration of how the goals are ill-formulated – and thus in need of major revision by 2015 – is the shocking fact that there is no mention of the quality of education. What ultimately is important, for the individual learner and for the economy, is not just how many girls or boys are enrolled in what level of schooling, but what they learn, the quality of their teachers, and how learning can develop capabilities to access health provision and forms of economic, social, cultural and political participation that are potentially available and valuable to them.

The nations of the world must remain committed to achieving the right to education – both as an end in itself and as a powerful tool for achieving human emancipation and advancement. That is as true for the industrialised world as it is for the rest of our global population. This can be achieved in New York; delegates just need the courage to make the connection.

Christopher Colclough is Commonwealth Professor of Education and Development and Director of the Centre for Education and International Development at the University of Cambridge; Elaine Unterhalter is Professor of Education and International Development at the Institute of Education, University of London; both are advisory panel members of The Right to Education Project, a non-profit campaign and research project on the human right to education, www.right-to-education.org.