

Tony Burdon, Deputy Head DFID Nepal, Speech to UNGEI, 11th June 2008

I was delighted to be offered the chance to speak to you all today, at this important week led by the Ministry of Education and Sports in Nepal, and the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative and its partners here today from different parts of the world.

Having seen the Girl Stars video, listened to Anita and our own Girl Stars from Nepal, these are a hard act to follow. I want to be a Girl Star! I do believe that we do not listen to children, nor value their insights enough.

Now, we all know that education is key to the opportunities we have as individuals, as communities and as countries – and it is the most cost-effective, the most inclusive and the most lasting way to make real development progress.

We should remind ourselves that no country has lifted itself out of poverty without investing in the education of its people. Successful countries like – Taiwan, South Korea, China and indeed our own - have singled out education, and in particular girls' education, as the key means of improving their success.

Our focus here today is gender.

Let's start with the basics. No-one is going to challenge the inherent power of education to transform our lives, and this is particularly the case for girls.

- An educated woman is 50% more likely to have her children immunised.
- Education is a “social vaccine” against HIV. In Swaziland, two-thirds of teenage girls in school are free from HIV, while two-thirds of girls out of school have HIV. That tells you all you need to know.
- In a globalised world, the number of years in school is a proxy for economic growth - for every year of schooling in the poorest countries, incomes grow by more than 10%. For girls that can be even more - up to 20%.
- And education empowers all of us - educated women in Bangladesh are three times more likely than illiterate women to participate in political life

The truth is that the education Millennium Development Goals will not be achieved unless the children that are hardest to reach – children in remote or conflict-affected areas, or those that have a disability or are excluded in some way have a chance to go to school.

And enrolment is not the end game for education. Getting children into school is not enough – it's what they learn that counts – and retaining students and in particular girls, is even more of a challenge.

You know all this. But the question we have to ask ourselves – as Professor Govinda reminds us in his background paper to this meeting - is why, despite

knowing what we know, national and local policies in many parts of the world today have not put girls' education at the heart of development policy.

Sadly, gender discrimination is deeply embedded in all our societies.

The real tragedy isn't the numbers of girls out of school in the world, but why we aren't doing more?

And this is the challenge this meeting faces today and I hope this week we can agree ways to galvanise more national and international action to achieve gender parity in education, and improve the quality of learning.

So, what works for girls' education?

Luckily for us, we also know the policies that work for girls' education: these include the removal of school fees - one of the most significant factors affecting girls' access to school - as well as bursaries, curriculum development as well as tackling abuse and violence towards girls, and providing clean water supplies and sanitation facilities.

For example, in Zambia in 2002 the government abolished school user fees, implemented targeted bursary schemes, sensitized communities and developed re-entry policies for pregnant girls after giving birth. The result? Net enrolment for girls in primary school climbed from 62% in 1999 to 89% in 2005 – enrolment increased by over a quarter.

Persistent gender disparities as Prof Govinda says, have prompted countries to adopt special policy measures to promote girls education, and one of the major policy initiatives adopted, especially here in South Asia, is to reduce the financial burden of families for sending girls to school through cash incentives. This is true in India, Bangladesh and in Nepal.

For example, in Bangladesh the Female Secondary School Stipend programme saw girls' enrolment rise by 12 percent a year in rural areas. The improvement came about because poor families enrolled children to school in response to food or money, but those incentives were tied to attendance, to study and passing exams.

And where have we got to?

We are half way towards the target date for achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Since 2000 there has been amazing progress and there are 30 million more children in school globally – with equal numbers of boys and girls in primary schools in 118 countries.

But despite all this progress, 72 million children, mostly girls, remain out of school worldwide.

Globally - 94 girls started Grade 1 for every 100 boys in 2005. We know that within South Asia countries lags behind the global average.

In schools I have visited in Nepal and elsewhere all too frequently children are being taught in schools with no drinking water, not enough working toilets, intermittent or no electricity – where teachers were ill trained, poorly motivated and poorly rewarded. And this story is repeated through much of South Asia. Efforts to hire, train and support teachers – at the centre of teaching and learning – is essential.

We also know that certain groups of girls are more likely to be excluded from school on the basis of caste, ethnicity, religion or disability and that disabled children, and among them disabled girls in particular, constitute a significant group that is denied access to education.

Efforts are being made in the design of programmes. In India, for example, the District Primary Education Programme promotes inclusive education, and some states have been successful in integrating disabled children into mainstream schools.

And at the international level, the advocacy for increased financing in long-term plans is supporting sustainable investment in key quality inputs such as teachers, textbooks and classrooms.

Let's pause for the moment and reflect on Nepal.

Here in Nepal, we can be proud of the progress made by the Government's Education for All Programme – and I'd like to thank the Secretary for his leadership here. It's backed by a multi-donor group, and it's helping to get more children into school in a country that has recently emerged from conflict. primary enrolment rates increasing since 2004 from 84% to 89% in 2007, but the country still has some way to go way to go achieve universal primary education.

There has been steady progress on gender parity in primary and secondary enrolment - Nepal should be proud of the progress it has made - but over-all enrolment rates for both boys and girls are low. Girls' enrolment at primary level is 48% but only 30% at secondary level – not enough to achieve the MDG on gender parity.

But disadvantaged girls fare very badly. Half of Dalit girls (formerly “untouchable”) drop out during grade 1 – their first year in school; only 8% make it to grade 5 where they can read. The challenge is to support governments to provide quality education for excluded groups.

But for Nepal, as elsewhere, quality needs to improve, including improving retention, and targeting excluded groups.

It's about political leadership

Last July the UK Prime Minister and the United Nations Secretary General launched a Call to Action to galvanize the entire international community to

face up to the challenge of meeting the MDGs. Education is a key pillar of the UN Call to Action.

We hope to see agreements to ensure a further 25 million children are in school by 2010, and that additional external financing is made available to help countries remove fees, hire and train an extra 10 million teachers, and put in place national assessments of learning outcomes.

A few international players doing a few good things is not enough – we all need to be pulling in the same direction. The MDG Call to Action aims to build an international consensus about what needs to be done to meet the 2015 goals and this will involve a broad set of players. Not just governments, but the private sector, trade unions, faith groups, civil society all have their roles to play.

Here in Nepal there are huge opportunities. In April elections were held to a constituent assembly – its members, the new parliament, are the most representative in Nepal's history – a third women, 20 years younger! A new government is being formed, a unique moment for a new government to make education, and educating girls, a top priority.

It's about leadership, but if we are to achieve success, we need to be relentless. I was on the Board of Jubilee 2000, the global debt campaign. It's taken over a decade to make serious progress on debt cancellation for poor countries. The lesson for me is that we can't give up whatever the obstacles are. We need to be innovative, we need to do research and argue for progress based on evidence of what works and what does not. But above all we must be relentless if we are to succeed in changing things for the better.

It's up to all of us to make a difference, and I wish you the best for your meetings ahead this week. Thank you.

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