Post-2015 Global Thematic Consultation on Education
Summary Report of the e-Discussion on Equitable Access to Education

Background

The e-discussion on the theme of **equitable access to education** ran from 10 to 28 December 2012. A total of **175 contributions,** including moderator inputs were posted on the website. The vast majority of these contributions were from individuals, although there were a handful of inputs from youth organisations, government organisations and both local and international non-governmental organisations.

The e-discussion was marked by a strong degree of consensus, by the increasing sophistication of the contributions over time, and by the diversity of topics addressed. While different contributors had varying priorities for education, there were no instances where one contributor disagreed with another. Similarly, there were relatively few instances where contributors built on points made by others. But the most striking feature of the e-discussion was the breadth of contributions, with a large proportion of participants straying some way from the intended theme of equitable access to education.

General issues

There was reasonable consensus (5 posts) on the **progress made so far** under the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the work still to do. While some contributors focused on the challenges faced by particular countries, others presented a more holistic assessment. According to one contributor, "while progress has been made towards better education attainment, countries continue to struggle to improve achievement" and "youth in developing countries are spending more time in school than ever before," but "learning levels in many countries are alarmingly low, which

suggests that time in school is not always well spent." **Poverty** was raised as a factor that keeps children out of school, creates marginalization and inequalities associated with discrimination and exclusion.

There was also strong consensus (13 posts) on the **fundamental role of education in development.** Some contributors focused on the "critical role that education plays in the empowerment of individuals in rural communities". Others adopted a human rights perspective and argued that education "has the greatest potential to transform people's lives – providing the skills for breaking the cycle of poverty, building the resilience of the most vulnerable, and encouraging all to adopt values and lifestyles that can lead to a fairer, less troubled and more sustainable world". There were also a number of contributions that stressed the links between education and other sectors, arguing that education "contributes to greater economic growth, healthier populations and more stable societies" and that "the ability to read and write is the basis not only for all other learning but also for achieving the MDGs".

Specific issues

There was extensive discussion on **girls' education** (29 posts), with contributors pointing out that, in some countries, girls are still seen as a "liability, married off in childhood by their parents to shift the same on another family and the new family treats them as goods to be consumed". Contributors also noted that equality does not mean simple numerical parity but must also include equal opportunities for girls. There were also mentions of cross-cutting inequalities and the way

gender inequalities interact with **economic inequalities.** Other marginalised groups received slightly less attention. On **children with disabilities** (20 posts), one contributor noted that "estimates as high as 98% of disabled children in the developing world being out of school cannot be ignored". There are also continuing issues of exclusion of **ethnic minorities** (5 posts) and **orphans** even in relatively well performing countries, and especially in developing economies. There are also still issues around the **language of instruction** (2 posts) in some countries.

Many contributors identified **education governance** (23 posts) as a key factor. Shortcomings were often attributed to "political interference, political agenda, personal interest, and conflict of interest" by political leaders. It was claimed that "improving governance and accountability is of utmost importance", and contributors called for civil society and the media to do more to lobby their governments for improvements in education. Many contributors pointed out that governments had to do better in **financing education** (12 posts) with the allocation of "sufficient funds towards achieving universal access to comprehensive education" and the introduction of "policies that facilitate investment in education by private sector partners". Some contributors also saw a greater role for financial assistance in education, with a plea for donors to allocate at least 10% of their funds to the sector.

Weaknesses in equitable access to education were often attributed to a lack of essential resources. The need for more and better **teacher training** (21 posts) and for more teachers in remote locations was complemented by "recognition of the importance of a professionalised properly qualified and supported teaching profession in order to achieve education for all". Similarly, the need for more **classroom construction** (14 posts) was balanced by a recognition of the need in many places for better transport and the importance of other types of infrastructure including **water and sanitation** (2 posts).

Beyond the education sector, **poverty** (16 posts) was seen as a major barrier to access, including amongst the growing numbers of urban poor such as street children. Contributors noted the 'hidden costs' of supposedly free education as well as

pointing out that "for the children of the poorest of the poor, even a 'free' education can come at too steep a price". Others recorded that "there is clear and consistent evidence that poorer households have worse education outcomes" and that there are substantial differences in the quality of education available to the rich and the poor. Children affected by **conflict and disasters** (7 posts) were noted to be amongst the poorest of the poor. On similar lines, the issue of **child labour** (8 posts) highlighted the difficult choices that have to be made by many poor families.

Many contributors focused on how much and what children learn when they are in school. The **quality of education** (10 posts) was seen as extremely important. One contributor noted that "they don't learn to read, they don't learn to do math, and they still move on to the next grade whether they've learned anything or not. The reasons for this could fill a tome, but the effect is simple: parents stop sending their children to school". Similarly, the **relevance of education** (9 posts) was often seen as weak, with "irrelevant curriculum, unproductive outputs, and mismatch with the local needs". This was seen as having strong links with the issue of **youth unemployment** (7 posts). Contributors noted the need to include in school curricula issues of **sexual and reproductive health** (11 posts) and **HIV/AIDS** (2 posts), climate change and **environmental issues** (6 posts), and **global citizenship** (5 posts).

Local **engagement with schools** (12 posts) was considered essential, with the involvement of "all local stakeholders including parents, children and youth, including in monitoring and evaluation processes". This was often linked to the need for **better data** (9 posts) to enable a more detailed assessment of progress to be made. There are, however, thought to be dangers that **cultural barriers** (3 posts) including extremism and terrorism are making "it impossible for educational institutions to complete its academic session properly".

Different levels of education systems were also discussed. The **early years of education** (3 posts) were considered important because "one of the reasons that so many children drop out of school after the early grades is that they have not mastered the basic reading and numeracy skills that

they need to progress to higher levels". On **secondary education** (5 posts) and **tertiary education** (2 posts), some contributors proposed extending the current goals to cover these levels of education, with contributors arguing for a target for lifelong learning and reforms in **non-formal education** (9 posts), particularly in terms of accreditation of learning.

Additional valuable inputs to education were identified as **information technology** (6 posts) and **school feeding** (2 posts).

Education in the Post-2015 Development Agenda

Contributors provided answers to our specific questions, as well as a few suggestions for post-2015 education goals and targets.

a) What have we learned from the MDGs?

While the MDGs had prompted substantial gains in education, there was a lack of focus on "reaching the most vulnerable and marginalised groups". In other words, "by focusing on increased numbers of children in school those that are easiest to reach children have had the greatest opportunities, but we must now focus on those that have been left behind".

b) What are the remaining challenges?

There is an extensive "unfinished agenda" in education: "the world is not on track, with 61million primary-age children still out of school, 775million adults still illiterate (two-thirds women), and 250 million children still unable to read or write by the time they should be reaching grade 4 of school".

c) How should education be reflected in the Post 2015 agenda?

The issue of clarity of language was raised as being important when writing new goals to guarantee that a vague definition does not hinder progress.

There should be "a continued focus on the basic premise that education should be free, universal and compulsory" but with a shift in focus from "enrolment to retention and completion". There was also a broad consensus that the post-2015 framework should be built around the equity principle of reducing the gap in access and learning, including between the poorest and richest. New targets will need to be measurable, and there will need to be some progress on the availability and quality of data.

d) Suggestions for a new goal on education

There was also consensus that the post-2015 framework should include a new education goal since "at their best, goals establish a clear and shared sense of direction, and identify the scale of action needed to secure a desired outcome".

Two contributors provided specific suggestions for new goals in the post-2015 development framework, along with targets and indicators.

The *Commonwealth Secretariat* proposed three goals:

Goal 1 Every child completes a full cycle of a minimum of 9 years of continuous, free basic education and demonstrates learning achievement consistent with national standards.

Goal 2 Post-basic education expanded strategically to meet needs for knowledge and skills related to employment and livelihoods

Goal 3 Reduce and seek to eliminate differences in educational outcomes among learners associated with household wealth, gender, special needs, location, age and social group.

Save the Children proposed a single goal:

Goal By 2030 we will ensure all children receive a good quality education and have good learning outcomes.