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Education in Third World Countries

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All children have a right to free and quality education. The right to education for everybody is the central goal of our millennium. Unfortunately, it is unattainable for many poor countries.

In some countries, children receive primary education, but it is not enough for their subsequent development. This is because teachers are poorly trained and paid, classrooms are overcrowded, and there is lack of basic learning materials such as textbooks, blackboards, pens and paper. The problem for many developing countries is that governments lack financial and political resources.

If we lived in an ideal world, primary education would be available to everybody and funded by the government, and all children would be able to go to school. When a child does not acquire the basic education necessary to become an educated and responsible member of society, the whole society loses out. Sadly, according to the United Nations Development Programme, some 113 million children worldwide were not in school at the end of 2003.

Since education is a universally recognized right for everyone, it should be paid for by the state. In poor countries, however, governments are unable to fund education.

Children in developing countries (the African and Asian regions) and in countries with difficult economies are excluded from education. It is worth noting, though, that much progress has been made since the Millennium Development Goals (the

UN programme to achieve the global Millennium Development Goals) came into force. Many developing countries have already completed the process of achieving universal primary education. Such countries include Chile, China, Cuba and Sri Lanka. Others should follow suit.

Some states have the potential to develop education but resources may simply not reach schools because of corruption or inefficiency. Publicly funded schools may be available in urban areas but not in rural areas, or may vary widely in quality. In addition, public resources may be diverted from education to other programmes, such as military construction, which are endorsed by the upper classes seeking to protect their interests. Corruption is another reason why children in poor countries may not have access to quality public schools: public officials may avoid spending on schools in favour of expensive projects such as the defence sector or road construction, since funding for these projects can be more easily misappropriated. The ideal and correct goal of education policy remains universal education financed by public revenues.

What can be done at the moment? First, even minimal payments can cover teachers' salaries, learning materials, pencils and textbooks and school repairs. Or parents can pay with in-kind items, such as bringing food to teachers, helping to run classes, or making school repairs themselves.

There are several main reasons why access to education is difficult.

Children in many countries find it difficult to attend school because of the location and climate of their country. For example, in some high mountain areas (e. g. India), adverse weather conditions can last for months, causing children to stay home and miss school. In many rural areas, students simply cannot get to school. The geographic location of an area greatly affects access to primary education.

Another reason is the gender inequality that still exists in the third world countries. The days when girls were not allowed to be educated at all are over, but the gender bias still remains. Countries like Nepal, Yemen, India and Togo are among them.

Language of instruction is another cause of discord. Schools do not teach in the mother tongue but in the national language. At home children still speak their mother tongue. It is difficult to learn.

We shouldn't forget the financial issue either. The cost of schooling and the inability of many families in developing countries to provide schooling for their children is also an important reason. Parents in rural areas prefer to send their children to work in the fields or stay home.

Demand for education also depends on perception of its value. But money is not always the main issue. For example, the Progress programme in Mexico has cut school fees by more than half, but enrolment has only increased by 10 per cent. Under this programme, the government pays district heads directly, who distribute funds to women on condition that they send their children to school and take them to hospitals for check-ups. It is in countries like this, where low demand for education is not related to cost, that school attendance will not improve unless cultural barriers and prejudices are overcome.

Parents may not have enough information to correctly assess the return on investment in their children's education, or they may believe, sometimes justifiably, that the return is too low to justify the cost - perhaps because of the poor quality of education available to them.

Education is one of the most important parts of our world and it must necessarily be available in every corner of the planet.