

Statement by Ambassador A. Gopinathan, Permanent Representative,
Permanent Mission of India, Geneva, at the High Level Segment of ECOSOC on
July 06, 2011

Mr. President,

Please allow me to express my delegation's deep appreciation for your leadership and the meaningful program of work drawn up for this session of ECOSOC. The theme of this year's Annual Ministerial Review – "Implementing the internationally agreed goals and commitments in regard to education" – gives us an opportunity to focus on an issue that is not only a fundamental human right, but also a catalyst for the achievement of many other development goals. In this context, we take note of the three reports that have been presented, including two by the Secretary-General on the progress towards internationally agreed development goals related to education, and on the current trends in global environment and their impact on education goals.

Mr. President,

2. The Secretary-General's overview of emerging trends is a sobering reminder of the significant challenges before us in making sustainable progress in education. Notwithstanding a global economic recovery, formidable challenges remain on account of the weak and fragile nature of this recovery, and its consequent impacts on job insecurity, migrant remittances and cuts in development finance. As noted in the report, there was a delivery gap of USD 153 billion in ODA in 2009 and concerns persist about future aid commitments to the education component of the development finance programmes. Also, the number of out-of-school children is now more likely to plateau at about 56 million – nearly 93% more than the pre-crisis expectation – as a result of the 2008 crisis and its concomitant fiscal pressure on Government budgets. Coupled with rising and volatile food prices that have been shown to have a correlation with learning achievements, this implies a serious setback to the developing countries' economic and social development efforts, and its real impact would be felt only in the medium-to-long term. In this regard, we take note of the Secretary-General's recommendations that emphasise, inter alia, improving the efficiency and effectiveness of current domestic spending; policy coherence; investment in teachers; social protection programmes; in-school nutrition intervention; technical and vocational training; expanding affordable access to information and communication technologies; education during conflict-related emergencies; the need for donors to honour their overall aid commitments; and the quality of education content and delivery.

3. We also concur with the Secretary-General's stress on crucial inter-linkages between education, health, poverty reduction and gender equality, and his observation that the Millennium Development Goals remain a powerful means of keeping the world's attention on development issues.

Mr. President,

4. In our national context, we have consistently sought to put education at the centre of our development policy. To this end, we have pursued a multi-pronged strategy for the attainment of Education for All goals, and the MDGs, integrating these commitments into all levels of our development planning and policy. The net enrollment ratio in primary schools in India has risen to over 96% and we are well on our way to achieving the MDG 2 target of universal primary education.

5. One of our biggest milestones in the field of education in recent times has been the enactment of the Right to Education Act in 2009 that guarantees free and compulsory education to all children aged six to fourteen, and that has introduced, for the first time since the country's independence 64 years ago, a new fundamental right in our Constitution. In the past ten years, India's literacy rate increased by another 9.2%, translating into an addition of 210 million Indians in our literacy pool. Further, our commitment to achieving gender parity in education has led to, for the first time in the history of India, addition of more number of female literates than males during the decade 2001-2010. Our Saakshar Bharat (Literate India) adult education programme launched in 2009 with special focus on females would further strengthen gender equity in education. In addition, our flagship Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan (Education for All) campaign addresses the needs of 192 million children and has a special focus on girls' education. It aims to target the hardest-to-reach girls through residential schools and other incentives in order to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education.

6. Our objective has been not only to enroll students but also to ensure that they undergo the complete school cycle. To this end, we run the world's largest in-school feeding program (Mid-Day Meal Scheme) reaching out to about 120 million children in over 1.2 million schools across the country. Several Conditional Cash Transfer programmes have also been implemented to incentivise education. Pursuant to our success in universalizing access to primary education, the Government of India is now in the process of launching a campaign which envisions universal access to secondary education for all. We have also undertaken initiatives to link education with skill development through technical and vocational training.

7. At the same time, we remain conscious of the challenges that still continue to daunt us, including those pertaining to quality of education delivery and gender disparity. We have scaled up investment in education, initiated programmes to improve quality of teaching and curricula and made conscious efforts to build linkage between education and our economic needs.

Mr. President,

8. India remains committed to sharing its development experience with fellow developing countries to boost their efforts to achieve Education for All goals. We also recognize the use of ICT tools as a key enabler of development. In this context, we have extended our distance education programme run by the Indira Gandhi National Open University to LDCs, SIDS and countries in Africa and other parts of the developing world. At the recent, India-Africa Summit held in May 2011 in Ethiopia, our Prime Minister announced the establishment of an India-Africa Virtual University. This would complement the ongoing efforts to imparting tele-education and tele-medicine through the PAN African e-network set up by the Government of India.

Mr. President,

9. The past few years have exemplified the transformative power of education in India. From fighting poverty, empowering women and reversing traditional gender roles in society to sustaining a substantial growth rate even at the peak of the financial downturn, education has been central to India's progress. Our commitments in this regard are, and shall remain, persistent and resolute. We are equally hopeful that the promises made in the Ministerial Declaration would be met in letter and spirit.

Thank you, Mr. President.

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