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Universal Primary Education A Moving Target

Universal primary education has been the goal of several international initiatives. A 1990 global conference in Thailand set the year 2000 as the target date for universal primary education but when that goal was not met, a global forum in Senegal in the year 2000 set a new target date - 2015. But a recent study by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences said this date was also unlikely to be met - and the goal needs to be expanded to include secondary education. The study said despite the findings, the goal of providing a high-quality education to all children could be achieved at a reasonable cost with more support and funding from governments worldwide. David Bloom, an economist and demographer at Harvard said, "There's no question that it's possible. It's a question of financial resources and it's a question of political will. We have cost estimates, for example, of what it would take and we're looking at numbers that are less than what the US is spending on an annual basis in Iraq and Afghanistan."

Although over the past century the number of primary children enrolled in school has grown from around 40 percent in all regions to about 86 percent, many areas are still lagging behind, especially sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. Bloom said, "If we actually look at an extrapolation ... we're not going to come close to making 'education for all' by 2015" as at current rates of progress, nearly 300 million children would not be enrolled in 2015, 114 million of them of primary school age.

According to Bloom the programme laid out to meet the goal of universal primary education for all was "not nearly ambitious enough" and that students who spend less than 10 years in school do not achieve many of the benefits of education. "We need to pay much more attention to education access at the secondary level and we need to pay attention to educational quality. It's not just a question of getting kids into schools, it's also a question of what you do with them once they're in school."

Non-availability of sanitation is a key issue in parents' willingness to send their daughters to school. In a seven-point priority action plan for DFID's continuing work to support girls' education, water and sanitation facilities are mentioned as a way to "make schools safer places for girls." And Indian Social Justice and Empowerment Minister Meira Kumar has added her voice by saying she wanted to make it mandatory for authorities at schools and educational institutions to provide toilets for girls.

UNESCO said in 2000, the total number of illiterate people in the world in 2000, amounted to 876 million, 563 million of them women which is why we have to make women top priority because a mother who can read and write will not let her children be illiterate, and she will promote an interest in reading, in understanding the world through books, in her home. A Cuban educationist also said, "a woman who can read and write also learns about the environment, health and hygiene, and about raising her children better, and having a better family life therefore the provision of adequate sanitation for girls is important." And according to educationists at a conference held last year in Havana, Cuban authorities calculated that over 12 years some 1.5 billion people worldwide could learn to read and write - and complete their primary education - with an initial investment of only US\$ 3 billion in the first three-year period and US\$ 700 million in each of the following 9 years. Considering all the benefits that will derive from education, this is not such a large amount.