

Presentation of Clementina Acedo
Director of the UNESCO International Bureau of Education (IBE)

at the 48th Session of the International Conference on Education
Research Findings and Policy Challenges for Inclusive Education
Tuesday 25 November 2008, 12h45 – 13h30

**Inter-regional and regional trends on inclusive education:
Outcomes from nine regional workshops and four regional conferences**

Your Excellencies,
Mr. Director General of UNESCO,
Distinguished Ministers and Vice-Ministers,
Distinguished Heads of Delegations,
Distinguished Delegates,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we all know, the theme of the 48th session of the International Conference on Education of UNESCO is *Inclusive Education: The Way to the Future*. I would dare to say that inclusive education is perhaps the biggest challenge facing educational systems throughout the world today; whether we are referring to developing, transition or developed countries.

Exclusion from education exists in every country, to varying degrees and in different forms. Individuals or groups might be excluded for reasons based on race, socio-

economic status, ethnicity, culture, religion, gender, and physical or intellectual capacities. But there are also those who are excluded within the education system itself, who drop-out or for whom the educational provision does not offer the most appropriate response to their basic learning needs and so cannot have access to the knowledge, skills and competencies they need to successfully integrate into society. The challenge is therefore to overcome all forms of exclusion, from and within education.

During the period from June 2007 to September 2008, UNESCO-IBE was engaged in preparations for the 48th session of the ICE. The International Bureau of Education (IBE) in collaboration with UNESCO Paris, the National Commissions and field offices as well as with the support of several countries organized nine Regional Preparatory Workshops, and four Regional Preparatory Conferences. An important sharing of vision and policy experiences has taken place among policymakers, education experts, and members of civil society.

Outcomes of all these meetings clearly suggest that fostering inclusion within both the educational system and society is a common concern among countries and regions. There are different interpretations but also a progression towards a convergent, expanded notion of inclusive education.

I would like to speak about some of the regional features and trends found:

In **Europe**, preparatory workshops took place in Belarus, Romania, and Finland. The conference in Riga, Latvia, brought together countries from the whole region, as well as from **North America**.

In this varied region we find a full spectrum of positions, experiences and challenges. The workshop in Finland affirmed that in the Nordic countries, there is a commitment to inclusion and comprehensive public policies that go through all relevant dimensions of the education system. It is a long road to develop a system that promotes successful learning for all, requiring the political will and determination to create structures that

prevent exclusion, while developing activities and pedagogies that facilitate inclusion. There is also an emphasis on the social dimension of inclusion and fundamental democratic values.

The workshops in Romania and Belarus have shown that, in the **Eastern European countries** and the **Commonwealth of Independent States** there is some progress towards a wider conception of inclusive education. Challenges for quality education for all are mainly related to multi-ethnic, multilingual and migration patterns. Special needs education often continues to be based on a medical ‘defectology’ approach. Still, a commitment to more inclusive policies and practices in education is evident. Progress is slow but steadily moving forward.

At the regional conference in Latvia, there was a common agreement among the participants that inclusive education means giving all learners equal opportunities to take part in high-quality and relevant education, regardless of background. This equality in access to education must be supplemented by equality in terms of positive educational outcomes and competencies for life for each and every learner. The experiences of European and North American countries also demonstrate the value of meaningful and effective partnerships between the State, private sector and civil society, including teachers’ organizations, with a view to reaching common societal goals.

In **Latin America**, discussions at the Argentina preparatory workshop emphasized a view on the analysis of exclusion and equity gaps and the links between inclusive education and an inclusive society. Education is directly related to human development, and the guarantee of rights. A different approach towards cultural and linguistic diversity and the implementation of intercultural bilingual education programmes have become important components of educational policies in many countries of the region. The issue of education as a public good and right is also contended by the learning gap between public and private schools.

At the workshop in Jamaica, it was noted that numerous national constitutions in the **English-speaking Caribbean** reflect a commitment to ensuring free quality education for all, regardless of physical, intellectual or economic social condition. Nevertheless, poverty continues to be a barrier to inclusion in many countries; and migrants and linguistic or cultural minorities have also been identified as among the excluded. The geography of these small islands also poses some unique challenges to inclusive education; however some good practices have been exemplified with regard to using information and communication technologies to bridge this gap.

Some promising policies in this sub-region have shown inter-ministerial collaboration among different sectors, as well as community participation in order to implement inclusive education reforms.

In **Asia and the Pacific**, as noted in the preparatory workshop in China and the regional conference in Indonesia, the importance of the notion of inclusive education is recognized and has certain legitimacy in some areas; however, obstacles still exist. Participants proposed a distinction between “old” and “new” notions of inclusive education: the former mainly focused on whether there should be special or general school settings for children with disabilities; and the latter claiming to incorporate socio-economic, ethnic and cultural diversity.

Participants from this region have emphasized the need to focus in particular on children with disabilities, HIV and AIDS, minorities, migrants, refugees, girls, and children affected by disasters. Furthermore, direct investment towards traditionally excluded groups, for example very poor families, may be necessary.

There is an emphasis on the need for early childhood care and education. Also, disaster risk reduction education was emphasized as an important topic of consideration in order to address social inclusion and enhance learning to achieve quality education for all.

The ‘child friendly’ schools in some countries provide examples of good practices in an inclusive education setting, which is safe, accessible and child-centred. In Japan, we have seen the inspirational story of Kentaro Fukuchi, whose parents and local authorities enabled his study as a blind student at a local school. We have the honour of welcoming Mr. Fukuchi to the International Conference on Education.

In the **Arab States region**, a preparatory workshop was hosted by the United Arab Emirates, and a preparatory conference in Lebanon. There has been a shared understanding among the participants of these meetings that the notion of inclusive education must extend beyond the conceptualization of the inclusion of children with special needs into mainstream schools, to taking a human rights perspective.

In this region, information and communication technologies have been used in innovative ways, as a tool to advance the objectives of inclusive education. Some specific challenges are the inclusion of girls, the poor and rural students within the public policy framework for education. Despite some progress, attendance rates for children from poor households, for example, fall up to five times below those for children from wealthy households.

As discussed at the preparatory conference in Beirut, countries are facing the challenge of social exclusion with a comprehensive perspective, taking a framework of non-discriminatory and flexible curricula, encouraging participatory policymaking, and promoting legislation with adequate funding for all categories of students. Participants also noted the lack of trained teachers and support to implement inclusive education practices.

In **Sub-Saharan Africa**, the link between inclusive education and Education for All has been clearly established. Preparatory workshops and conferences for this region took place in Kenya, Rwanda, and Cameroon.

The dramatic reality due to poverty poses important priorities for the understanding and possible action towards inclusive education. It was noted that in the region, it is women

and children who sacrifice their education to collect water or to do other household or farming work. Participants noted that there is a need to include children with disabilities or special needs, who are mostly out of the system. In fact, over 90 per cent of children with disabilities are not in school, and many other children remain excluded, for example those affected by poverty, conflicts and HIV and AIDS.

Teachers play a fundamental role with regard to providing quality inclusive education. However, this remains a challenge for the African region in particular. Large percentages of the available teachers are untrained. The scourge of HIV and AIDS in the region also affects the availability of teachers. One must not forget the effects of military and civil strife on the delivery of quality education. Civil conflicts are also creating new groups at risk.

At the regional conference in Yaoundé, Cameroon, it was noted that, despite the progress made toward EFA since 2000, in Sub-Saharan Africa there are still over 33 million children who do not attend school. A good number of countries may not achieve universal basic education by 2015.

In spite of the difficulties, great strides have been made in the region. Policies to abolish school fees have been a remarkable improvement in several countries. Work has been advanced in education for the prevention of HIV and AIDS, and special frameworks have been put in place to develop integrated curricular and extra-curricular programmes for children with physical and mental disabilities.

In concluding this presentation, that unfortunately cannot reflect the richness of contributions and debates which involved more than 900 participants from over 125 countries, I would like to stress that, although the task may seem daunting, the need for more inclusive education worldwide is ever pressing. We may take pride in the significant steps which have already been taken towards the goal of an equitable quality education for all learners.

In all the preparatory meetings participants agreed that public policies should be in line with international conventions and normative frameworks related to inclusion, and that all budgetary allocations for inclusive education need to be equitable, transparent, accountable and efficient.

We enjoyed a particularly good atmosphere at all of the workshops and conferences. I would like to take this opportunity to thank once again the countries who hosted the nine regional preparatory workshops, and the four regional conferences, which took place in Cameroon, Indonesia, Latvia, and Lebanon.

These meetings have provided a foundation and inspiration for the work that we will all engage in over the next few days. Although every region and country has its own specificities, the challenge of inclusive education is a common one. The knowledge that has been produced and shared along the way has brought us to a better place to continue building a shared vision of inclusive education, and to translate that vision into concrete educational policies and practices that are truly inclusive for all.

Thank you.

| Electoral Group | Region | Preparatory Workshop | Region | Preparatory Conference |
|--------------------------------------|--|--|---------------------------------|---|
| I. Western Europe and North America | Nordic Countries | Helsinki, Finland 6-7 March 2008 | Europe and North America Region | Riga, Latvia 24-26 Feb 2008 |
| II. Eastern and Central Europe | Eastern and South Eastern Europe | Sinaia, Romania 14-16 June 2007 | | |
| | Commonwealth of Independent States | Minsk, Belarus 29-31 Oct 2007 | | |
| III. Latin America and the Caribbean | Southern Cone and Andean Regions | Buenos Aires, Argentina 12-14 Aug 2007 | | |
| | English Speaking Caribbean | Kingston, Jamaica 5-7 Dec 2007 | | |
| IV. Asia and the Pacific | East Asia | Hangzhou, China 3-5 Nov 2007 | Asia Pacific Region | Bali, Indonesia 29-31 May 2008 |
| Vb. Arab States | The Gulf Arab States | Dubai, United Arab Emirates 27-29 Aug 2007 | Arab Region | Beirut, Lebanon 25-27 August 2008 |
| Va. Africa | Eastern and Western Sub-Saharan Africa | Nairobi, Kenya 23-27 July 2007 | African Region | Yaounde, Cameroon , 17-18 Sept 2008 |
| | Africa | Kigali, Rwanda 27 Sept 2007 | | |