

Pakistan committed to education for Afghan refugee children

A national conference on “The right to education of Afghan refugee children in Pakistan” took place on Thursday, 29th March 2012 in Islamabad, Pakistan. The conference was jointly organized by UNESCO and UNHCR to assist the country in achieving the Education for All (EFA) goals by advocating for the provision of education to Afghan refugee children.

In his keynote address, Mr. Gwang-Jo Kim, Director of the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Regional Bureau for Education, laid out the global perspectives of the Education for All progress since its inception at the World Conference on Education in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990, and the formulation of the 6 EFA goals during the World Education Forum in 2000 in Dakar, Senegal.

While many countries will achieve universal primary education by 2015, the two potential scenarios for 2015, presented by Mr. Kim, will still leave between 29 and 43 million children worldwide at primary school age out of school. Also adult literacy is still far from being on track for reaching the EFA goal in 2015, with currently about 796 million illiterate adults - 17 per cent of the world’s adult population – of which 412 million residing in South and West Asia.

Two-thirds of illiterate adults are women. In Pakistan, for example, 31 per cent of girls aged 17-22 have less than 2 years of education. In case of rural Sindhi girls, this rate even reaches an alarming 73 per cent.

Besides marginalization, conflicts and disasters as the 2005 earthquake and 2009 and 2010 flood in Pakistan, insufficient funding for education is considered one of the main obstacles in achieving EFA in many countries.

“Pakistan has one of the world’s largest out-of-school populations (7.3 million) and particularly wide gender disparities in education, yet military spending dwarfs spending on primary schooling. Just one-fifth of Pakistan’s military budget would be sufficient to fund universal primary education,” said Mr. Kim.

Looking closer at the Afghan refugee children’s situation, UNESCO country representative Kozue Kay Nagata stressed the need to give access to education without discrimination in view of these children’s right to education. Also, she called for a policy reform in the country to improve education for all marginalized and vulnerable groups.

Elaborating on the situation of the 1.74 million Afghan refugees in the country, UNHCR Country Representative Mr Neill Wright pointed out that only 5 per cent of them have completed primary education and just 20 per cent are currently enrolled in primary school.

In his closing remarks, Gwang-Jo Kim recalled that the right to education had been enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human rights and was confirmed by the 1990 Convention of the Rights of the Child.

“Pakistan’s rectification of the Convention of the Rights of the Child as early as 1990 demonstrates the nation’s commitments to ensure the basic rights to survival, development, protection and participation of every child living in the country, including those without citizenship,” said Mr. Kim.

“The State as the primary duty-bearer has the responsibility, along with other non-state actors and the international community, to ensure that the right to education is protected, respected and fulfilled,” said Mr. Kim.

The joint UNESCO-UNHCR conference was possible through the recent inter-agency agreement for enhanced cooperation to support Afghan refugees in their school education, non-formal education, literacy and other social services. The joint project is part of the One UN approach and in line with the Government of Pakistan’s Management and Repatriation Strategy for Afghans in Pakistan 2010-2012.

Written by Dieter Schlenker, UNESCO Bangkok.