



'INCLUDING ALL CHILDREN IN QUALITY LEARNING - CLOSING EQUITY GAPS IN BASIC EDUCATION'



REGIONAL MINISTERIAL EDUCATION CONFERENCE CONCEPT NOTE

INTRODUCTION

The Government of Turkey and the UNICEF Regional Office for Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CEE/CIS) are co-organizing a Regional Ministerial Education Conference on '**Including All Children in Quality Learning**' to be held in Istanbul, Turkey from 10-13 December 2013.

The high-level regional event will launch a Call for Action to advance equity in education participation and learning and to contribute to on-going regional discussions on the **Post-2015 Development Agenda**.

This Concept Note provides a background, rationale and tentative framework for the organization of the Conference.

BACKGROUND

Although national enrolment rates are high in the CEE/CIS region and universal education/MDG2 is often assumed to be achieved, many children drop out of school soon after primary education and many graduate from school without basic literacy and numeracy skills.

Around 2.5 million children of primary and lower-secondary school age and 1.6 million children of pre-primary school age are out of basic education, and thus out of learning. At the secondary level, more than 12 million adolescents are estimated not to be in school. There are many more children, perhaps millions, from the most marginalized communities, that are excluded from national data collection procedures and thus are invisible in national education indicators. In particular, there are an estimated 5.1 million children with disabilities in the region, the majority of who are likely to be out of school.

A close look at the profiles of these children out of school¹ shows that specific groups of children from the most socially, culturally and economically marginalized communities continue to be excluded from basic education – either never enrolling in school, enrolling but not learning or enrolling but dropping out before the end of basic education. Indeed children from ethnic and/or linguistic minorities (such as the Roma), children with disabilities, children facing gender discrimination, children from poor families, young children without access to preschool and adolescents that have been “pushed out” of school make up the largest sub-groups of children out of school in the region. Major equity gaps in education exist in enrolment, completion and learning rates between these children and their peers from majority populations.

The **key barriers and system bottlenecks** leading to children’s exclusion from education include discrimination, stigma and violence, poorly implemented policies, inadequate budgets, data gaps, poor quality teaching/learning processes, poverty, social and cultural barriers, inadequate social protection mechanisms, and lack of critical system inputs.

The children and adolescents from marginalized communities that manage to stay in school often experience barriers to learning. Learning outcomes across the region are already worryingly low, with about half of 15-year-olds failing to master basic reading and mathematics skills, according to the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). For the most marginalized children, learning levels are the lowest; there are severe equity gaps in learning outcomes across the region between children and adolescents from marginalized communities and their peers from majority and wealthier backgrounds. Children with low levels of learning become more likely to leave school early and to be **excluded from more advanced learning and employment opportunities**.

RATIONALE

The pace of the discussions on the **post-2015 agenda** in education is accelerating. In these discussions, the attention of many actors and stakeholders is shifting from a pure **quantitative focus** on access and participation in formal education to include an increasing concern for the **quality and relevance of education**, with a particular focus on the importance of **learning outcomes** and their **social distribution**.

In the CEE/CIS region, several countries have made advances in reducing the number of out of school children, through reforms, policy developments and innovations in service provision. **Turkey** is an example of a country that has made impressive advances in enhancing participation rates of marginalized children in education, particularly girls, in improving data collection systems on children out of school and in improving learning outcomes. Other good examples come from the European Union (EU), which has launched a movement to reduce the numbers of Early School Leavers², as well as from

¹ CEE/CIS Regional Report on Out-of-School Children

² Defined as young people aged between 18 and 24 years that have completed ISCED level 2 (lower-secondary education) or below and are not currently enrolled in education or training.

Brazil, Indonesia and Mexico which are engaged, together with Turkey, in a joint study on children out of secondary school.

Despite the progress made, striking **inequities** in levels of educational **attainment** and **outcomes** persist. Thus, increasingly countries in the region see it as their priority to **close equity gaps** in both **access** to and **outcomes** of education.

To close equity gaps, education systems must better address the **unfinished business** of MDG 2 and focus on improving access and completion in basic education while at the same time ensuring the quality and relevance of learning. **Inclusive education** systems are those that respond to the needs of each and every child and thus reduce exclusion. To address the needs of marginalized children and adolescents, partnerships must go beyond the education sector and be built at the system-level **across sectors**.

The **voice of learners** - particularly adolescents and **youth** – needs to be incorporated in order to design, monitor and ensure the effectiveness of education reforms and initiatives.

In today's environment of limited financial resources, it is more imperative than ever that governments renew their political commitment to inclusive and quality education, exchange their experiences and lessons learnt, and work collaboratively toward developing networks and creating opportunities for horizontal cooperation in the region and beyond. The **focus** of the planned Regional Ministerial Education Conference will be on promoting cross-country exchange and collaboration on **closing equity gaps in education participation and learning**.

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

In the context of the regional discussions of the post-2015 agenda in education, the **overall purpose** of the Regional Ministerial Education Conference is to **provide a renewed impetus and foster a greater political commitment toward closing equity gaps in both participation and outcomes of basic education and upper secondary education in CEE/CIS**, with the view to accelerate reforms at country level.

More specifically, the conference will have the following **objectives**:

1. Accelerate the political momentum around **equity in access to and completion of basic education and secondary education** in CEE/CIS, and reduce the number of children out of school - particularly among young children and adolescents - by launching a call for action that will put in motion a regional initiative to include all children in quality learning ;
2. Promote the importance of the **quality and relevance of education** as a way to improve learning outcomes, reduce equity gaps in learning and increase completion rates in basic and upper-secondary education in the region;
3. Promote an **inter-sectoral approach** to education inclusion, and in particular to the issue of out of school children;
4. Provide an opportunity and a forum to allow learners - particularly **adolescents and youth** – to get their voice heard, regarding the quality and relevance of the education they are offered.

UNICEF and the Government of Turkey will bring a critical mass of countries together to work collaboratively toward including all out of school children in quality learning.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

At the **political** level, the conference will help setting an agenda for quality basic education in the CEE/CIS region through the agreement of country delegations to collaborate on the **Call for Action** for the Inclusion of All Children into Quality Learning. The conference will also have promoted and reinforced:

- A stronger **political commitment** towards effective reforms for the Inclusion of All Children into Quality Learning in the CEE/CIS region; and
- A greater **dialogue** as well as enhanced opportunities for **networking** and **horizontal cooperation** towards education sector reforms **between sectors** and **between partners** supporting governments.

At the technical level, the conference will provide a forum for **knowledge sharing, learning** and **horizontal cooperation in the region and beyond**.

FORMAT

The Regional Ministerial Education Conference will last 3.5 days. It will consist of a **political segment** (1.5 day) and a **technical segment** (2 days).

The **political segment** will launch the Call for Action and address what needs to be accomplished in order to eliminate equity gaps in access to quality education and learning in the region. Besides opening remarks and the keynote addresses, it will consist of Thematic Sessions and will include presentations, ministerial statements, discussions of the Call for Action and contributions of youth from the region. The thematic sessions will be organized around the main building blocks of quality education in the CEE/CIS region, as follows:

- Every child in school
- Every child learning
- Every child learning early and enrolling on time
- Good governance for equity

The **technical segment** will consist of a number of sessions designed to present and discuss how the Call for Action can be best implemented.

PARTNERS

The regional conference will bring together countries from Europe, Asia and Latin America that share similar concerns about equity in education, that have relevant experience in reforming education for equity and that are currently engaged in equity reforms or planning to do so.

The conference will provide an opportunity for countries and experts to share their experience and lessons learned from education reforms, and partner organizations that have proven technical expertise to contribute to discussions.