

## **'6 out of 10 for effort' but High-Level Group must do better in future years**

GCE verdict on Oslo EFA Meeting December 2009

The eighth Education For All High-Level Group (EFA-HLG) convened in Oslo last week, with GCE campaigners out in force to call for a revival of the 'global compact' for education: the idea that governments of rich and poor countries, supported by international institutions, have a mutual responsibility and commitment to achieving all six EFA goals.

GCE and other stakeholders have expressed growing frustration at the laborious process, low-level attendance and lack of firm commitments that come out of the annual HLG (a meeting that is meant to review the progress and actions towards meeting EFA). At the start of this year, the GCE Board wrote to UNESCO Director-General Matsuura informing him GCE would have to consider withdrawal from the process unless changes were made. This year the host government, Norway, and UNESCO strove to address the issues raised by GCE and others. Whilst improvements were made, the HLG is still lacking the dynamic leadership and decision-making power to really drive the international effort to achieve EFA. Further and deeper efforts will be needed both within this forum and more widely, to see the goals realised.

On the positive side, participation in the 2008 meeting was higher-level than previously, with some representation from ministers of richer countries in addition to the usual attendance from developing countries. The Government of Norway was represented by its Prime Minister, Crown Prince and several Ministers. President Wade of Senegal attended the Opening Ceremony as host of the 2007 meeting. UNICEF Deputy Director Hilde Johnsson and World Bank Managing Director Graeme Wheeler were present, signalling greater commitment from the EFA Convening Agencies towards this process. 'Star' quality was provided by education advocates Her Majesty Queen Rania of Jordan, singer Angelique Kidjo and Intel Chairperson Craig Barrett. GCE had a high profile throughout, delivering a Class of 2015 sign-up during the Opening Ceremony, and hosting a breakfast for developing country ministers on the morning of the HLG meeting itself, where Angelique Kidjo, Kailash Satyarthi and Helge Hjetland spoke of the need for donors and international financial institutions to get behind the global compact for EFA. Class of 2015 was high-profile throughout, earning plaudits by a number of major speakers as well as a specific mention in the 'Oslo Declaration' – the main political statement issued from the meeting[1].

Participants united in calling for the global community to 'protect and insulate the world's poorest children youth and adults from the worst effects of the [financial] crisis, as they carry the least responsibility for events' adding that 'the crisis should not serve as justification for any reduction in national spending and aid to education', and recognising the potential role of education in recovery and growth.

The main HLG meeting prioritised three themes as identified by the host country Governance for equity; Teachers[2] and Financing. The Oslo Declaration is shorter and more focused than statements from previous years , There is undoubtedly a greater sense of urgency and prioritisation than in the past, but there was a lack of sufficient attention to key issues such as children in fragile states, working and disabled children, HIV and AIDs and the role of the IMF. GCE also lamented the lack of an indicative target for donor aid to basic education, noting that targets are included for developing countries' financing of education.

GCE Board members and campaigners remain firm in their view that there is still a long way to go before the HLG lives up to its mandate. The Oslo Declaration still tends towards generalisation and progressive statements that are not backed by commitments. It contains just one firm and tangible commitment: to create a Teachers Task Force, supported by a small Secretariat, to assist countries to formulate evidence-based policies to address the teacher gap, particularly the most challenged countries. Otherwise the Declaration largely consists of calls for action by the main stakeholders within the EFA movement. While broadly positive in intent, these all stop short of specific actionable recommendations to drive change. GCE also notes the lack of priority given to the meeting by rich countries with only– Norway, UK, Germany, Denmark and Sweden – sending ministers to the meeting. This must change in future years.

GCE welcomed the findings of the EFA Global Monitoring Report, which offered a very good analysis of many key issues and challenges in education today. On current rates of progress 29 million children will remain out-of-school in 2015. Other EFA goals lag further behind, with early childhood and literacy most neglected. We share the GMR's view that good governance is crucial for equity – and that this principle applies at national and international levels.

GCE remains concerned that a number of issues threaten the global compact on education:

\* Most donors, including most of the G8, are not living up to their commitments to finance EFA, with a continued neglect of the basic education sector and low-income countries most in need, especially fragile states

\* Aid levels to basic education have stagnated at \$4 billion per year, whereas \$16 billion is needed

\* The EFA Fast-Track Initiative has not lived up to its full potential partly because of lack of financing but also because of institutional flaws, including problems with disbursement of funds

\* Governments pursue policies, often recommended by donors and the World Bank, that contribute to inequity, rather than investing in state provision of equitable inclusive, rights-based education

\* The IMF undermines the ability of governments to pursue such an agenda by insisting on narrow macro-economic fiscal targets

While this year's HLG was a modest step forward, this is no time for complacency. The financial crisis threatens the progress to date, let alone the hope of meeting the full EFA agenda by 2015. But there are important opportunities, with leadership from Netherlands, Scandinavia and the succession of President-elect Barack Obama to United States President. GCE will be working in all corners of the world to ensure that by the time of the next HLG, the global compact is seen to be the driving force to providing everyone with a quality education.