

UNICEF report cites declining levels of education and literacy world-wide

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According to a recent report released by UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), nearly one billion of the world's population is entering the twenty-first century without even the basic literacy skill of signing their names. Relatively few can operate a computer or comprehend a simple application form. The report reveals that people without literacy skills usually live in extreme poverty and unhygienic conditions, compared to those who are literate.

The number of poor people is on the rise, the report adds. Despite UN conventions established 50 years ago on the right to education, one-sixth of the world's population (855 million) will be illiterate by the end of this millennium. By the year 2000, 130 million children of school-going age in developing countries will be growing up without any basic education. Three out of five of those children who don't attend school are girls.

The report also reveals that in 1995, 98 percent of children of school age in industrial countries had begun their education. The figures for the East Asian and Pacific region are 96 percent. In Central/Eastern Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS—the former USSR) and the Baltic region, it is 94 percent. In Central America and the Caribbean it is 92 percent. In the Middle East and North Africa, 81 percent. In South Asia it is 68 percent, and in sub-Saharan Africa it is only 57 percent. These figures illustrate the wide gap which exists between education in rich countries and poor countries, even under conditions where the quality of education in developed countries is declining.

By the time children reach grade five, drop-out rates are as follows: 1 percent in industrial countries, 10 percent in the East Asian and Pacific region, 26 percent in Latin American and Caribbean countries, 9 percent in the Middle East and North Africa, 4 percent in South

Asia, and 33 percent in sub-Saharan Africa.

In sub-Saharan Africa 40 million children of school-going age do not even attend primary school. Depressed economic conditions in sub-Saharan African countries have resulted in the deplorable condition of school buildings, lack of proper teacher training and resources. While education in this region continues to deteriorate, in 1998 alone these debt-ridden countries expended \$12 billion in debt repayments.

The UNICEF report cites that in South Asia 50 million children who should have received primary education have not entered school. In India 80 percent of urban children go to schools, but in rural areas the figure is only 20 percent. In the Indian state of Kerala nine out of ten children go to school, but in Bihar the figure is only five out of ten.

Increased debt payments by “developing countries,” particularly in the 1980s, have affected the quality of education. Funds previously allocated to education are now used to pay off the debt. Between 1980 and 1987 expenditure on education has been cut by 65 percent in sub-Saharan Africa and by 40 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean, resulting in a significant reduction in the quality of education.

The level of education in Eastern Europe and Russia, with the conversion to market economies, has declined. A fall in family incomes, a rise in education fees for primary and secondary schools, and the cut-off of free clothing, shoes and textbooks have contributed to the deterioration of education. The government's contribution towards education has also been drastically cut. In Bulgaria government spending on education has been slashed by 75 percent, resulting in wage cuts for teachers and less money for school facilities. In 12 countries of the CIS, 30,000 primary schools were shut down between 1991 and 1995.

Statistics published in industrial countries show that the decline in education is actually much worse than what the UNICEF report describes. In Detroit, one of the poorest US cities, where 108,000 out of 180,000 children come from poverty stricken families, the 1997 drop-out rate was 26.4 percent. In Bradford, England it was reported in June 1998 that one-fourth of the city's schools were scheduled to be closed. In Australia, a survey done by the Bureau of Statistics found that 6.2 million of the adult population were unable to perform duties of daily life, such as reading and understanding the instructions on a label of prescribed medicine.

UNICEF recommends its Student Centered Education policy, under the slogan "In 2001, Education for All," as the solution for the world-wide deterioration of education, and the widening gap between the quality of education received by children in rich and poor families. However it does not examine how this would be accomplished, or put forward any programs to achieve this target.



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