

Equal Access to Quality Education for Minorities
(Section IV of Draft Recommendations on Minorities and the Right to Education)

Input from Helen Pinnock, Save the Children

Thank you, Madam Chair, for the opportunity to speak on the topic of access to education for minority children, which is a key priority for Save the Children.

I would like us to consider the principle of non-discrimination in access to equitable, quality education for minorities - to suggest some ideas from Save the Children's experience on what it means to deliver on that principle in practice across education systems.

It is our experience that several governments have strong policy commitments to minority education, often expressing similar ideas to the very strong recommendations drafted by Professor Thornberry. However, these are often not implemented. Why is this the case? And why is the principle of access to education without discrimination so often not realised?

When thinking about these questions, it is useful to think about the motivations and drivers which affect those individuals with the power to make significant change within the education system. This means thinking about the education policy framework in terms of which messages are communicated through the system by powerful people. These messages are sometimes written down, but are often not written down – they are tacit policy messages.

One of these key motivations could be described as the drive to assimilate. Often those running education at various levels are anxious to get minority people to become more similar to the dominant group and see education as a key means to achieve this. This anxiety can override other expectations for education, particularly in situations of conflict or fragility, or where a country is struggling to assert a unified national identity. It can lead, for example, to refusal to include minority histories in the curriculum, or to anxiety about enabling minority people to become teachers.

Another strong factor in discriminatory effects in minority children's access to education is a lack of understanding among those with power of what it means to deliver education equitably for diverse groups of people. Often our contacts with Ministry of Education staff and local education officials reveal strong assumptions that delivering quality education requires one fixed and detailed national curriculum, delivered using the same methods, using one language, across the country.

Basing education delivery on either or both of these motivations is going to result in exclusion and failure for large numbers of children; i.e. discriminatory education systems. One example of how access to education for minorities is affected by the imperatives outlined is the increasing and alarming trend, particularly in Asia, for young minority children from remote areas to be put into boarding hostels far from home. This is taking place under the banner of expanding access to primary education under Education For All and the

Millennium Development Goals. Children in these schools experience a fixed model of education which is irrelevant to their lives, in a language which they do not understand. This approach to expanding primary education deprives children of their rights to home and family life; threatens their rights to protection from abuse and exploitation; cuts them off from their culture and language; and often poses serious risks to their health and nutrition.

What can be done to challenge fixed and discriminatory ways of offering education access to minority children? First, there is a need to establish internationally that such models are inappropriate and undermine minorities' rights to education. This Forum should promote monitoring mechanisms which hold decision makers accountable to providing flexible approaches to education delivery, which respond to and value the diverse cultures, identities and contexts present in the population.

It will also be important for the international community to demonstrate that it is more effective to deliver education through such flexible, diversity-friendly approaches, and that inflexible and discriminatory approaches to education will ultimately undermine aims of national unity, cohesion and economic and social development.

With these points in mind we propose that Section IV includes a recommendation that states adopt flexible and participatory modes of education delivery which respond to the diverse situations of children and communities, recognising in policy the key importance of flexibility and participation in ensuring access to quality education for all without discrimination.

Section IV should also recommend that, while expanding access to primary education for minority children should be undertaken as a priority, states should undertake not to do this in ways which pose risks to children's protection, which diminish their access to family life, or which undermine the maintenance and development of their culture and languages.