

*MESSAGE from Mr Nicholas BURNETT, Assistant Director-General for Education, UNESCO, to the First United Nations Forum on Minorities and the Right to Education, Geneva 15-16 Dec. 2008*

As this forum opens, millions of children and adults remain deprived of their right to education. Some 75 million children who should be in primary school today are not. Some 776 million adults – one in five – lack the most basic literacy skills to escape poverty, improve their livelihoods and participate in our knowledge-intensive societies.

As the main UN agency charged with education, UNESCO welcomes this First United Nations Forum on Minority Issues devoted to Minorities and the Right to Education. Let me take this opportunity to thank and congratulate Professor McDougall, Independent Expert on Minority Issues, and the High Commissioner for Human Rights Navanethem Pillay for organizing this Forum. I know from Judge Pillay's remarks at the recent international Conference on Education how committed she is to inclusive education. I also acknowledge Viktoria Mohasci's commitment from our time working together on setting up the Roma Education Fund and Decade.

This Forum takes place at a critical time. Throughout this year we have celebrated the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 26 stipulates that "everyone has the right to education." Since then a number of important treaties and normative instruments have reaffirmed this right. All these instruments are rooted in the same principle: non-discrimination on any basis whatsoever.

There has been notable, even historic progress towards access to universal education since 2000. There are 40 million more children in primary school than in

1999. Some of the poorest countries in the world have introduced ambitious policies to ensure the right to education. They have abolished school fees, built classrooms, hired teachers and taken special measures to reach the most vulnerable groups.

But progress is very uneven. The foremost challenge we face is to make education more inclusive, by developing policies that tackle deep and persistent inequalities in education. Girls still have a higher chance of being out of school than boys. Living in a rural area, an urban slum, belonging to a minority group, speaking a minority language or being disabled all significantly raise the stakes of being excluded.

But learning itself must welcome diversity through relevant curricula and respect for cultural and linguistic pluralism. Schools and other learning environments must become places where all children and learners participate, are treated equally and enjoy the same learning opportunities. More flexible, open education systems that are rooted in a concern for equity promote social cohesion and more just and peaceful societies.

The right to education is at the heart of UNESCO's mission of ensuring "full and equal opportunities for education for all." It is crucial to monitor this right. UNESCO contributes to this exercise through its annual *EFA Global Monitoring Report* and through consultations with Member States on the implementation of the Convention against Discrimination in Education.

But clearly we must do more to advocate for the universal right to education. We must work to intensify normative action at the national level to ensure that ethnic minorities and other vulnerable groups have access to and complete a good quality primary education.

I regret not to be with you personally today. I shall, however, be pressing for measures to guarantee the right to education before development and education ministers at the eighth High Level Group Meeting on Education for All in Oslo.

I am confident that the Forum will indicate ways forward for promoting and protecting the right to education of minorities, shed light on key areas for action, and make a significant contribution to advancing the Education for All agenda to which the majority of countries committed themselves in 2000.

I look forward to the Forum's Recommendations and would like to encourage you to take on board the conclusions from last month's International Conference on Education held in Geneva. They focus on the fundamental importance of inclusive education for human, social and economic development.

I want to assure you of UNESCO's continued collaboration with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in all aspects of fulfilling the right to education for every child, youth and adult.

Thank you very much.