

ADEA, ADB, World Bank, EFA/FTI

Conference for African Ministers of Finance and of Education on
**Sustaining the Education and Economic Momentum in Africa amidst the
Current Global Financial Crisis**

July 15 – 17, 2009

Tunis, Tunisia

**Opening Ceremony:
UNICEF Goodwill Message**

by

Ms Maria Luisa Fornara (UNICEF Tunisia Representative)

on behalf of

Mr. Saad Houry (UNICEF Deputy Executive Director)

Excellencies,

-Distinguished Representatives of African Development Bank, World Bank and African Union,

-The Executive Secretary of Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA),

-Honorable Ministers of Finance and Ministers of Education of Africa,

-Distinguished colleagues and partners,

Let me start by conveying the greetings and apologies of Mr. Saad Houry, UNICEF Deputy Executive Director, for not being able to participate at the Conference due to unforeseen constraints. Let me also on his behalf thank the organizers of the Conference, ADEA, the African Development Bank, and the World Bank.... all key partners to UNICEF in the field of education.

“Chair, honorable Ministers, distinguished colleagues and partners,

UNICEF is greatly honored by the opportunity to address you at this key event on sustaining and, indeed, accelerating the education momentum, especially in the face of the current economic crisis. This is a key opportunity for all development actors in Africa to bring more focused attention on the need to act urgently, smartly, boldly and with scale.

We all know that the **remarkable progress** made by African countries towards Universal Primary Education in the past decade is largely due to high growth in public domestic education budgets and increased aid to education, notably from all the partners present at this Conference. Progress is also due to increased strategic interventions that are transforming education systems, as well as small scale targeted strategies that promote the education rights of disadvantaged children and youth. We are witnessing more informed investment choices in education and more efficient use of available resources. Progress has been especially striking for African countries most at risk of not attaining the 2015 goals. In many of these, education is playing a key role in restoring normal life following wars, conflicts, crises and natural disasters.

We know that the present global economic crisis can have **long-term intergenerational impacts** - that will be hard to recover from - if the risks are not urgently addressed. Children and women are already being severely affected and the full impact of the global slowdown on the poorest and most vulnerable may yet to be fully felt. Education is particularly vulnerable to budget and aid cuts during times of economic crises; at the household level coping measures in many cases include taking children out of school and putting them to work, and reallocating household resources away from women and girls. School fees may be reintroduced in countries that have abolished

them. We will have to work even harder to protect the gains achieved so far – not only in education but towards all the MDGs, given the impact of education on these goals.

All of us are convinced of the importance and advantage of investing in good quality basic education. What is important now, in a time of economic downturn, is to translate this consensus into key **strategic initiatives** that are feasible, efficient and can deliver major results in the years up to 2015. This calls for countries to be committed to bolder and more courageous actions. The present meeting and dialogue between Finance Ministers and Education Ministers of Africa, together with their development partners, represents a **major opportunity** that can ignite rapid progress in this regard.

Chair, honorable Ministers, distinguished colleagues and partners,

In contributing to this meeting, UNICEF would like to call for renewed action and focused investments by governments and partners around the following strategic initiatives:

- First, we need to act with greater urgency to put the issue of **access** behind us in Africa. In 2006, 75 million children worldwide, 55 percent girls, were still not enrolled in school. Almost half of these out-of-school children were in Sub-Saharan Africa. If current trends persist, millions of children will still be out of school in 2015. Africa can and must rise above this, if it is to fully harness the potential of its young population for development.
- Second, for poor and most vulnerable households, costs of education are often the key reason for non-enrolment and for school drop-out, especially in times of economic crisis. The School Fee Abolition Initiative, launched in 2005 by UNICEF and the World Bank in support of strategies to address household cost barriers to education, can be utilized more intensively by African countries to boost household demand for education and to achieve a quantum leap in access.
- Third, in overcoming access problems we must not lose sight of **quality**. In Sub-Saharan Africa, far too many children fail to master basic skills before leaving school. This is a waste of investments. Governments will need to make strategic choices on which elements of quality are essential, cost-effective and can deliver quick wins for children. A useful mechanism for this is provided by the Essential Learning Package Initiative introduced by UNICEF in West and Central Africa in 2004. It entails the design, costing and delivery of affordable quality education packages to most schools within a relatively short timeframe.
- Fourth, as with quality, we must not forget **post-primary education** despite arguments about high cost. Progress in this area is imperative for addressing the challenges facing adolescents and youths who are Africa's greatest asset, but who may also pose the

- greatest risk to political stability. Countries must explore alternative models that complement formal secondary education to improve equity and strengthen the transition to the labor market in a cost effective manner.
- Last, but not least, we must prevent the loss of hard won gains in education through sustained investment in measures to rapidly restore learning and rebuild education systems in **emergency and post-crisis situations**. UNICEF stands ready to deploy its of expertise and experience in this area to help support African countries.

Chair, honorable Ministers, distinguished colleagues and partners,

Africa is perhaps facing one of the biggest challenges of our times in education. But for the bold, great challenges can be great opportunities. Ministers of Education and Ministers of Finance have it in their power to create a breakthrough for education in Africa. Perhaps there can be no greater opportunity than making 2010 the decisive year for education in Africa. This also happens to be the year when the eyes of the world will be on Africa for another major reason. Africa hosts the Football World Cup for the first time. The timing is opportune. If African countries raise their game in terms of investments in education; if development partners accelerate support for education in Africa, then the world will not only be celebrating the prowess of youth in football, but will also be marking a turning point in the future of Africa's children and youths. Hosting the World Cup on the continent in 2010 can be used to build a much needed compact of education investments to effect meaningful change and lasting impact for education in Africa. It can be used to rally support for a major campaign that will create the momentum for boosting investments to scale up access to education. The year 2010 can be the turning point through which every African child will be able to secure a place in a school with adequate numbers of teachers. **What a legacy that would be!**

In times of economic crisis we should not forget that all children have a right to an education of good quality through which they can be prepared to shape a better world, where tolerance and dignity, peace and socioeconomic progress are sustained. Addressing the education needs and guaranteeing the education rights of children in Africa will in large part determine how we face the present global economic crisis on this continent and whether the Africa region succeeds in reaching the global development targets and in building a more peaceful future. We can only do this by sustaining the solid and dynamic partnerships we have been building in the past decade. We need to act now to make a difference for the future of the African child.”

Chair, honorable Ministers, distinguished colleagues and partners, *On behalf of our Deputy Executive Director Saad Houry, I thank you once again for your kind attention.*