



ADEA presents Africa's progress at the First World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)

Moscow, 29 September 2010. The Executive Secretary of ADEA, Mr. Ahlin Byll-Cataria, and the Director of UNESCO's Regional Bureau for Education in Africa (BREDA) and leader of the Working Group on Early Childhood Development (WGECD), Ms. Ann-Thérèse Ndong-Jatta, spoke yesterday before the participants at the 1st World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education, which is being held in Moscow, Russian Federation, from 27 to 29 September 2010.

Their presentations were given during the session devoted to Africa, chaired by Mr. Sam Ongeru, Minister of Education of Kenya and Chair of the Bureau of Ministers of ADEA and of the Conference of African Ministers of Education (COMEDAF).

The concept of early childhood care and education (ECCE) encompasses all aspects of children's development, with the aim of ensuring their physical, cognitive, linguistic, social and emotional well-being. It also includes the notion of care, a process that engenders a favorable environment for the comprehensive development of the child. ECCE services are many and varied, ranging from day-care to kindergarten to the first years of primary education.

The Director of UNESCO's Regional Bureau (BREDA) in Dakar presented the Regional Report on Early Childhood Care and Education in Africa [report attached]. Early childhood is defined as the period from 0 to 8 years of age. These years are crucial for the development of the brain and hence constitute the foundation for the child's future learning process. They are also a period of extreme vulnerability, particularly in Africa, where infant mortality rates remain high (158 deaths per thousand live births, as against a world average of 71 per thousand) and where, in some 30 countries, 38% of all children suffer from severe or chronic malnutrition. Moreover, in a continent where 50% of the population is living in poverty and where the prevalence of HIV/AIDS is highest (70% of all infected persons live in Africa), ECCE services reach only 42% of children. Moreover, in sub-Saharan Africa, less than 15% of children receive even one full year of preschool education.

After an overview of African initiatives in progress, including the 2008-2013 strategic plan for ECCE developed by the WGECD, the Director of BREDA highlighted a number of successful experiences in sub-Saharan Africa, notably in Kenya, Ethiopia and Mauritius. She encouraged countries to develop strategies for scaling up ECCE services, based on these promising experiences and the opportunities available – in particular, the very strong commitment shown by communities in supporting the efforts of governments. “We have presented the reasons why ECCE should be a leading priority many times, since it is the foundation for the child's development and the first step toward the achievement of all the Education for All (EFA) goals”, said Ms. Ndong-Jatta. “Now it is time for us to act.”

The ADEA Executive Secretary presented the report of the 4th African International Conference on Early Childhood Development, on the theme “From Policy to Action: Expanding Investment in ECD for Sustainable Development”, which was held in Dakar from 10 to 13 November 2009. This major conference was organized by the ADEA Working Group on Early Childhood Development (WGECD), the government of Senegal and UNESCO’s Regional Bureau for Education in (BREDA). It brought together delegations from 42 African countries and was attended by 35 ministers of education, health, family affairs and social affairs, as well as many experts in the field, development agencies, and technical and financial partners. The conference was opened by the heads of state of Senegal and Mali, who regard ECD as a key issue in the sustainable development of Africa, and was also attended by the first ladies of Cape Verde, Senegal and Zanzibar.

“Africa has not come here with empty hands”, declared Mr. Byll-Cataria. “The Dakar conference, among other things, promoted dialogue among all stakeholders in ECD in the areas of planning, financing and policy implementation, shared knowledge and innovative experiences, and indicated concrete strategies for expanding ECD services and increasing investment in ECD.” The Executive Secretary reminded the participants that a call for action had been issued at Dakar to all interested parties – heads of state, first ladies, ministers, civil society, the private sector, the research community, and technical and financial partners – to promote the creation of holistic, integrated ECD services and to increase investment in this area. The first ladies of Cape Verde, Senegal and Zanzibar also proclaimed their support for ECD in Africa. [See the Call for Action and the Declaration of the First Ladies, attached.]

In his conclusion, Mr. Byll-Cataria emphasized the concrete impact of the conference:

- The African Union has made ECD the eighth priority area of the Plan of Action of the Second Decade of Education for Africa.
- At the request of the President of Senegal, the heads of state of the African Union are planning a special summit on ECD in 2011.
- Sub-regional processes for policy dialogue and exchanges of experience and expertise have emerged, notably in Mauritius, which is a center of excellence for ECD in Africa.

Mr. Haroun Ali Suleiman, Minister of Education and Vocational Training of Zanzibar, shared with participants his country’s experiment entitled Radio Instruction to Strengthen Education (RISE), a program of radio-based preschool education for 4- to 6-year-olds. This entertaining, child-centered interactive program is rooted in local communities and local culture. It was developed by the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, in partnership with the Voice of Zanzibar, non-governmental organizations and private partners, as part of the new education policy adopted in 2006. RISE is intended in particular for poor and isolated communities. It currently comprises 78 community radio programs.

Other speakers at the session included the pediatrician and nutritionist Guelaya Sall, professor at Cheikh Anta Diop University in Senegal, who presented the nutrition and health challenges facing early childhood development, and Robert Serpell, professor of psychology at the University of Zambia, who spoke of traditional community-based approaches.

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In Moscow, the session on Africa showed that although the challenges remain huge, Africa has passed from the stage of policy formulation to that of action. With 19 countries that have adopted an ECD policy, Africa has indeed taken action.

The Vice-President of Seychelles, ministers of education, experts on early childhood and civil society representatives from around the world are currently gathered in Moscow, from 27 to 29 September, to coordinate their strategies for accelerating ECCE. ADEA, whose Working Group on ECD is led by UNESCO BRED, is organizing several sessions on Africa at the conference.

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