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en Afrique



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Strong Political Mobilization for the Fourth African International Conference on Early Childhood Development

The conference was opened yesterday by President Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal, in the presence of President Amadou Toumani Touré of Mali

Dakar, 10 November 2009: The Fourth African International Conference on Early Childhood Development, on the theme "From Policy to Action: Expanding Investment in ECD for Sustainable Development", was opened today in Dakar by President Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal. The official opening ceremony was attended by President Amadou Toumani Touré of Mali, the guest of honor, and the first ladies of Senegal, Cape Verde and Zanzibar, Mrs. Viviane Wade, Mrs. Abdelcia Pires and Mrs. Shadiya Karume. In addition to the addresses of the two heads of state, the opening ceremony included speeches by Senegal's Senior Minister, Minister of Family Affairs, Food Security, Female Entrepreneurship, Micro-finance and Early Childhood, Ms. Ndeye Khady Diop; the ADEA Executive Secretary, Mr. Ahlin Byll-Cataria; the Director of the UNESCO Bureau for Education in Africa (BREDA), Ms. Ann-Thérèse Ndong-Jatta; and the UNICEF Regional Director for West and Central Africa, Mr. Gian Franco Rotigliano.

The ADEA Executive Secretary expressed appreciation for the support provided by many development partners toward the organization of the conference and the strong mobilization of top-level policymakers in favor of the conference theme. "If so many of us are here", he declared, "it is because we all think that ECD programs work in favor of social and economic equity, promote gender equality, facilitate the transition to primary school and have a positive impact on scholastic performance". The conference was not only opened by two heads of state, it is attended by over ten First Ladies as well as Ministers of Education, Finance, Health and Family Affairs from more than 30 African countries.

Mr. Byll-Cataria stressed the crucial role of ECD in overcoming the considerable challenges facing education in most African countries. Currently, over half of the 130 million children aged 0-6 years are living in poverty and are not covered by health and education programs. Dropout and repetition rates are very high in the first three years of school, and more than half of all children who complete primary school have not mastered the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic. "Research on ECD", the Executive Secretary noted, "has demonstrated the savings achieved in the medium term through the reduction of repetition rates, of special education costs in primary and secondary education, of social assistance and protection costs, of juvenile delinquency and of costs engendered by violence."

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Mr. Byll-Cataria encouraged the participants to reflect on ECD policies and strategies that particularly target vulnerable children, notably including orphans in countries with high HIV/AIDS prevalence rates; in some countries, orphans represent 33% of learners in primary education and about 50% of children at the end of secondary education.

The Director of UNESCO's Regional Education Bureau for (BREDA), Ms. Ndong-Jatta, expressed regret that despite international declarations in favor of children's education and health, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, neither development partners nor most African countries have given priority to early childhood care and education (ECCE), which on average is allocated less than 10% of primary education budgets.

She reminded participants of the inefficiency of health and education systems, evidenced by high rates of child mortality and morbidity in the former case, and unacceptably high rates of class repetition, scholastic failure and attrition in the latter. "The results of this waste", she declared, "are intergenerational poverty, civil conflict and disorder, and under-development."

"After nearly half a century of public investment in education, health and welfare, the majority of the population in African countries is still illiterate or under-educated, poor in terms of income, poor in terms of knowledge and technology, malnourished or underfed", she said, thus calling into question the return on the investments made in human capital development.

To break this circle, Ms. Ndong-Jatta called on heads of governments to undertake a paradigm change: "As long as African leaders do not take a step back to think and start to invest in human resources by specifically targeting children from 0 to 8 years of age and their mothers, the vision of a developed, prosperous Africa will remain merely a vision."

UNICEF's Regional Director for West and Central Africa also called on African governments to mobilize for preschool education, which is currently accessible to only 15% of young African children.

In her address, Ms. Khady Diop highlighted the importance that Senegal places on education in general, and early childhood development in particular.

President Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal pointed out that Senegal is one of the few African countries to devote more than 40% of its budget to education. He noted the progress made by the "Case des tout-petits" ("toddlers' corner") project, a holistic, integrated ECD program launched by his government in 2000 at the World Forum on Education for All. He stated that he will continue to support the ADEA Working Group on Early Childhood Development (WGECD), notably by passing on the messages of the conference to his peers in the African Union.

Malian President Amadou Toumani Touré thanked Senegal for its invitation and informed the conference about the bilateral cooperation between Mali and Senegal in the area of early childhood through the establishment of "Cases des tout-petits" in Mali. He shared with the participants his thoughts on his commitment to early childhood and the measures taken in his country in favor of ECD. Mali is currently finalizing its ECD policies and strategies.

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The Fourth African International Conference on Early Childhood Development is co-organized by the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) Working Group on Early Childhood Development (WGECD) and the government of Senegal, with financial and technical support from many development cooperation organizations.

The conference will end on 13 November.

For further information on the conference and to consult the program, please visit: <http://ecdconference.org/index.html>.

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