

12 July 2013

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Vuk Jeremić,
President of the 67th Session of the General Assembly,
on ‘Malala Day’ to the United Nations Youth Assembly**

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon,
Mr. Gordon Brown, UN Special Envoy for Global Education,
Mr. Ahmad Alkindawi, UN Special Envoy for Youth,
Dear Malala and Members of the Youth Advocacy Group,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

As President of the General Assembly, it gives me great pleasure to offer a very warm welcome to all of you to the United Nations.

We have been brought together to this historic chamber by a shared commitment to secure universal access to education. Today we stand united with young people from nearly one hundred countries in seeking to ensure that no child is barred from attending school—convinced that factors like geography, gender, disability, language, wealth, and ethnicity, should not be seen as impediments to this achievement. It is my distinct honor to be able to lend my support to this inspiring endeavor

The Secretary-General’s presence here today is a strong testament to his active engagement on this issue. On behalf of the Member States, allow me to thank him for his tireless efforts.

I would also like to acknowledge, with gratitude, the hard work and devotion of his Special Envoy for Youth, Mr. Ahmad Alkindawi.

Last but certainly not least, allow me to express my sincere appreciation to Gordon Brown—a leading advocate for the education rights of young people. His leadership has mobilized corporations and think tanks, international organizations and community groups, governments and activists. He has helped raise global awareness of how much more needs to be done in the time ahead, as his visionary call for a “freedom fight for change” to end child labor, child marriage, and child trafficking is heard loud and clear world-wide.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today we celebrate the 16th birthday of a very special and courageous young woman: Malala Yousafzai. In a few moments, she will deliver her first public remarks since surviving a barbaric attack by Taliban gunmen, who saw her as a target for assassination because of her outspoken stance on the inalienable right to receive proper education.

Her perseverance is a testament to her courage; and a living proof of how the extraordinary actions of a single person can bring hope to millions of victims of prejudice and discrimination.

It is a true privilege to share this rostrum with a person of such integrity and character, whose example has encouraged so many from around the world to stand up for their basic human rights.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Education aims to equip children to flourish as adults—as future parents, productive breadwinners, responsible community leaders, and engaged citizens—and to impart them with the skills, dispositions and knowledge they will need in order to make valuable contributions to their respective societies.

From its founding, the United Nations has sought to promote the indispensability of this key instrument of progress.

On December 10th, 1948, the General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This landmark document mandated that primary education be “compulsory,” technical and professional education “generally available,” and higher education “equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.”

It has taken close to seventy years, but thanks in no small measure to the Millennium Development Goals, the vast majority of UN Member States will meet the target of completing a full course of primary schooling by 2015. Very few will miss it by much.

Consider the fact that the average adult living in a developing country today has more years of completed education than the average adult of a developed one at the mid-point of the last century. Progress on this front has been achieved one hundred times faster over the past six decades, than in the 2500 years that preceded it.

This represents an astonishing rupture in the human experience.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Academic research unambiguously indicates that our immediate task, however, is far from over. Close to 60 million children still do not go to school, while some 70 million adolescents—in lowest-income countries alone—receive no secondary education whatsoever.

We therefore have no right to rest on our laurels. We must instead re-double our efforts to achieve universal school enrollment.

As urgent as addressing this challenge evidently is, I submit that we must devote our attention to an equally fundamental one.

Let us begin by asking ourselves, how many young people currently in primary school are being truly prepared to contribute to the globalized, knowledge-based and technology-driven economy of today, much less the one of say 2030—or 2050?

I am afraid the answer is ‘not too many.’

As Lant Pritchett, one of the world’s foremost development economists has pointed out, school attendance is indeed a necessary first step on the road to a quality education, but it is not reducible to an exercise in logistics. It must be also about designing the right learning outcomes.

To focus primarily on supplying more books, more teachers, and more training without reforming current pedagogical frameworks is just a palliative—in the same way that pumping more air into a flat tire does not solve the underlying problem. It’s not that the air is unnecessary, but without first repairing the tire, the air simply won’t keep it inflated, and the vehicle will remain immobile.

School enrollment is thus nothing more than a necessary foundation upon which to build a 21st-century set of educational standards.

Basic literacy should not be seen as an end in itself, but merely as a baseline tool for teaching cognition, mathematics, problem-solving, creative thinking...

Ladies and Gentlemen,

UN Member States have a little over 900 days to agree on a set of Sustainable Development Goals, and less than 80 days to draft a clear roadmap for how to effectuate a smooth transition from the MDGs to the SDGs.

I believe one of the most important decisions they will need to make is how to consolidate the gains made in schooling, while setting learning-based and content-driven education targets that are “global in nature and universally applicable to all countries.”

Settling for any other way forward would amount to an a priori admission that the educational gap between developed and developing cannot be bridged—that achieving parity is unfeasible. In my view, it is based on the morally unacceptable premise that current inequalities cannot be redressed.

I believe that striving to narrow the existing gulf must stand at the core of the post-2015 agenda.

“If we do not act swiftly,” a report by the UN’s Global Education First Initiative concludes, “educational disparities will become an even greater source of division both within and between countries.”

This would have disastrous human, social, economic and political consequences, relegating perhaps billions of people to relative poverty and diminished outlook. It would undermine our efforts to end

hunger, empower women, and save children and mothers from premature deaths, as well as undercut our ambition to live in greater harmony with the environment.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we reflect on our further steps, we may draw inspiration from the words of one of the world's greatest statesman, Nelson Mandela, a heroic figure whose political legacy and moral weight has left a lasting mark on our times.

“Education,” he said, “is the most powerful weapon to change the world.”

I believe this is the reason why Malala and hundreds of other young people are meeting with us here today.

It speaks to the hopes of entire generations—present and future—to live fuller, sustainable lives; of youths who justly claim the right to participate in the creation of a world where social justice and equality of opportunity—in education as in everything else—is not dismissed out of hand as an unattainable ideal, but is relentlessly pursued with great ardor, until it becomes an irreversible part of the human condition.

Thank you very much for your attention.