BACKGROUND GUIDE: Primary Education for All

READ TO DISCOVER:

1. Why is right to primary education so important?
2. What are the main obstacles that prevent access to primary education for all children?
3. What has the international community achieved regarding the right to primary education?

DESCRIPTION OF THE COMMITTEE

UNICEF was created in 1946 to provide assistance to children in Europe who were facing disease and famine in the aftermath of World War II. Today it operates in countries all over the world in an effort to protect and improve the lives of children. UNICEF also works to prevent abuse and exploitation of children. UNICEF has focused on projects such as improving girls’ access to education, providing immunizations in developing countries, protecting children in times of conflict, and preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS to children.

The UNICEF Executive Board is the body that formulates the policy that UNICEF carries out. The Board is made up of 36 member states that are elected for three-year terms. Eight of the member states must come from Africa, seven from Asia, four from Eastern Europe, five from Latin America and the Caribbean, and 12 from the Western European and Other States category, which includes Japan. The committee functions by consensus rather than by voting. This means that in order for a resolution to pass, all member states must agree to it.
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Education is widely considered a basic human right that is vital to personal and societal development and well-being. Children who receive an education have greater and better opportunities and can make a more profound difference in their own lives and in the world as a whole. This begins with a strong primary education.

Attending primary school offers children many lessons that extend beyond the classroom. Children can learn basic life skills and how to treat and prevent diseases. In some cases, school may be the child’s only opportunity to receive life-saving vaccines, fresh water, and healthy food.²

Unfortunately, not every child has access to primary education. Even though most countries have made it mandatory for children to receive some form of education, ninety-three million children of primary school age are not in school. Almost eighty percent of these children live in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.³

Education is one focus of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs are eight international development goals that United Nations member states agreed upon achieving by 2015. The second MDG calls for the achievement of universal primary education (UPE) for all children. The attainment of primary education is linked to the fulfillment of other goals such as child health, ending poverty and hunger, gender equality, and women’s empowerment.⁴

The international community has been working hard to improve access to primary education. In 2002, 115 million children did not have access to education. In 2005-2006, numbers had declined to 93 million.⁵ This is a notable start but more efforts need to be taken, especially in regions where economic and social factors prevent children from gaining an education.

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**TERMS & CONCEPTS**

Human rights: rights to which all human beings are entitled from birth

Primary education: full-time education suited to the requirements of students up to the age of 12 years.

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): eight world wide development goals that United Nations member states agreed upon achieving by 2015; universal access to primary education is one of them.
BACKGROUND

Family poverty is the greatest barrier to primary education as sending a child to school can hurt a family financially when that child can no longer work or help at home. According to Action Aid, ninety-two countries require children to pay to attend primary school, which many poor families cannot afford.6

Schools may also charge fees or require uniforms and supplies that are expensive. This causes many parents to see education as a burden rather than as an investment, especially when it is so costly that the family may not be able to survive.7

Parents that never had access to education are less likely to send their children to primary school than those who did receive an education when they were young. Access to primary education greatly decreases when parents feel that the cost of sending their children to school is not worth the value of the children’s labor at home or outside of the home.

The existence of laws that regulate the access to primary education is another important factor. Many countries do not have laws that make students attend school. Laws about education can also be weak. Even if there are laws requiring all children to attend school or education to be free, they are not always enforced.

Corruption, on both the local and national level, can also have tremendous impacts on primary education when money set aside for more schools or more teachers ends up in places where it doesn’t belong. Access to primary education is limited when children do not have a school to attend or schools do not have enough teachers or supplies to take on more children.

Safety

Issues of safety and security for children attending school away from home also contribute to reasons why parents may not think primary education is very important. If children have to travel long distances to school, parents are less likely to allow their children to make the journey because of risks to their personal safety. This is especially true in places where there is war or unstable politics.
The cost of travel must also be taken into account as an expense of attending school. In isolated areas, children may have to travel for miles before they can reach school, which puts their safety at risk. In some extreme cases, children have been attacked simply for going to school, which may cause parents to worry about their children and keep them at home. Parents do not always see the link between granting access to primary education and a change in attitudes toward a more peaceful and tolerant future.  

Finally, children are more likely to drop out of school if they do not see any benefit to their attendance. If the curriculum only focuses on literacy, math, and science and does not address other issues relevant to the child’s life such as information about rights, gender equality, health, nutrition, avoiding diseases, and peace, children will not be able to relate what they learn in school to their everyday lives. True success in an education system comes when children want to learn, and can use what they learn in their day-to-day lives. Some nations have chosen to address this by setting up training schools that teach children work skills in addition to basic education.

**Gender Inequality**

The single most important factor preventing girls from attending and excelling in school is gender discrimination. Girls and boys both have problems to overcome when trying to get an education. For girls, however, these problems tend to happen more often and be more difficult to deal with. UNICEF reports that a majority of the children not in school, around 48.5 million, are girls. Early marriage and pregnancy are common in many countries and most have laws preventing pregnant girls from attending school or returning after becoming mothers. Many societies punish these girls by denying them an education, which can have a negative impact on both the mother and child.

Issues of safety and security are an even bigger problem when dealing with female students. Physical violence, especially gender-based violence, is directed toward girls much more than boys. This is made worse if girls do not feel they can trust their teachers, or if the teachers are allowing these things to go on despite knowing that they are wrong.

**CRITICAL THINKING QUESTION**

Since the issue of boys holding a more prominent role in society over girls is a gender discrimination engrained in many cultures, how should the UN go about addressing this problem?
CURRENT SITUATION

The number of children of primary school age who are currently out of school has declined dramatically from 2002 to 2006, from 115 million to 93 million. Although considerable progress has been made, many countries and regions still face barriers in providing universal primary education to its citizens. For instance, in South Asia, 31.5 million children of primary school age do not attend school. In sub-Saharan Africa, the numbers are even higher, at 41 million children.

It should also be noted that one out of every six children, or 17 percent, attending primary school are of secondary school age. Many students are unable to start school at a normal age or may have to repeat grades. In parts of Africa, up to 39 percent of secondary school-age children are attending primary school.

Despite progress toward achieving universal primary education by 2015, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reports that 86 countries are still at risk of not achieving gender equality by 2015. Out of the 149 countries with data, 94 of those countries missed their gender equality target for 2005. While numbers have improved over the years, a lot of changes need to be made in order to realize universal primary education (UPE) for both boys and girls.

Number of children not in primary education programs by region.

INTERNATIONAL ACTION

Throughout the last several decades, UNICEF has completed much of the work on access to primary education. UNICEF operates in 157 countries, calling on all citizens to step up efforts and make education for all children a reality. UNICEF works in a variety of ways, coming up with new strategies for each new situation that usually include:

• Support and assistance to governments and communities to increase access for children who need education the most;

• Working to keep safe, stable, gender-sensitive schools open even in conflict areas;

• Promoting quality in education to encourage greater participation;

• Programs to eliminate cultural, social and economic barriers to the education of girls; and

• Outreach to locate excluded and at-risk children, especially girls, and enroll them in school.\(^\text{16}\)

UNICEF has also worked diligently to promote life skills-based education. This allows children to take what they learn in the classroom and apply it to their daily lives, and to better prepare them for their futures.

In 2004, ECOSOC passed Resolution 254, “The Right to Education,” which elaborates on the issue of education for all.\(^\text{17}\) The UN Development Program (UNDP) continues to work towards accomplishing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), one of which is universal primary education.

The international community has passed two important documents that are related to access to primary education: the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Dakar Framework agreement. All UN member states, except Somalia and the United States, have ratified the CRC. Every nation that has ratified the Convention adopts the agreement into its national laws and is responsible for fulfilling the rights outlined in the Convention. Article 28 recognizes the right to compulsory and free primary education, though education is talked about several times in the CRC.\(^\text{18}\)
The Dakar Framework calls for “expansion of…early childhood care and education” and suggests the best ways to get more children, especially girls, into good education programs. The agreement calls for individual nations to do most of the work, but agrees there must also be international cooperation. Both of these documents call on governments and citizens to play a role in achieving education for all children, especially girls. All nations who have signed and ratified these documents have a responsibility to see that they do their best to uphold the ideas in these treaties.19

Several individual nations have also launched programs in an effort to bring more at risk children into the education system. These programs often help families with the cost of education, such as with uniforms, school supplies, or even paying children to go to school instead of working in factories or on the streets.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CREATING A RESOLUTION

When drafting resolutions, delegates should focus on providing access to education for the 100 million children not currently in school as well as addressing other issues related to education that other groups have been unable to solve. The following ideas should be addressed in any resolution that is brought to the floor:20

- **Environments:** At the very least, they should be healthy, protective and gender-safe.
- **Safety:** How to protect children while at, going to, or coming from school.
- **Outreach:** How to get children that are not currently in school to attend school.
- **Content:** Making school not only interesting but useful to the children.
- **Processes:** Teacher-student ratio, increased teacher recruitment, and community support.

Delegates should not only address barriers to education, but also introduce new ideas to resolve these problems. Keep in mind that poverty, gender inequality, and legal problems all play a role in this issue. The UN Children’s Fund has acted on these issues before, and now needs to take the lead on this issue with innovative and unique ideas, while keeping country’s policies in mind. States should look past simply treating the problem, and instead address the root causes.

“Change will not come overnight. It has to be fundamental, and that may take generations. The governments must give greater priority to education and social programs.”

Craig Kielburger, Founder of Free the Children

*Source:* Free the Children: A Young Man’s Personal Crusade Against Child Labor
When considering ideas, delegates should take into account the situation of the nations who need to make the most progress in education. Also, UNICEF has limits in terms of what it can and cannot do. As delegates, you have flexibility in suggesting solutions to the committee for increasing access to primary education and you are encouraged to look at problems and issues not discussed in this background guide.

Questions to Consider:

When researching your country’s policy, keep the following questions in mind to better understand your country’s position and possible solutions on the topic:

1. How many children are not able to access primary education in your country?
2. What is the ratio of boy-to-girl enrollment in primary education in your country?
3. What do you see as your country’s biggest barrier in dealing with access to primary education?
4. Are there any programs in your country that have helped children access primary education?
5. How can these national programs be adapted to the international community?
6. What non-traditional means can be used to expand access to education?
RESEARCH AID

Perhaps the solution to access to primary education does not rest solely on one ninja, but here is a quick and fun video to help motivate you on your research!

- **MDG: Achieve Primary Education:** [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xXtvv-FxsMk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xXtvv-FxsMk)

Here is a more serious video on the achieving universal primary education. It touches on many of the topics you have already read about in this background guide.

- **United Nations Millennium Campaign Goal 2: Universal Education:** [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hNBvtM1hmzQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hNBvtM1hmzQ)

This is the official website of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals.


This website by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization is one of the many UN websites where you can find an overview of primary education.


The World Factbook by the United States Central Intelligence Agency will provide you will basic information about your country and hundreds of other countries around the world.


Similar to the CIA World Factbook, the British Broadcasting Company Country Profiles will also give you a historical, political, and economic background on your country and other UN member states:

- **BBC Country Profiles:** [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/country_profiles/default.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/country_profiles/default.stm)
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