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Fourth International Conference on Poverty Reduction and Child Development and ARNEC's 2015 Asia-Pacific Regional ECD Conference

Transformative Power of ECD for Equitable Development

Beijing, China

22 October 2015

Investing in Education Drives Economic and Social Development

I want to express my deep appreciation to the Government of the People's Republic of China for hosting this important conference, and to the China Development Research Foundation, the Asia Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC) and to Secretary General Lu Mai for organizing these timely and significant discussions.

I am very pleased to have the opportunity to return to Beijing. I last visited as Prime Minister, in April 2013. At that time, I had the privilege of signing historic agreements with China's leaders that established a new architecture of annual bilateral high-level meetings between our two governments - a level of engagement that China has entered into with only a very few countries.

In December 2012, I had the honor, as Prime Minister, to welcome Madam Liu Yandong who has played such a significant role at this conference, to the Great Hall of Parliament House in Canberra. With Madam Liu's distinguished delegation and Australian guests, we celebrated 40 years of diplomatic relations between our two countries.

These important events during my Prime Ministership reflected my view that China plays an essential role on the world stage and in this region, and that China's

achievements can be a vital demonstration to the world of what can be done as nations journey from poverty to prosperity.

Consequently, as Chair of the Global Partnership for Education, I am delighted to be here with you today to bear witness to China's remarkable education achievements. This conference signifies to China's friends across the world what can be achieved when a country invests in education.

And the world is hungry for this information, for insights on achieving equity and excellence in education. A few short weeks ago in New York City I had the honor of being present at the United Nations for the adoption of the new Global Goals for Sustainable Development. I believe a new era beckons us, one in which, with China's help, the world addresses the interconnected challenges of sustainable development. An era that can only be reached by working together. An era in which we live together in peace and security, on a planet we nurture. An era in which we realize opportunity for all.

It is a grand vision of our shared future. But we now all understand that we cannot get there without ensuring there is universal access to quality education, and especially quality early childhood education. This global consensus around the pivotal role of education has built step by step.

The global community emphasized that education is the highest development priority in multiple My World Surveys.

World education leaders first lifted ambition in May in the Incheon Declaration of the World Education Forum, a meeting that is held only once every fifteen years.

The Government of Norway then created a high level International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunities to set out the definitive business case for financing education and to help unlock the financial resources needed – from

governments, business, philanthropists, and through innovative financial tools and mechanisms – to help ensure that we will have the resources to do the job.

The 3rd Financing for Sustainable Development Conference in Addis Ababa, captured these sentiments when it declared:

"We will scale up investments and international cooperation to allow all children to complete free, equitable, inclusive and quality early childhood, primary and secondary education, including through scaling up and strengthening initiatives, such as the Global Partnership for Education."

But while all these global processes are important, no one captured the need for education more clearly than First Lady Peng Liyuan in her eloquent speech in New York on the importance of education in her own life. She spoke with feeling about her father's opening of a night school to help improve literacy for poor Chinese, to her own efforts to advocate for education for women and girls.

These words she spoke struck me in particular:

"After generations of hard work, China has come a long way in education. I myself am a beneficiary of that progress."

And "As my father's daughter, I know what education means to the people, especially those without it."

While the First Lady and I have lived very different lives, I too could have uttered those words. As my father's daughter - he was a man named John, who was born in a coal mining village in South Wales and denied a full school education - I too know what education means.

So, with the First Lady's moving words in mind, I am sure we are all delighted that the world has now endorsed a new global goal for education. We have raised our level of ambition and said every child should have access to at least one year of pre-primary education, followed by primary school and secondary school. Indeed, we have gone further and said access - simply sitting in a school room is not enough. Rather education must be of high quality, enabling children to learn.

Now we have made this promise to the children of the world, it is our shared responsibility to fulfil it.

China's strong engagement will be vital to achieving our new, ambitious - indeed audacious - global education goal.

China has made significant pledges of support for development in recent times. China has advanced a major new fund of some $2 billion to promote South-South cooperation. China's recent commitments on climate change are substantial and progressive. The new Asia Infrastructure Development Bank as well as the new BRICS Development Bank will help lift our region's economic growth.

These efforts are so very welcome, and the good news is we know that improving access to and the quality of education is possible. In the 15 years that the Millennium Development Goals have galvanized the world we have seen the number of children not in primary school decline by 40 percent to 59 million. The number of children not enrolled in primary or lower secondary also dropped by almost 40 percent to 124 million.

But achieving the new Global Goal for education will present a greater challenge and require more from all of us.

Business as usual will not be enough.

I am attending this conference as the Chair of the Board of Directors of the Global Partnership for Education and our mission, put simply is to achieve the new global goal for education by mobilizing the best efforts of all. The Global Partnership is the only multilateral organization solely dedicated to ensuring that all children in the poorest countries have access to a quality education. Our partnership includes donor governments, 60 developing countries, civil society, including teachers, and private foundations.

The Global Partnership is dedicated to the critical work of strengthening education systems through a country-led development model. It is a genuine partnership that works at a country and global level to enable schooling to be properly and inclusively planned and implemented. The Global Partnership mobilizes resources to fund education in the poorest nations on earth and fully half of our funding in 2014 and 2015 supports education in fragile and conflict- affected countries. We strive constantly to make the entirety of the partnership more than the sum of its parts; to leverage knowledge exchange, advocacy, exchange and south-south cooperation, and mutual accountability.

At the Global Partnership for Education, we are determined to maximize the resources going to the education of the poorest children and the impact of those resources.

Our aim has always been to unlock the power of a genuine partnership, to build on the wealth of expertise and experience of our members, including UN agencies like UNICEF and UNESCO, as well as new partners like the China Development Research Foundation.

Now we are increasingly enabling developing nations to learning from each other about what works as they strive to strengthen education results.

Since 2002, the Global Partnership has allocated $US 4.3 billion to support education in developing country partners and programs. Today we are the fourth largest international funder of basic education in low and lower-middle income countries.

We should all be pleased with this progress but be determined to make further change.

Even with all this work, the reality is education is shockingly under-financed by an estimated $39 billion per year according to UNESCO's Global Monitoring Report. Note that this is the gap in external financing assuming that developing countries will continue to increase their education spending.

In the years immediately following the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals, the world came together and recognized the health goals could not be achieved without a step change in financing and ways of working. Out of this global mobilization came the vaccines alliance (known as GAVI) and the Global Fund for Aids, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

I genuinely believe that if we jointly commit to it on the basis of the new Global Goal for education we can see a similar effort for global mobilization around education.

And such a mobilization is as desperately needed as it was in health care because we know - China given its own journey especially knows - that without education, there is no progress, no growth, no jobs, no development, and no prosperity.

Without education, people more often live shorter lives, and they live in poverty. Their horizons are smaller, their isolation bigger, their hopes are irrevocably diminished.

And of course, as I mentioned previously, investment in a child's education starts early, and has demonstrable impacts on a number of development outcomes.

Before turning to the larger picture, let me give you some more down-to-earth examples of the global challenge we face – and the benefits investment in early childhood care and education brings

40 percent of children in the developing world live in extreme poverty and 10.5 million children under five die from preventable diseases each year. The worldwide increased participation in pre-primary education is encouraging but is still limited and unequal in developing countries, especially for the most disadvantaged children. Sub-Saharan Africa and Arab states showed the lowest gross enrolment ratios- 18 percent and 21 percent respectively in 2009. In some countries, children from privileged backgrounds are four times more likely to receive pre-primary education than poor children. A significant challenge for improving access and quality of early childhood education is reaching the poorest populations, especially in rural areas, through effective and targeted interventions.

But we know that investing in quality Early Childhood Care and Education can improve children's well-being and close the education and poverty gap. Early childhood education helps children develop their potential and promotes their social, emotional, physical and cognitive development. Young children, especially the poorest and most disadvantaged, who benefit from early childhood education are more likely to be healthy, ready to learn, and stay longer and perform better in school.

Additionally, I cannot emphasize enough the critical importance of educating girls. China has a highly successful and commendable record on the education of girls and the opportunities for women. China knows what is so evident: that educating girls is essential to successfully building your nation and ensuring it is prosperous in the future. Educating girls is essential to a healthier country, and healthier children. Educating girls means that girls have more chances to succeed and contribute to society.

China understands that investing in early childhood education is a driver of economic and societal development.

In 2010 China dramatically expanded access to early childhood education and saw rapid increases in enrolment.

In December 2014, the State Council released a plan focused on improving early childhood education particularly in rural areas, encouraging national, provincial and local governments to continuously innovate and apply data to inform policy decisions, in an effort to reach 40 million children by 2020.

China's success is as an example to other countries as they consider prioritizing smart investments.

I believe the Global Partnership has much to learn from China's experience and commitment to education. And I believe we at the Global Partnership have much to share about our programs and operations.

Indeed, in Mongolia, a $10 million grant from the Global Partnership for Education co-finances an education project with the aim of reducing social inequality by providing access to early childhood education for children in

disadvantaged communities. The project focuses on the construction of kindergartens, and providing alternative pre-schools, including mobile kindergartens, in rural areas with large populations of children of nomadic herders. These mobile kindergartens are less expensive and easier to construct and maintain than regular schools and "travel" each summer to follow the children of nomadic herder families, providing access to over 3,700 children.

This is just one example of how creativity and innovation can help us to increase opportunities for children.

China has substantial investments to assist development in Africa and Asia. So does the Global Partnership for Education. And just to give you a couple of examples:

At the Global Partnership, we have invested $80.6 million in sector-specific interventions supporting early childhood education. Across partner countries, enrolment in pre-primary school has increased.

In countries such as Moldova, and Kyrgyzstan, the Global Partnership provides funding to expand quality and sustainable early childhood care and education programs, which target the poorest. These funds help train educators, develop pedagogical materials and alternative and cost-effective models of early childhood education.

In Tonga and Papua New Guinea, as well as across a number of Pacific Islands, the Global Partnership is supporting a program that addresses the gaps in literacy preparedness among children ages three to seven in low-literacy, low-resource contexts with special consideration for the multicultural and multi-linguistic context of the countries.

These are just a couple of examples of the work the Global Partnership is doing to make a real and tangible impact on children's' lives. We are restless to do more. To always aim to do better with every dollar and to advocate for more global ambition and resources.

In a room like this, full of people passionate about education, I am personally focused on extending our partnership and joining forces so we can do so much more for the children of the world.

Now the world's political leaders have pledged that by the end of 2030 we would ensure "inclusive and equitable quality education and the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all." There is momentum for change: let's not let it slip.

The challenge for education globally, including for early childhood education is huge, there is no denying it. But the opportunities are immense too. If we get this right in 2015 and beyond, the world our young people will inherit, and the generations that come after them, will be much fairer, more equitable and prosperous.

I look forward to working with you in pursuit of this grand cause of education for all, about which China knows so much and cares so passionately.