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Education – Sustainable Development for 2015 and Beyond

Introduction

Thank you Peter Van Rompaey, for your kind and generous introduction.

Mr. Rudischhauser, Mr. Dedeurwaerdere, leadership, faculty and students of Vrije Universiteit; Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honored and delighted to be part of this prestigious lecture series and to follow in the footsteps of esteemed friends and colleagues. I thank our hosts and the University for your warm welcome.

Ryszard Kapuscinski to whom this lecture series is dedicated was a keen observer and chronicler of his times. He traveled the world for much of his life giving voice to the voiceless and keeping witness against any autocracy. He reported numerous revolutions and national liberation struggles and he knew from his own experience what it means to be oppressed.

He knew Africa – a continent I will discuss at some length today. Kapuscinski once said: "Africa means thousands of situations; diverse, different, contradictory, opposed situations." These words still hold. There is no easy fix for any of the challenges that Africa still faces today, and Africa’s ongoing education crisis is no exception.

But Kapuscinski knew the world too – and he reminded us that “we cannot understand our problems if we don’t think of them at a global, planetary scale.” I’ll talk about the
transformative power of education today, but this point, the powerful possibilities of working together, in partnership at a global scale – is really what my lecture is about.

And what better place to give it than in this great institution of learning and exploration. There could be no better place to gather and to remind ourselves of the value of something that at some stages in our lives we may well have taken for granted. So many of us present in a place like this, on an occasion like this afternoon have lived with the expectation and reality:

- that we would be educated;
- and that education would be the essential engine driving our own personal development.

As citizens in our advanced societies, this understanding that the ordinary course of life will bring access to school and, for many, higher levels of education, is so commonplace and universal it seems almost quaint to say it out loud.

As individuals present in this room, it is an obvious, yet profound truism that were it not for education, none of us would likely be here today, let alone excelling in multiple endeavors beyond it.

In many parts of the world, however, there live an alarming number of children – tens of millions, in fact – for whom education is not a given, not an expectation.

For these children, access to even the most basic schooling is simply not a part of reality – never mind secondary school or a university education.

There is no opportunity to develop their full intellectual potential, to use learning as a stepping stone out of poverty for themselves, their families and communities.

Not only are their hopes of a better future denied; for too many education is something which is not even in their dreams, getting to go to school is simply beyond imagination.
So today I will talk to you about these children and their education. Education as a right – not a privilege. Education – quality education – for all, not just a few.

Education for girls – as well as for boys. Education for the poorest, the most marginalized, the most at risk.

Education as a transforming tool for every nation’s society, and for our world – because as minds develop and grow, opportunities arise, horizons expand, and lives change for the better.

We are having the conversation in a very fitting place, and at a very fitting time. This year –2015 – is a pivotal moment for global development overall and the education sector in particular.

This year the Millennium Development Goals, which have guided the global development agenda for 15 years, will expire – and the member states of the United Nations will adopt a new sustainable development agenda to be the blueprint for global efforts for another 15 years.

That blueprint will contain crucial goals for education which build on the Education for All goals, which the international community adopted 25 years ago and which remain the touchstone and the inspiration for all the education sector’s efforts today.

The new sustainable development agenda, which leaders will unveil at the United Nations in September, will include a wide range of goals and targets for poverty reduction, nutrition, health, gender equality, climate change – and, yes, education.

The true life and power of that agenda will be the political support and financial resources it receives. Achieving the best future for all in the world we share – not just improving the lives of people in the developing world – relies on our ability to share knowledge, skills, learning, capacity, and empowerment.
Consider these startling but simple facts:

- In Pakistan, working women with good literacy skills earn 95% more than those with weak skills.

- In Nigeria, if all women completed secondary school, the under-5 child mortality rate would drop by 43%.

- In Africa, educated people are 1.5 times more likely to support democracy than those with no education.

- In Arab States, tolerance towards different religions increases by 14% with a secondary education.

In countries that nurture education, living standards are higher, disease is lower, life expectancy is longer, families have more income, women have more choices, children are better nourished, governments have more revenue, and successive generations do better.

In my own home region of the Asia Pacific region, heavy investment in education helped transform nations like the Republic of Korea, Singapore and more recently China from impoverished, developing nations only a couple of generations ago into the powerhouses of industry and progress today.

Education can also be part of the process of social transformation which creates more ‘gender-just’ societies. Education can empower women to overcome forms of gender discrimination and make more informed choices about their lives. Such empowerment benefits their own lives, but also lifts the living conditions of their children and ultimately strengthens their society.

We know, for example, that women with higher levels of education are less likely to get married early or have children at an early age\(^2\). We know, too, as women’s education levels rise fertility rates decline\(^3\).


And as women climb the education ladder, preventable child deaths drop dramatically.⁴

So I come before you as an emissary of education and its power to transform and improve our world and human kind with that simple message: education matters.

I come to you as the Chair of the Board of the Global Partnership for Education -- the only multilateral organization solely devoted to getting all children into school for a good quality education -- and as a former national leader, who put education at the core of what I sought to achieve for my nation. So I come with the simple plea: join in together, together do more.

Never doubt the possibilities of co-operation between people and nations.

On May 8th, we will be marking the day 70 years ago when freedom triumphed over fascism – when so much of the world was brought out of the abyss of totalitarianism.

So much blood soaked into European battle fields in what was thought to be the war to end all wars, World War I – and then again in World War II. My own nation’s finest fought here and many died, far from home but never far from memory.

Yet a day did dawn when hope was restored, as the nightmare of Nazism and the Holocaust finally ended, and the world – and particularly this continent of Europe – could begin to turn to a better future.

Of course the Iron Curtain and the Cold War were still to come. But so, too, was something remarkable. Patiently, painstakingly, people of good will created a union of former combatants: the European Union.

At its heart, the European Union is an enterprise dedicated to making and sustaining peace – peace among its members, across its borders and around the world. Next to the United Nations, it is one of the greatest peace and co-operation projects ever conceived and executed in the history of humankind.
And given all the forces of chaos and conflict that swirl around us, that mission is as urgent and essential to all of us today as it was when the Europe emerged from war six decades ago.

Education has always been at the heart of the new European vision. The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union enshrines the right to education in Article 14:

1. Everyone has the right to education and to have access to vocational and continuing training.
2. This right includes the possibility to receive free compulsory education.
3. The freedom to found educational establishments with due respect for democratic principles and the right of parents to ensure the education and teaching of their children in conformity with their religious, philosophical and pedagogical convictions shall be respected, in accordance with the national laws governing the exercise of such freedom and right.

To its credit, the European Union did not merely enunciate those noble words; it also acted on them through a wide range of meaningful deeds.

I am especially conscious of those deeds, as today the European Union is the largest single contributor to the Global Partnership for Education. Here in Brussels last June, the Global Partnership at our pledging conference, in collaboration with the EU, raised more than $2.1 billion from donor countries for our next funding cycle. It was at this conference that the EU pledged 375 million euro and became our single largest donor.

With the support of the European Union and many others, the Global Partnership I lead brings resources to developing countries to strengthen their education systems and increase their capacity to deliver a quality basic education to their children.
The European Union, in other words, is a bedrock of the Global Partnership for Education. So I cannot leave this podium unless I say thank you to the EU, on behalf of the Global Partnership and the children we serve. Thank you for being part of our journey to make quality education available for all children wherever and whoever they are.

**Education progress and challenges:**

As we take this journey together, it is heartening to know that change is possible. Indeed, since the Millennium Development Goals were adopted 15 years ago the world has made real progress in education.

Governments have combined political will with concrete action to get more girls and boys into school and provide them with a quality education. Indeed, since 2000, the number of children not in school has dropped by more than 40 million.

We can see the changes within many countries:

In Rwanda, a GPE partner country – where I have just spent the last week – the benefits of investing in education are real and the results are tangible.

- The number of out-of-school primary aged children there dropped dramatically from 15 percent in 2002 to 1.3 percent in 2012;
- Primary school net enrolment rates increased from 85 percent in 2002 to 99 percent in 2012;
- The introduction of a nine-year basic education cycle and the elimination of fees for lower secondary school in 2006 boosted the number of lower secondary students by 25% within a year\(^5\);
- The government is now working towards 12 years of free education for all.

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\(^5\) UNESCO Institute for Statistics
Afghanistan is another country that has made dramatic progress, especially since it joined the Global Partnership in 2011.

- The Global Partnership helped Afghanistan develop an interim education sector plan that has focused on getting more children into school, including girls, and training female teachers.

- Today, 42% of all enrolled students in Afghanistan are girls, and 42% of all teachers are female – a revolutionary change from the time when the country was under Taliban control.

The Global Partnership for Education was created to achieve results just like these.

Since 2002, the Global Partnership has allocated $US 4.3 billion to developing country partners and programs. And since 2009 we have become the largest international funder of education in countries affected by conflict. We have demonstrated a capacity to deliver rapid and flexible funding when our partners experience crises and emergencies. Working closely with our partners, we are now going to look again at whether this capability needs to be further strengthened given the rising numbers of children living in conflict without access to any education at all.

The Global Partnership for Education is so much more than a global fund. It is a unique partnership model that has been praised by the United Nations as the development model of the future. Both around our board table and within our sixty developing country partners, the Global Partnership brings together donors, governments, teachers, civil society, the private sector and multilateral organizations in a practical expression of partnership.
That partnership makes this a genuine joint endeavor to finance education for all. At the pledging conference of the Global Partnership last June, developing countries pledged to increase their education budgets by a collective US$26 billion.

As these countries become increasingly invested in their education systems, we are likely to see better results and long-term self-sufficiency, which is the ultimate goal. In addition, for the first time ever, private philanthropy contributed directly to the Global Partnership for Education.

Our partnership also means shared know-how, with technical expertise locking together with the financing. Increasingly that know-how is being shared between our developing country partners, a real exchange of learning between peers rather than the more usual or expected flow of technical capacity from the global north to the global south.

Mutual accountability is at the core of our approach. This is why our whole partnership has endorsed a new results-based funding model where up to 30 percent of funds will only be paid if countries show tangible education results.

Finally, our partnership is dedicated to doing the hard, patient work necessary to build and support sound, comprehensive education systems.

School construction, teacher training, developing new curriculum or delivering information technology are all important tools to improve education systems. But it makes little sense to roll out any one of these in isolation. Without an overarching plan, individual projects may well only have a localized or time limited impact. Even worse, effort and precious resources may be wasted.

Like our own nations, developing countries need approaches that are sustainable, support the overall system and fit all the various inputs together into a coherent strategy that will provide children with the ability to learn over eight, ten or twelve years. Helping build that integrated, effective, long-term system is the mission of the
Global Partnership for Education. Realizing that mission requires us to be united in effort and united in advocacy for the future.

You know this matters and we’ve shown we can make a difference. We must get children into school and we can. So today I want to go further and raise with you four challenges to getting that done which require our shared thinking and advocacy efforts.

I think of these four challenges as represented by four overlapping circles: one labeled ‘poverty’, one ‘conflict’, one ‘fragility’, one ‘emergency’. Within the circumferences of these four circles are the **58 million** children of primary school age in our world who do not go to school.

While in today’s world there are still millions of poor, marginalized children out of school in nations with functioning governments, 28.5 million children worldwide are out of school because they are not only poor but they live in conflict-affected nations, fragile nations, situations of emergency – or more than one of these.

The second challenge of armed conflict affected thirty-five countries between 1999 and 2008, and almost half of those countries were in sub-Saharan Africa.

There are out-of-school children in many parts of the world, but today more than half live in sub-Saharan Africa. Girls in sub-Saharan Africa account for the majority of this group and face the greatest risk of exclusion⁶.

The third challenge of governmental fragility is disproportionately present in Africa as well.

And fragile countries deal less well with the fourth challenge of emergency – so that often natural disaster or disease become educational emergencies in turn.

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⁶ EFA GMR, UNESCO
The current humanitarian crises in the Central African Republic, South Sudan and other countries have resulted in even more schools shut, populations displaced and widespread destruction or severe damage to the education infrastructure.

Ebola’s outbreak has closed schools in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, denying education to some five million girls and boys. This lost learning time is almost impossible to recover. Many children may never return to school.

While schools in Guinea have re-opened and Sierra Leone and Liberia have announced their re-opening, this tragic disease crisis threatens years of educational progress in West Africa where literacy rates are already low and school systems are only now recovering from years of civil war.

The challenge of giving children access to school is a dynamic one as every year a new cohort of children becomes of school age. Once again, our focus goes to Sub-Saharan Africa where, according to UNESCO, the school-age population is growing faster than in any other region – up 35 percent since 2000.

While educational emergencies are compounded by underlying poverty, fragility or conflict, natural emergency or the outbreak of disease, some situations can challenge our traditional thinking about capacity and development.

Think of a middle income country like Lebanon that has become home to large numbers of fleeing Syrian children, who before the outbreak of conflict used to go to school. Some report that education standards in Lebanon are now at risk of serious deterioration. This is despite the efforts of local authorities to run several shifts to accommodate the influx of new students.

These are difficult challenges in isolation and ones which interact with each other in tremendously complex ways. So across the entire global community there is much thinking to be done in this vital year of international deliberation and goal setting: on
how we enable the delivery of education in emergency response, for displaced children, in the face of conflict, including when education is targeted for attack.

Already 50 percent of the funding of the Global Partnership for Education goes to fragile and or conflict-affected countries so we have experiences to share but also our own thinking to do and contribute. Ensuring that children’s learning is not interrupted will require a rapid and coordinated funding response during emergencies.

But education receives relatively scant financing through humanitarian appeals. In 2012, only 1.4 percent of global humanitarian funding was allocated to education, down from 2.4 percent in 2011.

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7 Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2013.
Tragically, education also lags in development funding. Aid to education has declined by almost 10 percent since 2010 – while over the same period overall development assistance worldwide has fallen by just 1.3 percent\(^9\).

The simple fact is that we have to devote far more resources to overcome the strain emergencies, fragility and conflict put on education. We also need to do more through global development funding to get children into school and learning.

The sharp decline in global aid to education must be reversed. We must push for the political will to re-prioritize education aid.

While ensuring access to school is challenging, ensuring learning happens at school is even harder. In truth our world faces a **learning quality crisis**.

**250 million** children are unable to read or perform basic calculations even though they may have had four years of schooling.

We must ensure that children can spend their childhood safe and nourished inside the classroom. But we must also ensure that they are getting the skills, knowledge and experience to thrive in life.

In other words, it’s not enough just to get children in school. We must be sure they learn and achieve while they are there.

To get this right requires us to answer some complex questions. How do we define quality? How do we systematically measure it? How do we use that information to feed back to policy makers, teachers and communities so learning can be improved?

In our communities, in the developed world, these questions still perplex policy makers. It is therefore unsurprising that they should be found challenging in developing countries.

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\(^9\) OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC)
Last week in Rwanda, I chaired a global education meeting focused precisely on these questions. Progress is being made, hard fought for and hard won but it is happening.

In doing this work, let’s understand the difference between the education sector and the health sector. To be sure, education is the vaccine against ignorance and radical fundamentalism. Education is the best vaccine against Boko Haram and the Islamic State, which are committed to eradicating real learning.

But education, unlike medicine, is not delivered in a vial. It is not administered in one dose on one day in a tent in a field. It is not a vaccine whose chemical formula remains the same, year in and year out.

Education is not a global standard good, it is a locally delivered service. Education is a complex and elastic process of learning over many years.

This should be obvious. But sometimes confusing comparisons do get made. Yet looking to our own societies the difference is clear. Many years ago our nations solved the challenge of vaccinating our children but we are all still working to ensure that every child is learning.

My own observation is that among the reasons education struggles for aid dollars is that educating a child is not quick, while even for many patient donors it can’t be sufficiently measured.

I am convinced that if we can keep making progress on measuring quality and equity we will not only improve children’s learning but we will unlock more money for education.

Before I finish, I want to reinforce a point I made earlier: 2015 is a year of decision.

To me, the agenda for this year is clear. The status quo is unacceptable. We need to raise our level of ambition and rapidly accelerate progress towards achieving our goals.
First, we must get the Sustainable Development Goals right. There is a message here for global leaders as they meet in New York to determine the Sustainable Development Goals. To galvanize education efforts we need goals that lift ambition on access and learning.

- Access to school is not enough. Quality education is the goal. And equity, so we reach all children, including the most marginalized.

- Primary school is not enough. We have to help children move beyond primary to lower secondary school

And in defining these goals, ensure they are measurable so we can show the progress towards achieving them.

Second, give us financing that matches the goals.

- We have to reverse the trend we’ve seen in recent years of declining international support for education systems in developing countries.

Third, we must address the humanitarian challenge to education, to ensure education does not stop, even when there are ravages of conflict, broken governance and disease. Gordon Brown, the UN Special Envoy for Education is to be commended for having done so much to raise world awareness of this educational tragedy. The Global Partnership stands ready to work with him and others of good will to do better for these children

Fourth, let’s spend our time on the debates we need to have and not be sidetracked by those we don’t.
- It is so easy, just when we are on the cusp of a breakthrough era, to revert to a discussion of institutions and process – essentially taking us back to square one and losing valuable time and energy to tackle the urgent needs at hand.

- The architecture to address the challenges we face is in place and we know it can work. What the world requires is a recommitment of resources and intensive work where the needs are greatest.

2015 - **A big year beckons.** In the coming months the world has an opportunity to commit to quality education for every child, at the major gatherings being held in Korea, and Germany, and Norway and Ethiopia. Let this pathway to the meeting of national leaders in New York in September be one that brings all the world’s children along.

My challenge to everyone, young and old, developing and developed countries: press your political leaders to invest in a better life for the hundreds of millions of children who today lack a quality education. Our shared future depends on it.

Thank you.