

REMARKS BY FORMER PRESIDENT F W DE KLERK TO

THE KIDSRIGHTS CONFERENCE ON THE MILLENNIUM

DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND CHILDREN,

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THE IMPACT OF EDUCATION ON THE ACHIEVEMENT

OF THE MDGs FOR CHILDREN

Several of the Millennium Development Goals have a direct impact on the well-being of children. However, two are of special significance: the need to combat AIDS and the need to ensure universal primary education.

South Africa's continuing high HIV rate of almost 20% remains one of the greatest challenges in achieving several of the key MDGs - most obviously those that affect mortality rates of infants and of children below the age of five. Primarily because of AIDS, South Africa does not fare nearly as well as it should in these areas. Our infant mortality rate of 55 per 1000 is still about half of that of the rest of Africa - but far higher than the rate in other middle income countries.

I would, however, like to deal primarily with the importance of education for the attainment of several of the main MDGs.

The achievement of universal primary education is, indeed, one of the key goals. However, education will also play a pivotal role in helping children to attain several other Millennium Development Goals.

- Education is the key to escaping from poverty.
- It is an essential element in the fight against AIDS and other diseases.
- Education will greatly contribute to children's awareness of gender equality - firstly by informing female children of their rights and

secondly by breaking down male-dominant traditions.

The question then is: how are we doing with the achievement of this basic goal in South Africa?

In fact, we have virtually achieved two of the millennium goals relating to education. According to our Department of Basic Education 98% of primary school age children were enrolled at primary school in 2008. There was also virtually no gender disparity in enrolment - and where it did occur, it generally favored girls.

However, mere attendance is not enough. It is also imperative that children at primary school should receive quality education and that they should be able to meet certain basic standards at the end of their primary school careers. South Africa is not faring so well in this regard. Despite the enormous national resources that we have committed to education - representing more than 5% of GDP and 22% of the national budget - we are simply not getting value for our investment.

South African primary school children consistently perform badly in comparison with children from even the poorest countries in Africa.

Equally poor results at high school are contributing to a serious education crisis. Of the 1.67 million children who entered the education system in 1995 only 368 000 passed matric in 2007 - and a mere 85 000 passed with university exemption. More than a million children from each age cohort since then have been leaving school without matric.

Poor education is, in turn, one of the main factors in unacceptably high youth unemployment rates. 72% of South Africa's 4.3 million 'officially' unemployed people are below the age of 35. New entrants to the labour market - primarily young people leaving school and

university - comprise 41% of those who are officially unemployed. Youth unemployment contributes in turn to the difficulty of achieving other Millennium Development Goals, including the eradication of extreme poverty.

What are the causes of the education crisis?

Certainly, they do not include any lack of willingness on the part of the government to deliver quality education. I would hazard to identify the following problems:

- The first is the adoption of an inappropriate education model: When the ANC came to power in

1994 it idealistically wanted to introduce the very best education model possible. As a result, it decided to implement 'Outcomes Based Education' which looked excellent in theory but proved to be entirely unsuitable for most South African schools. Outcomes-Based Education might possibly function effectively in advanced first-world societies, but has proved to be completely inappropriate for most South African communities, where there is a requirement for sound basic education. Fortunately, the Zuma administration has come to grips with this problem, and announced significant changes to the model earlier this week.

- The second problem was that, in its haste to reform or discard the old education system, the government also dismantled some valuable institutions like teachers training colleges and the old apprenticeship system. As a result, we have not been producing enough properly trained primary school teachers - and most of our artisans are now over the age of 50.

- Another problem arose from the insistence of teachers trade unions that the government should abolish the old system of school inspectors. As a result, standards declined and teacher discipline became lax or non-existent to the extent that

teachers could often not be found at their posts.

Once again the Zuma administration is coming to grips with the problem and is insisting that teachers should perform effectively.

- The nine newly created provinces became the main education providers. Some - like the Western Cape and Gauteng - functioned quite well - but others - like the Eastern Cape performed very poorly.
- There was also a massive movement away from mother-tongue education. School governing bodies were, quite rightly, given broad responsibilities for the running of schools and the determination of

language policy. Most schools in black areas chose English as the medium of education at the earliest possible time in the mistaken belief that this would advance their children's education and integration into the modern economy.

They were tragically mistaken. Experience throughout the world has shown conclusively that children should receive education for the first 6 - 7 years in the language that they understand best. This helps them, not only to improve their cognitive skills across the board, but also to learn a second language for use at high school much more effectively. Instead, a large portion of South

Africa's children have been taught in English, a language that they do not understand, by teachers who themselves do not speak the language very effectively. For many children the result has been educationally crippling. Once again, the government has shown that it is aware of the problem and is taking steps to promote mother tongue education.

The future success of South Africa's children - and the country's ability to attain the eight Millennium Development Goals, will be strongly influenced by our ability to deliver good education. After a shaky start

there are promising signs that we are beginning to move in the right direction,

This surely is the great value of the MDGs: They enable us to set clear targets and to measure our performance accordingly. They hold the promise of substantially improving the lives of children - not only here in South Africa - but throughout the world.