

**Statement by Mr. Thomas Stelzer  
Assistant Secretary General for Policy Co-ordination and Inter-Agency Affairs**

**Regional Meeting for Latin America and the Caribbean  
For the 2011 ECOSOC Annual Ministerial Review  
Buenos Aires, Argentina, 12-13 May 2011**

His Excellency Professor Alberto Sileoni, Minister of Education of the Argentine Republic,  
His Excellency Mr. Gonzalo Gutiérrez, Vice President of ECOSOC  
Distinguished ladies and gentlemen

I am delighted to be here and to welcome you warmly to this meeting, on behalf of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA). Through you, Mr Minister, I extend our deepest thanks to the Argentine Government as our gracious hosts and for the excellent arrangements for this meeting.

I wish to thank as well our partners UNESCO, ECLAC and UNICEF for their cooperation in organising this event and bringing the ECOSOC agenda to the region.

Judged by the standards of developing regions elsewhere, the state of basic education in Latin America and the Caribbean is exemplary.

Net enrolment in primary education, at 94 percent in 2008, is well above the developing world average. Nine countries have already, or are close to meeting the elusive Education for All targets; sixteen are within striking distance.

On other measures, such as pre-school enrolment, child mortality and gender parity, regional progress looks stellar.

Yet there is more to this story than first meets the eye.

Between 1999 and 2008, primary enrolment in the Caribbean actually fell, while progress in the rest of the region slowed. And dropouts continue to pose a problem: overall, 16 percent of children fail to finish primary school.

Poor quality is another concern. On exams like the OECD's PISA review, which tests 16-year-olds on reading, math and science, Latin American students frequently underperform their foreign peers, even those at comparable income levels.

What can governments do?

A global perspective might help. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon recently discussed some of the key emerging challenges facing education reform in a highly instructive report. Here are several recommendations.

Safeguarding education spending will be critical in the near-term as domestic and aid budgets come under increased pressure. Stable, predictable revenue streams are thus essential.

In many countries, employment has yet to return to its pre-crisis peak. Some 30 million people lost their jobs between 2007 and 2009, while just 8 million have since found new jobs. Structural unemployment has grown, too, with long-term unemployment rolls swelling to record highs in places like the United States.

Likewise, soaring youth unemployment — currently an estimated 81 million worldwide — suggests a widening skills mismatch between graduates and employers. Making students 'workforce ready' must therefore become a higher priority. Policymakers can speed up the process by promoting the spread of cost-effective information and communication technologies to boost learning productivity.

Resurging high food prices remind us of the vulnerability of the poorest households, where a poor harvest or swing in exchange rates can spell starvation. During such a period, the threat of political instability rises as well. Witness the food riots of 2008 in places as distant as Haiti, Bangladesh and Egypt.

How to cope? Measures such as conditional cash transfers, school meals and reprioritizing primary education all have good track records — as ways to both strengthen social safety nets and improve education results.

The Secretary-General's report also rightly urges greater attention be paid to sustainable development education — to promote peace and protect the environment.

Meanwhile, coping with climate change and other environmental threats will require developing more sustainable consumption and living habits. This must start in school.

Many of the recommendations just mentioned will require more spending — one-half of the equation to better education results.

The second-half of the equation demands that we do far more with the resources we already have. High time, then, for better incentives, more accountability, an openness to new ideas and the courage to tackle vested interests perpetuating the status quo.

As the United Nations prepares for its Annual Ministerial Review in July, the next two days offer a fine opportunity to discuss what has worked in the region, what has not and how best to advance from talk to action.

Again, on behalf of UNDESA and ECOSOC, welcome.

I thank you.