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Keynote Address by  
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on the occasion of the International Conference on Secondary Education for a  
Better Future: Trends, Challenges and Priorities

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Mr Yahia-Bin-Saood-Bin Mansoor Al-Salimi, Minister of Education,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished Speakers and Participants,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to begin by saying how honoured I feel to have been invited to give this keynote address today at this important conference. The focus of my address will be the task of re-defining secondary education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and why such change is essential. After outlining certain key challenges, problems and associated changes, I will examine how and why the drive for quality basic education for all (EFA) will have a strong influence upon all aspects, levels and types of education, including secondary education, in the years ahead. I believe that the World Education Forum held in Dakar, Senegal, in April 2000 set an agenda for educational change reaching far into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As I said earlier in my opening statement, it is important to locate national actions and strategies within an international context. Since education cannot be insulated from events and developments happening in the world around us, I shall begin my remarks with reference to the global context at the beginning of this century.

Peace and security are threatened in many parts of the world and many countries are living in situations of crisis and conflict. Civil wars are a key source of human suffering in today's world, where billions of dollars are spent on weapons. Meanwhile, the HIV/AIDS epidemic is a crisis of another kind, affecting millions of people each year, especially young people, and undoing the development efforts of past decades, such as those that created functioning education systems and schools.

Poverty continues to blight our world, and inequalities are widening rather than narrowing. The top 20 per cent of the world's population own 75 per cent of the world's wealth while the bottom 20 per cent owns only 2 per cent. Despite advances in many places, 1.2 billion people live on one dollar a day or less. Poverty, however, is not just a lack of the material resources needed to sustain life. People's experience of poverty also involves processes that undermine their self-esteem, their human worth, and their power to determine the course of their own lives. As the Nobel laureate Professor Amartya Sen has argued, development must be about the growth of human freedom, and poverty is the negation of that freedom. In many parts of the developing world, furthermore, poverty combines with rapid population growth to lead to widespread degradation of renewable resources. Poverty limits the freedom not only of those living today but of future generations too.

According to the *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2002*, an estimated 862 million people are illiterate, two-thirds of whom are women, and 115.4 million children do not go to primary school. Over 70 per cent of these children are girls. There is also a lack of educational opportunities for migrants and refugees, displaced persons, street children, and various categories of disadvantaged youth: young people in indigenous minorities, in rural areas and those with disabilities.

In the meantime, globalization and rapid technological advances are creating knowledge societies. The internet and ICTs constitute some of the most remarkable scientific achievements of recent decades. They open up new possibilities for the right to education and access to information. But possibilities for whom? The internet may seem to be the most obvious symbol of a globalizing world, but only 2.5 per cent of the world has access to it. The digital divide is one aspect of a broader scientific-technological divide that is making the gap between the rich and the poor grow wider.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Education has a key role to play in making our future world a better one. It must help us to address the major challenges we are facing at the dawn of the twenty-first century: to eradicate poverty, to build peace and security, to create equitable knowledge societies, to generate sustainable development, and to protect and promote cultural diversity.

In all these areas, secondary education has an important contribution to make. Situated midway between primary and higher education and parallel to technical and vocational education, secondary education has enormous impact on the critical period of adolescent schooling between 12 and 19 years of age. Adolescents, let us not forget, constitute about one billion individuals in the world, one-sixth of the global population. How they are educated is important for everyone.

I shall now consider three aspects of secondary education which reveal how crucial it is. However, these dimensions may also pull secondary education in different and confusing directions. As a result, the question “What exactly is secondary education for?” may receive no clear answer. Today, if the objectives of primary education, higher education and technical and vocational education are clear, those of secondary education often are not. Is it conceived and planned to prepare for higher education, for the world of work or for life?

The first dimension of secondary education I wish to discuss is the fact that, in many countries, the initial years of secondary-level schooling are part of basic education. Since it is considered as the minimum required for personal and social development, basic education corresponds, in many countries, to the

compulsory part of education that should benefit everyone. For many countries, basic education comprises primary education, with the average duration of six years, and at least the first cycle of secondary education.

The need to extend the length and scope of basic education results from the general increase in levels of education and training, as a consequence of relentless economic change and labour market requirements – especially in terms of the adaptation of knowledge and competencies in the context of technological advance and economic globalization. Thus, the concept of basic education is an evolving one: the more the world changes and the more complex societies become, the more sophisticated are the skills needed for social integration and economic participation. This broadens the scope of basic education learned in primary and secondary schools.

The second aspect of secondary education I would like to emphasise is that it is both a pre-condition of and a bridge towards higher education. This is not to say that secondary education should be designed solely or even mainly in terms of preparing students for tertiary-level studies. After all, a large proportion of secondary school pupils do not proceed to university or other institutions of higher education. But preparation for higher educational studies is certainly one of the key functions of secondary schooling.

The third dimension is the way that secondary education is vital for preparing young people for life – for work and employment; for the responsibilities of citizenship; for active membership of communities and organizations. Adolescence is a crucial age in terms of physical and psychological development, of acquisition of knowledge and behaviours and in making personal and career choices for the future. These choices, furthermore, have a cumulative impact on broader processes of social and economic development. Secondary schooling is the learning environment in which many young people negotiate their passage through adolescence towards early adulthood.

In many countries today, however, secondary education is ill-prepared and ill-equipped to help young people to meet the personal and collective challenges leading to a better future. Often, secondary education is the weakest link in the education system and faces acute problems in terms of access, quality, relevance and equity. Let me now look briefly at these issues in turn.

Globally, of all the sectors of formal schooling, secondary education is the one that is expanding most rapidly today. Nevertheless, a major gap remains between the supply of education within existing secondary education structures, and the demand coming from an increasing number of adolescents who are seeking enrolment in secondary-level education. This increased demand is a

result of the expansion of primary schooling, changing employment patterns and new expectations and attitudes among parents as well as young people themselves.

The mismatch between supply and demand, however, is unevenly distributed. In industrialized countries, almost all those completing primary school gain access to secondary education, while in most developing countries the transition rates to the secondary level are low. Half of sub-Saharan African countries have transition rates from primary to secondary that are below 50 per cent. Large numbers of secondary-school-aged youth in less developed regions are out-of-school: in 2000, there were nearly 60 million in East Asia/Oceania and around 98 million in South Asia, constituting the largest proportion of out-of-school youth of the world total. In many countries, especially in Africa and Asia, girls are more affected than boys by secondary school dropout, although we can see the opposite trend in some developed countries and in Latin America and the Caribbean. Other population groups, such as the economically disadvantaged, ethnic minorities, migrant populations, refugees and the displaced are among those who are most affected by this phenomenon.

With regard to quality, secondary education systems in many countries are rigid in their curricula, organization and teaching/learning practices and, in consequence, are ineffective in terms of the quality of learning and the acquisition of appropriate values, attitudes and skills. In most developing countries, the expansion of secondary education is hampered not only by limited opportunities, caused by insufficient provision, but also by low retention, low quality and poor academic performance. High repetition rates are also linked to low levels of learning achievement. Repetition rates of more than 10 per cent are not uncommon among developing countries. Repetition, often a prelude to dropping out, is a sign of low quality.

The relevance of secondary education, furthermore, may be distorted by an excessive pre-occupation with preparing young people for university-level studies. In practice, large proportions of secondary school youth will never have access to higher education and will have to confront the world of work without the required skills to find and keep a job, without the capabilities to deal with issues such as the HIV/AIDS epidemic, drug abuse and violence, and without any realistic preparation for the responsibilities of parenthood or citizenship.

It should be noted at this point that the question of skills development for entry into the labour market is not simply an issue for technical or vocational secondary education, but also for general education - not least because solid, broad-based knowledge and generic skills, such as the ability to communicate and engage in teamwork, form the basis of all essential work tasks.

Indeed, education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must place greater emphasis on non-cognitive outcomes, including personal initiative or entrepreneurship, life-skills and social competence. Today, good schools are those which act more as social communities than simply as places of academic study. The school should be an environment where social capital is developed, not just intellectual capital. Secondary schools must help young people acquire the skills and capabilities that will enable them to participate in and contribute to society as well as to continue learning throughout their lives. It is imperative that young people, in or out of school, gain access to the technological tools and networks of knowledge-sharing that open the door to participation in knowledge societies.

Meanwhile, the issue of equity is unresolved. World-wide, there remains a great need for increased expansion and a more equitable distribution of opportunities at this level of education. Countries that have significantly expanded secondary education during recent decades have improved their level of human and economic development whereas countries where mass poverty remains entrenched are those with the weakest enrolment rates at secondary level. At the Dakar World Education Forum, it was clearly argued that: “No country can be expected to develop into a modern and open economy without having a certain proportion of its work force completing secondary education”. This had already been highlighted by the International Commission on Education for the Twentieth-first Century (the Delors Commission).

Commitment to universal access to secondary education as an aspiration should be maintained, along with active efforts to remove barriers and obstacles, especially for girls and marginalized groups. Where appropriate, alternative delivery systems, including distance education, should be given further consideration in order to create a more equitable distribution of opportunities..

In light of the issues I have raised, it is clear that secondary education not only must be expanded in response to increasing demand but also must be re-defined, renewed and improved if it is to fulfil its assigned functions of preparing learners in both formal and non-formal settings for higher education, for the world of work and, perhaps most importantly, for responsible citizenship in a changing world. Priority should be given not only to the renovation of contents, methods and structures in secondary education, but also to the improved training of teachers and school leaders so that they can better perform their roles, including the provision of counselling and guidance to meet adolescents’ needs.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me now turn to the implications of the global EFA drive for secondary education. As noted earlier, the achievement of universal primary education

will necessarily increase the demand for secondary education. In the context of EFA, the availability and quality of secondary provision is of paramount importance for at least two reasons:

First, in most developing countries, the development of primary education largely depends on that of secondary education, as regards the training and supply of teachers. Teachers need to complete at least secondary education.

Second, since primary education is often considered as a stepping stone to secondary education, limited opportunities for progression to secondary education may have the effect of reducing demand for primary education.

Out of the six Dakar goals, three goals have direct implications for the development of secondary education: ensuring that all children have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality by 2015 (goal 2); ensuring that the learning needs of young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programmes (goal 3); and eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005 and achieving gender equality in education by 2015 (goal 5).

These three goals imply a massive growth of secondary education in order to absorb primary school completers. Furthermore, they will require considerable adaptation by secondary education institutions in order to accommodate increased numbers of female pupils and ensure their equal treatment. Secondary education systems will also need to provide young people with flexible learning opportunities and life-skills development which traditional academic curricula and approaches tend to ignore.

The effect of EFA on secondary education, therefore, will extend far beyond quantitative expansion and greater access. The drive for EFA will generate changes affecting the quality and relevance of all types and levels of education. After EFA, secondary education in particular cannot remain the same as before. It will be challenged to provide an educational experience at least as good as the improved quality of primary schooling. It will be challenged to generate ways of learning that develop essential life-skills. It will be challenged to improve the quality of education so that young people acquire a common basis of human values and develop a capacity for tolerance and intercultural dialogue. And it will be challenged to employ professional, trained teachers who teach young people more than just academic subjects.

In the perspective of EFA, secondary education must be an integral feature within holistic approaches to educational planning and provision. The Dakar Framework for Action certainly promotes EFA policies in the context of a sector-wide approach. This means that the achievement of EFA is conceived within a sustainable and well-integrated sectoral framework, taking into account

the inter-relations between different levels and types of education. Secondary education is necessarily at the centre of key questions of transition, linkage and articulation within this system-wide frame of reference.

The strong focus on EFA will also affect secondary education through the renewed impetus towards cooperation and networking to reach the EFA goals. This implies the development of more diverse partnerships and collaborations involving national and local government, non-governmental organizations, community groups and the private sector, with support from international and regional organizations where necessary.

With regard to these prospects and developments, it may be noted that UNESCO's Division of Secondary, Technical and Vocational Education is coordinating the work of the Interagency Group on Secondary Education Reform and Youth Affairs, set up in 1999. The Group provides a forum for UN and other international and regional agencies and NGOS on the main issues affecting secondary education reform. During its last meeting, in March 2001, the Group worked on the identification of the main implications of the Dakar Framework for Action for each of the members' work at secondary level.

Currently, nations all over the world are preparing or implementing education reforms. Many are benefiting from UNESCO's assistance and advice available from Headquarters, the education institutes and field offices. Our aim is to provide evidence-based information and examples of innovative best practices in various fields of expertise related to secondary education reform and renewal. We also seek to facilitate policy dialogue. For instance, a few weeks ago, UNESCO organized in Bangkok the 8<sup>th</sup> UNESCO- APEID International Conference on Education, focusing on 'Innovations in Secondary Education: Meeting the Learning Needs of Adolescents and Youth in Asia and the Pacific'. This meeting sought to encourage regional policy dialogue, to share successful innovations in secondary education and to promote regional/international partnership and networking among secondary education systems.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The campaign to ensure the fulfilment of everyone's right to education, in the form of a completed basic education of good quality, is the unfinished educational business of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. That work must go ahead in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. UNESCO and its partners are doing their utmost to galvanize action at national, regional and international levels to attain the Dakar goals by 2015. In addition, we must bear in mind that a major, well-coordinated effort also must be made by national authorities, with the support of international and regional organizations and the active participation of civil society, to meet the long-term objective of universalizing quality secondary education in the perspective of



Education for All. For effective participation in the knowledge societies of the future, what is currently understood as 'basic education' will be a necessary but insufficient condition. It can be anticipated that the changes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will require the expansion, adaptation and improvement of secondary education, for the benefit of all. I am sure that the outcomes of this Conference will be an important milestone in defining effective strategies towards this important goal.

Thank you.