

Safeguarding the Rights of Disadvantaged Groups to Education in China

1. China observed rapid development in the field of education in recent years and has contributed to international and regional progress of Education for All (EFA). The *National Medium and Long Term Education Reform and Development Plan* (hereinafter referred as the Plan) promulgated in 2010 draws a blueprint for China's educational development till 2020, puts strong emphasis on education quality and equity and gives explicit priority to disadvantaged groups.

2. We noticed that in March 2012, the Chinese Premier announced realization of a national goal on universalizing nine-year compulsory education (100% coverage of school-aged children) and eliminating illiteracy (1.08% illiteracy rate among young and middle aged). China has achieved two EFA goals much ahead of the internationally agreed agenda and set a role model for other developing countries, which was highly appraised by international organizations specialized in education, such as UNESCO and UNICEF. Besides, China has also made remarkable progress in other sub-sectors of education: by December 2011, access to pre-school education has been much improved with gross enrolment rate (GER) reaching 62.3%; at senior secondary level, GER has raised up to 84% with vocational education accounting for half of the enrolment; higher education is benefiting more people with GER increased to 26.9%; more efforts were put on establishing a flexible and lifelong learning system through strengthening the capacities of community learning centers in rural areas, community colleges in urban areas and the open university system; government input in education has been increased steadily and reached 4% as of GDP by end of 2012.

3. We believe however that challenges still remain in improving the quality of education for disadvantaged groups such as girls, women and rural-urban migrant workers. With the approaching of another baby boom, inadequate access to and quality of pre-school education has become a concern of the government and families. As a result of imbalanced economic development and decentralization in educational administration, big gaps in school conditions and education quality between rural and urban areas and between the east and the west are observed. Under the background of rapid urbanization, the historical migration of 150 million farmers to cities has brought along challenges in getting their children in school and providing them with good quality education with the existing resident registration system. As a result of limited financial inputs and social awareness, education provision for disabled children is still insufficient and with relatively low quality.

4. It is noticed that the Plan contributes a whole chapter to pre-school education and requires to “prioritize pre-school education in rural areas and increase the coverage of pre-school education in rural areas.....in particular ensure the enrolment of left-behind¹ children.....and provide support for developing pre-school education in impoverished areas”. The Plan sets the goal of increasing the GER of one-year pre-school education from 74% in 2009 to 95% in 2020 and three-year pre-school education from 50.9% in 2009 to 70% in 2020. In order to achieve this goal, the State Council and the Ministry of Education have taken up several measures including: increasing financial inputs for rural and poor areas, from 2011 to 2015, the central treasury will provide 50 billion yuan to support pre-school education in financially difficult areas; encouraging social resources and efforts to jointly increase the scale of pre-school education; developing standards for pre-school education institutions, teachers and curriculum to ensure quality of pre-school education; and providing teacher training for rural kindergartens to improve teacher qualifications.

5. The *3rd Survey on Social Status of Chinese Women* (2011) shows that Chinese women’s average years of schooling have reached 8.8 with an increase of 2.7 years since 2000 and that the gender gap in years of schooling has decreased from 1.5 in 2000 to 0.3 in 2011. Gender equality in primary and lower secondary education have been achieved with balanced gender parity index (GPI). The proportion of women in post-secondary education has increased from 25.7% in 1964 to 49.68% in 2010. According to the *Development Outline of Chinese Women* (2011), the average years of schooling of Chinese women should reach 11.2 by 2020, illiteracy rate of young and middle-aged women should drop below 2%, and gender parity should be reflected in all kinds of curriculum as well as teaching-learning process and outcomes.

6. We observed that at the turn of the century, due to economic, geographical and environmental reasons, compulsory education in rural areas suffered from issues such as low quality, teacher shortage and high dropout. Since 2001, the government started an initiative to exempt textbook fees and miscellaneous fees and provide subsidies for students living in boarding schools. Till 2007, this initiative had been expanded to cover all students from rural families with financial difficulties, which released the heavy financial burdens of rural families and successfully prevented students from dropping-out. Besides, in order to improve conditions and quality of rural education, the central and local governments have increased scale of transfer

¹ Left-behind children refers to rural children whose parent(s) are working as migrant workers outside their hometown in urban areas and who live with their grandparents.

payment targeting impoverished and remote areas and implemented a series of programs, such as “Distance Education Program for Rural Primary and Middle School” that provided 420,000 rural schools with good quality resources through use of ICTs, “Free Prospective Teacher Program” , “Special Post Teacher Program” and “National Teacher Training Program” that helps provide adequate number of qualified teachers for rural areas, “Nutrition Plan for Rural Primary and Middle Schools” that provides 16 billion yuan per year to ensure nutrition and health of rural children.

7. We observed that with the achievements in universalization of nine-year compulsory education and elimination of illiteracy, the rights of ethnic minority children to compulsory education have been duly protected. In view of ethnic minorities’ features in language and culture, governments at different levels have developed relevant policies to respect and protect their rights of using ethnic languages and scripts in education and encourage to inherit and thrive ethnic cultures through education.

8. The number of migrant workers’ children studying in cities is 18 million in China at present. The number of left-behind children at compulsory education stage is 22 million, around 15% of all students of compulsory education. The Plan states that “governments of receiving areas² should be responsible for ensuring the schooling of migrant workers’ children in public schools and should explore mechanisms that allow them to transfer to higher level of education”. The Plan requires to “establish a government-led mechanism participated by all stakeholders to provide care to migrant children and monitor their education provision” and to “build more boarding schools in rural areas for the needs of left-behind children”. Governments at different levels have been taking measures to provide equal treatment to migrant children, eliminate discrimination, exempt additional fees and ensure smooth transfer between different levels of education. Governments and social organizations in sending areas have established care and grant mechanisms to ensure left-behind children’s normal schooling.

9. In China, disabled children receive education in special education schools and/or in regular schools depending on their physical and mental conditions. By end of 2011, there are 1,767 special education schools across China, five times more than the school number in 1980. The number of disabled children studying in regular schools accounts for 57% of all disabled students.

10. More than 80% of secondary vocational school students are from rural areas,

² Receiving area refers to urban areas where rural-urban migrant workers live and work after they leave their home town.

and most of them from low-income families. Since 2007, a new national grant scheme for secondary vocational education came into effect which increased coverage of students from 5% to 90% and increased amount of grants from 1,000 yuan to 1,500 yuan per year per student. Since 2012, secondary vocational education became free for all rural students.

11. It was observed that enrolment of rural students in higher education kept declining in recent years. In order to increase rural students' access to higher education, the government has increased enrolment quota for students from rural and impoverished areas and provided grants and subsidies. In 2012, national key universities enrolled 10% more than last year from selected rural areas.

12. Currently, disadvantaged groups' access to education has been legally protected and is a priority for governments at different levels. Many issues in ensuring access to education have been solved. The challenge now is how to provide education with good quality for disadvantaged groups. We suggest taking measures in improving school conditions, quality of teaching and learning materials and teaching staff. Specific actions may include increasing government's financial inputs, providing favorable policies for disadvantaged groups, and mobilizing the efforts of all possible stakeholders in improving education quality for disadvantaged groups. Firstly, we suggest improving the formulation of legislation and policies so as to provide sufficient legal and policy support for improving the quality of education for disadvantaged groups. It is also necessary to strengthen monitoring of the enforcement of legislations and policies so that disadvantaged groups could indeed benefit from these policies. Secondly, in the aspect of improving school conditions, we suggest to analyze local conditions and the real needs of disadvantaged groups, and on that basis provide necessary facilities and equipment for teaching and learning, school activities, boarding schools and for students with special needs. Thirdly, we suggest to mobilize all possible efforts and means, including the use of ICTs, to provide disadvantaged groups with educational resources with good quality that meet their needs, such as textbooks, reference books, reading materials, multi-media materials, teaching and learning materials in ethnic languages etc.