Regional agencies combine to ensure Education for All

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The strength of the broom is in how the individual sticks are bound together.

This old proverb took on a fresh meaning at the gathering of delegates from 11 South–East Asian countries to address the needs of children and adults unreach by education services.

The meeting was a response to the directive of the South–East Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) to focus on achieving the Education for All (EFA) goals together by 2015, particularly among unreach groups in the region.

The meeting brought together for the first time the SEAMEO Secretariat, the ASEAN Secretariat and the UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education, to join hands and lead this initiative.

EFA partners at the meeting included ActionAid, the Asian South–Pacific Bureau of Adult Education (ASPBPE), ATD Fourth World, Disability Action Council, E–Net Philippines, ILO, Save the Children, SIL International and UNICEF.

Each country and partner organization has strengths and good practices which together can contribute to reaching the EFA goals.

UNESCO defines the unreach as the last percentage of the population who have either been historically and culturally excluded, or have been pushed into difficult circumstances due to recent economic and political trends. Their participation is critical in meeting EFA goals by the year 2015.

The six EFA goals are to expand early childhood care and education, achieve universal primary education, improve the provision of learning and life skills, increase literacy rates, achieve gender equality in education and improve the quality of education.

“This meeting reminded us that there are only seven years left before 2015 and that there’s still so much to do for the unreach population groups in South–East Asia,” said Dr Nguyen Ngoc Hung, Deputy Director, International Cooperation Department of the Ministry of Education and Training in Viet Nam.

Through a process of sharing common challenges and potential answers to these challenges, the participants drafted 11 proposals that address issues of access, equity and quality of education among unreach groups in the region.

The projects include transition support for learners with disabilities, a tracking system for students at risk of dropping out, intensive pre–school programmes, multi–grade teaching, development of more community–based learning centres in rural areas, an inter–country schooling programme for stateless and undocumented children, providing education, care, treatment and counselling services to learners affected or infected by HIV and AIDS, education in emergencies and disaster preparedness, and literacy with a livelihood component.

The proposals will be presented to South–East Asian education ministers during a SEAMEO council meeting in March 2009 for endorsement and subsequent implementation.