

BROOKINGS

A Conversation with Ambassador Melanne Vermeer
Educating Women and Girls in the Developing World
Tuesday, July 21, 2009

On July 21, 2009, the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution hosted a conversation with Melanne Vermeer, who was recently appointed by President Barack Obama to serve as the first ever Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues. The discussion focused on the importance of girls' and women's education in the developing world, identifying specific challenges and highlighting effective strategies.

Ambassador Vermeer initiated the discussion by highlighting her commitment to education as a central pillar of advancing girls' and women's empowerment. "Education is the most critical tool we have to create the kind of world we want to see." She outlined five main issues facing women and girls in developing countries today. First, she voiced an overall need for foreign assistance policies to fully integrate women and girls. Next, she highlighted the impact of the global economic crisis on women and its potential to reverse recent progress on education toward gender parity.

Having just returned from Afghanistan, the Ambassador conveyed her firsthand experience of the challenge of sustaining education in a meaningful way in contexts of conflict. The Ambassador also highlighted the importance of realizing the full potential of women in the Arab World for ensuring development in the region. Finally, the Ambassador concluded that girls' education is one of the most leveraged development investments that exists and pointed to the need to scale up proven strategies.

The conversation expanded on these main themes, drawing upon the expertise of various other participants at the meeting:

- **Equity of Girls' Education:** As part of the 2000 UN Millennium Development Goals, the world committed to both universal primary education and gender parity in primary and secondary education by 2015. Education is one of the most leveraged development investments that currently exists. While some regions, most notably Latin America, Europe, and Central Asia, have made significant progress toward gender parity, in sub-Saharan Africa, 20 of 37 countries for which data exist are not on track, and another 10 countries lack data on education and gender. Globally, ten of the 22 fragile states for which data exist are critically off track for achieving the 2015 goals.
- **Innovative Strategies for Ensuring Sustainable Quality Education:** Successful strategies for education must include ensuring accountability for financial transactions as well as for learning outcomes. To ensure that funds actually reach the school level and help children learn, the Government of Kenya established school-level bank accounts. Teachers and community members have been trained to manage these accounts so that funds disbursed

from the Ministry of Finance are accounted for in a systematic and transparent way. Eliminating per-child school fees, offsetting the costs of uniforms and supplies, providing scholarships and social transfers, and offering health and nutrition services can all play an instrumental role in increasing and maintaining girls' participation in education.

- **Education in Conflict and Post-conflict Contexts:** It is important to highlight a number of major issues regarding the provision of quality education in contexts of conflict. One-half of out-of-school children are living in conflict-affected and fragile states and the average term of displacement is now 17 years for refugees. Despite the great challenges, there are proven strategies for ensuring quality education in these contexts; the Inter-Agency Network on Education in Emergencies (INEE) has developed a set of Minimum Standards and an accompanying toolkit for education in these contexts. These strategies can provide windows of opportunity for girls and women who may have been excluded from education. In Darfur, for example, more girls were attending school last year than before the crisis began. Within the US government, there are currently gaps in service delivery across developmental contexts, perhaps best illustrated by the fact that the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance does not have the provision of education within its humanitarian response mandate, thereby leaving education out of the early recovery stage.
- **Importance of Effective Multilateral Engagement:** The current multilateral initiative for education – the Education for All-Fast Track Initiative – has been important in a number of countries but has been unable to mobilize the level of international support and resources needed to achieve universal basic education. An inclusive, country-driven, performance-based and transparent global education initiative is needed to leverage the resources needed to close the global education gap. The President's pledge to create a Global Fund for Education holds the potential for transforming the global education landscape and catalyzing other nations to expand their resource commitment to achieving education for all if it builds off existing mechanisms and insists on clear accountability for results. A range of key stakeholders in civil society and in the Congress would strongly support the Administration if it moved toward launching such a Global Fund for Education in the coming year.