

SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON RIGHT TO EDUCATION
CONCLUDES VISIT TO BOTSWANA

4 October 2005

Vernor Muñoz, Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights on the right to education, has concluded a mission to Botswana that lasted from 26 September to 4 October. The mission took place at the invitation of the Government.

The purpose of the mission was to consider how Botswana endeavours to implement the right to education, the measures taken for its successful realization and the obstacles encountered, both at the national and international level.

During his visit, the Special Rapporteur met with the Minister of Education and senior officials of the Ministries of Education; Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation; Labour and Home Affairs; and Finance and Development Planning. He also met with the District Commissioner of Kagtleng and members of the District Council, as well as the Ombudsman. The Special Rapporteur held meetings with representatives of United Nations agencies and several non-governmental organizations. He also met with teachers and students; journalists and academics. The Special Rapporteur visited schools and hostels in Gaborone, the District of Kagtleng and the rural area of Mahalapaye.

Several key issues were addressed during the course of the mission, including HIV/AIDS as the major health challenge in Botswana, and its social consequences and impact, especially on the education of orphaned children; the foreseen re-introduction of school fees; access to education of pregnant girls and adolescent mothers, the intercultural challenge for the educational system in Botswana, including education provided to people living in remote areas and indigenous populations such as the Basarwa/San.

Following the conclusion of his mission, the Special Rapporteur discussed his preliminary observations with senior officials of the Ministry of Education. He noted his high regard for the Government's policies on education and commended the Government for the country's achievements in the field of education since its independence. He also commended the Government and other stakeholders for their clear commitment to ensure that all Botswana receive education.

The Special Rapporteur noted, however, the lack of a rights-based approach to education which led to uneven education indicators within Botswana. He believes that integrating the right to education, and other related human rights into the Government's policies would strengthen crucial elements of its current strategies. He acknowledges that Botswana faces the challenges of one of the highest HIV/AIDS infection rates in the world, which represents an additional constraint to the full realization of the right to education.

The Special Rapporteur also noted with great concern the intention of the Government to re-introduce school fees for those entering junior

secondary school. He drew attention to the crucial importance of maintaining education free of charge in order to both increase enrolment and help combat the increasing drop-out rate at the secondary level, especially among girls. He called for strengthened community participation and involvement by calling for compulsory basic education and urged the Government to reconsider the implementation of that measure for which he foresees a negative impact on Botswana's significant achievements in the field of education.

"I see the introduction of school fees as a dangerous step backwards. Any short-term budgetary gains from the re-introduction of school fees will have regrettable and inevitable economic and social costs in the medium and long-term. Education should be considered a right and not a service for which one should pay. It shouldn't be seen as a cost but rather as an investment", observed the Special Rapporteur.

With respect to the education provided to the different ethnic groups of the country, especially to indigenous populations such as the San/Basarwa, the Special Rapporteur stressed the importance of providing an inclusive education while respecting and promoting the culture and languages of all the components of the Botswana. He acknowledged the different constraints, such as, the extremely small human settlements scattered all over the country, and the need for training teachers accordingly. However, he believes that the country has the means to rise to that challenge.

"I believe that the country should make every effort to provide appropriate education to all components of society. No country can achieve any sustainable development if part of its population is left aside and not fully integrated. Non-discrimination is a vital feature of the human right to education. I am confident that Botswana can build on its remarkable achievements and rise to this challenge."

The Special Rapporteur also highlighted the critical role of education professionals in promoting the right to education. The Government has developed some excellent education policies, but these policies cannot be fully delivered without more teachers appropriately trained to reflect the intercultural composition of the society and working under even better terms and conditions.

The Special Rapporteur stressed that the right to education not only requires community participation, but also the transparent accountability of all actors.

The Special Rapporteur will report on his mission to the Commission on Human Rights at its sixty-second session in 2006.

The Special Rapporteur is an independent expert appointed by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights to help States, and others, promote and protect the right to education. For further information on the mandate of the Special Rapporteur and copies of available reports, please consult the website of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (<http://www.ohchr.org>).