**Social Forum: The promotion and protection of the rights of children and youth through education**

**Keynote panel: The transformative power of education for young people**

**1 October 2019, 1030-1130**

**Room XX, Palais des Nations, Geneva**

**Statement by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet**

**(7 mins)**

Your highness,

Excellencies,

Distinguished panellists,

Friends and colleagues,

I’m delighted to be here with so many friends and colleagues from UN agencies, civil society and missions, as well as the children and youth who are strongly represented today. Working together like this is key to achieving our goals.

The Social Forum is a unique space where the Human Rights Council, grassroots movements and civil society organisations can engage and learn from each other – and I’m sure this event will prove to be fruitful in assessing not just the progress we’ve made on education, but the challenges that remain.

All children have the right to an education. Enabling them to enjoy this right is something I am passionate about. This is particularly important today, as our world has never had more young people – currently around 1.8 billion, and rising.

Inclusive, quality education isn’t just a right in itself. It’s a “multiplier” right – one which enables children and youth to realize their other human rights too. As our theme today confirms, it literally has the power to transform lives and make dreams come true. The importance of education for children and young people cannot be overstated. When this right is violated, their lives and futures are severely impacted.

So how are we doing? Since 2000, we’ve seen progress in reducing the proportion of children not in education. However, around the world, at least 260 million children, adolescents and youth are still out of school. This is an unacceptable figure which demands our urgent attention. UNESCO has highlighted the learning crisis in which more than half of children and adolescents worldwide are not meeting minimum literary and numeracy standards.

It is also unacceptable that children’s educational chances are dependent on their background; by their gender, ethnic or religious group, disability, financial situation, location or migration status. There are still deep disparities in both access to education and the educational level that children achieve, based on these factors.

In addition, children caught up in conflict or emergencies face particular challenges. According to UNICEF, up to 27 million are unable to attend school in conflict zones, which is doubly damaging, as schools provide not just opportunities to learn, but much-needed security and stability in times of upheaval.

In most cases, children are out of school for other reasons. Bullying, gangs or violence, including sexual violence. A lack of accessibility for children with disabilities. No proper sanitation. Funding shortages. Failure to introduce the right policies and laws – or failure to implement them. There is often a vast gulf between the commitments made by States and the reality experienced by children and youth on the ground.

Friends and colleagues,

Education is a human right in itself, but not an end in itself. If we want to give our children and youth the best possible start to their adult lives, education should lead to relevant and effective learning outcomes, and equip children and young people for work. Around the world, 71 million young people are looking for a job, and young people are three times more likely than adults to be unemployed. One of the main barriers is a lack of education and training. Curricula must also be fit for purpose, including comprehensive sexuality education.

And the education we deliver must empower children and youth. This means strengthening their voices, developing their potential, engaging with them, ensuring they have equal participation in processes concerning them, and protecting and promoting *all* their rights. It benefits not just children and young people, but all of us. Empowered children and youth strengthen our communities and societies. They offer new ideas, innovations and solutions.

Already they’re leading the way in demanding change, human rights and sustainable development, combating hatred and intolerance, breaking down barriers, even preventing conflict. Some are human rights defenders or powerful advocates for action on climate change, women’s rights and education. They are no longer the beneficiaries of change – they *are* the agents of change.

Friends and colleagues,

The decisions we make now are crucial to delivering this vision of quality, inclusive, accessible education that equips and empowers young people. We need a paradigm shift if we are to achieve this. The right to education must be upheld in national laws, policies and strategies – and it must be implemented on the ground.

It’s now four years since States around the world committed themselves to delivering equal access to quality, inclusive education for all, as part of the 2030 Agenda. This commitment – Sustainable Development Goal 4 – will not be achieved without concrete action. Education must be prioritised in national budgets. The principle of public education must be upheld. In this respect, I welcome the 2019 Abidjan Principles on the human rights obligations of States to provide public education and to regulate private involvement in education.

We also need better data collection, including detailed statistics on the needs and numbers of children and youth who are not in education, so that violations of their rights can be spotted early and resolved. And we need the full engagement of civil society, including in helping children and youth to become advocates for their own rights.

Last year, I met children and youth from around the world as we celebrated the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. One of them,16-year-old Konstantinos from Greece, said his dream was to teach children from a young age that they were equal to everyone. He told me: “If we change education, we change humanity.”

I look forward to our discussions here, including the voices of children and youth, helping to turn that vision into reality.

Thank you.