

Asia-Pacific Regional Forum on Minority Issues 2022

'Review. Rethink. Reform. 30th anniversary of the

UN Declaration on the rights of minorities'

Hosted by UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues and Tom Lantos Institute

14 June 2022, 7.00 – 8.00 GMT+2 [12.00 – 13.00 Bangkok GMT+7]

Opening Remarks

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1. Good morning and good afternoon ministers, colleagues, participants, and guests!
2. Please allow me to begin by extending my gratitude to the UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues Mr Fernand de Varennes and the Tom Lantos Institute, for inviting and making possible UNESCO's participation in this important and timely 'Asia-Pacific regional forum on the 30th anniversary of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities'. UNESCO joined the first Asia-Pacific regional forum in 2019 in Thailand, and it is great to see the dialogue has been actively ongoing.
3. With 2022 marking the 30th anniversary of the UN Declaration on the rights of minorities, the theme of this year's forum on minority issues requires us to 'Review. Rethink. Reform.' That simple equation suggests we *review* challenges facing minorities in our region; we *rethink* how to strengthen protection and promotion of their rights; and we *reform* the institutions and mechanisms for ensuring minority rights in our relevant sectors.

4. Review, rethink, and reform have also been on our mind at UNESCO, especially in regard to education. Rights of persons belonging to minorities has been central to the work at UNESCO. As you may know, the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education¹ was adopted at UNESCO's General Conference in 1960, becoming the first legally binding international instrument entirely dedicated to the right to education. The Convention has largely influenced the Education 2030 Agenda and continues to serve as a powerful tool to advance Sustainable Development Goal 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education for all.
5. The UN Declaration on the rights of minorities is particularly connected to SDG Target 4.5, which aims to eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and children in vulnerable situations. Under the Asia Pacific Regional Networking Group on Learning and Education 2030+, technical working groups focus on specific areas of marginalization, such as multilingual education, disability-inclusive education and out-of-school children and youth in Asia and the Pacific.
6. This year's theme of 'Review. Rethink. Reform.' comes at an appropriate time, as our world must respond to unprecedented, widespread challenges for dealing with, and recovering from, the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges are especially relevant to education. Before the pandemic, millions of learners faced a 'learning crisis', in failing to learn what they needed to achieve to reach their fullest potential. This learning crisis mostly affected marginalized learners from minority backgrounds. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased learning loss for these learners – exacerbated by pre-existing inequalities based on ability, gender, location, ethnicity, language, wealth, refugee/migrant status and other factors – due to school closures and the digital divide, and has demonstrated the urgent

¹ Ratified by 12 countries in the Asia-Pacific region: Afghanistan, Australia, Indonesia, Islamic Republic of Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, New Zealand, Philippines, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

need for education systems to become more inclusive, equitable and gender-transformative.

7. The [5-Year Progress Review of SDG 4 on Education 2030 in Asia and the Pacific](#) published by UNESCO and UNICEF last year found that significant progress has been made toward improving access to quality and inclusive education in the region, but ‘[the most disadvantaged learners continue to be left behind due to discrimination, inadequate policies to mitigate exclusion and inequitable budget allocation](#) and data collection’.
8. Children from the poorest families and rural areas, often where many ethnic and linguistic minorities live, are less likely to experience positive and stimulating home learning environments; these children are also less likely to have access to organized learning activities prior to starting primary school. This same population are also more likely to have lower proficiency levels in reading and mathematics by lower-secondary education, and be entirely out of school by the time they should reach upper-secondary education. In general, students who speak the language of test are generally more likely to achieve minimum proficiency levels in both reading and mathematics at the end of lower-secondary education in many countries.
9. Minority learners also encounter both internal and external barriers to their accessing and receiving a quality education. Internal barriers encountered in education systems include exclusion within educational content and pedagogy, admissions and the workforce, and inequitable distribution of education budgets; whereas external barriers in education systems include discrimination against difference and diversity, reluctance to recognize minorities, and inadequate policies, legislation and strategies to mitigate exclusion.

10. Notably, most minorities are affected by more than one factor of exclusion. For example, UNESCO has developed [a guidance note](#) which highlights specific challenges that ethnolinguistic minority children face in returning to and remaining in school; these include factors of remoteness, lack of appropriate learning materials, and language barriers themselves, where, for instance, such learners may speak mother-tongues at home but another official teaching and learning language at school. Thus, solutions and strategies must work toward mitigating all the external and internal barriers at once, or minority learners will continue to be marginalized from, and even within education systems.
11. In order to address learning recovery and build education systems inclusive of disadvantaged and vulnerable learners beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, policies and strategies must ensure equitable access to and participation in all learning environments and opportunities, including skills development, the creation of safe school environments for the most vulnerable and marginalized, and the realization of gender equality in and through education. As such, system transformation is required to ensure that schools and education systems become more inclusive and gender-transformative in terms of policy and planning.
12. These challenges were recently discussed at the [2nd Asia-Pacific Regional Education Minister's Conference](#), which was jointly organized by the UNESCO and UNICEF in partnership with Ministries of Education of Thailand and Japan. The conference served as a platform for ministers of the 46 Member States of UNESCO from the Asia-Pacific region to take stock of, and analyse progress made, towards achieving the SDG 4 goal on inclusive, quality education for all. One of the thematic sessions focused on equity, inclusion and gender equality, but this key topic was a point of discussion throughout the other sessions as well.

13. The outcomes document, ‘Bangkok Statement 2022’ will inform the important discussions for the *Transforming Education Summit* at the global level. In September 2022, the *Summit* will spotlight the urgency to act fast to transform education, building on the [UNESCO report on Futures of Education](#).
14. Under today’s theme of ‘Review. Rethink. Reform.’, my hope is that all those present today continue to see education as a primary means for recognizing, protecting and promoting the rights of minorities to ensure that all learners achieve their full learning potential in safe, peaceful, diverse and just environments. In pursuing this, we must ensure that equity and inclusion are central to discussions for transforming our various sector systems.
15. Once again, I would like to thank the UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues and Tom Lantos Institute for inviting UNESCO to this important forum. I look forward to hearing the expertise and contributions from all the esteemed speakers today, perhaps especially those from minority groups. I am just as eager to learn from the insightful discussions, overall recommendations, and the potential implications for our ongoing work in this area at UNESCO.
16. *Thank you!*