

Position Paper for UNESCO

I. United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012)

We are greatly concerned that literacy has fallen short of the targets set at World Conference on Education in 1990, which pledged to halve the world illiteracy rate by the year 2000. Literacy, a basic human right and a crucial element in the socio-economic success and stability of any society, is the only tool for advancement for millions of children and adults in the most marginalized communities around the globe. The pursuit of the goal of universal education that encompasses the underprivileged sections of society is the primary medium of alleviating poverty and providing millions of people around the world with the means of advancement and financial security.

The Student World Assembly (SWA) is an organization that firmly believes in the right of all individuals, regardless of age, sex, or race, to have full access to all levels of education. The SWA strongly supports the UN Literacy Decade Project and agrees with the Senior Advisor of the Education Program Division at the UN Children's Fund, Elaine Furniss' statement, recognizing that "literacy is not only the means for fulfilling the right to education but also for accessing other rights, such as the right to information and freedom of opinion and expression." The SWA ardently supports this philosophy which is clearly reflected in its mission. The SWA motivates its membership by providing educational internet links to inform them about pressing global issues, by encouraging member participation in the intellectual and dynamic internet forums it hosts, and through attending SWA sponsored lectures and events. Thus, students not only practice their literacy skills, but also learn to utilize the electronic media for purposes of self-expression and obtain access to electronic resources during the present-day internet era. The SWA also exalts points #2 and 3 of the UN Millennium Development Goals, which specifically focus on ensuring the availability of a proper primary education for all and the termination of gender inequality within the institution of primary and secondary education.

The SWA recognizes that the promotion and development of literacy in the world should include all nations; therefore, executing a solid international plan of action will aid governments in prioritizing literacy among other key national issues. SWA is highly committed to influencing policy-makers by empowering individuals to create change. Literacy and primary education must become a priority for everyone. The SWA promotes these goals through various programs, like HIV/AIDS project, one of the selected pressing global issues for the upcoming 2005 SWA International Convention.

II. Cultural Property in the Armed Conflict

The international community has adopted a number of treaty provisions with the objective to prevent the destruction of irreplaceable cultural property during wartime and evade the loss of valuable cultural objects that constitute both the heritage of a particular nation and humanity as a whole. Among those treaties is the 1954 Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, which includes two protocols specifically designed to deal with the protection of cultural property in times of occupation and strengthen the Convention's provisions respectively. Aware of the distressing and ongoing conflicts affecting the world community, UNESCO and other organizations work collectively to protect and maintain alive these cultural assets during military occupations.

The SWA has responded to the current alarming conflicts occurring in various geographical locations by educating its members and taking immediate action on the issues. Different SWA

chapters around the world have organized educational forums about the war in Iraq and the crisis in Darfur, where important conclusions were derived by the members and have become the voice of our organization. Unfortunately, the ineffective implementation of the treaty provisions has enormously affected our organization when the educational facility of our Afghani chapter was totally destroyed by military operations in the zone. Episodes like this one obviously saddened our organization but encourage us to continue developing and promoting awareness.

We are unwilling to accept the continuing horrors of hostile acts and propose that the media play a more involved role in the preservation of cultural sites. They can do so by publicizing the destruction and creating international pressure on governments to strategize a military protection. It is the duty of nations to adopt mechanisms and practice them effectively to ensure the security of national heritage.

III. Afghanistan: Rebuilding, Educating and Sustaining

In the past two decades, war and the Taliban regime have caused the near destruction of the previously well-developed educational system in Afghanistan. Based on recent UNESCO statistics, Afghanistan suffers one of the lowest literacy rates in the world. Within the population over the age of 15, only 51.9% of men and a mere 21.9 % of women can read and write. As a result of the Taliban's ban on female education, a large disparity continues to persist between the genders. Furthermore, some one and a half million school-age children cannot attend classes because there are not enough schools or teachers for them. Developing and sustaining education in Afghanistan will not only improve literacy rates and facilitate the education of Afghani women, but moreover will ensure future economic and political stability.

The SWA fully endorses the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Human Rights Covenants which state that education is a fundamental human right. The mission of the SWA is to educate and when there is limited access to education, Afghani students are prevented from participating in the global community. The SWA has demonstrated a deep commitment to education in Afghanistan. In an effort to bridge the digital divide, promote education, and dialogue with Afghani students, The SWA sent a computer to our Afghani chapter. The chapter, which had been established despite numerous difficulties, was suddenly prevented from participating in our organization's online dialogues and other events, because their technological services were all damaged due to military operations.

UNESCO deems that, "None of the civil, political, economic and social rights can be exercised by individuals unless they have received a certain minimum education." In adherence with UNESCO, The SWA supports, the "Back to School" campaign launched by the Afghanistan Interim Authority, which is responsible for returning 3 million students grades 1-12 and 70,000 teachers back to school. Providing functional facilities and staff is the initial step in revitalizing education in Afghanistan. The importance of global academic and professional interdependence in rebuilding of Afghani education system has been acknowledged by the Ministry of Higher Education and Afghan Institutions of Higher Learning. The SWA encourages the efforts of the Ministry of Higher Education and Afghani Institutions as we are an organization that realizes the importance of a "high quality, modern, technologically advanced curricula in professional studies" which provides students from the most remote to the more accessible institutions around the world an equal voice.

The SWA recommends that the international community focus on the following policy goals for the development and sustainability of the Afghani educational system: (1) Further constructive contributions from organizations, i.e., printing textbooks and launching learning programs over the radio; (2) A grassroots effort to reeducate the Afghani population with regard to the necessity of female education; (3) Provisions should be made for child care and early childhood education which would enable female education and provide a structured environment for children recovering from the horrors of war; (4) Laws enforcing compulsory primary education; (5) Increasing thresholds of international aid, as education provides stability and is a weapon against terrorism; (6) Total rejection of war as social stability is an environment where education thrives.