

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Minister De Croo apologizes for not being able to be here with you today. He asked me to address you on his behalf. I am glad to do so, because this conference is dedicated to two very important topics: health and education, two sides of the same coin for many children and youth around the world. And therefore two main priorities of the Belgian development cooperation.

Welcome to you all and in particular:

- Mister Strickland, our keynote speaker today
- The panelists this morning.
- The experts who will share their knowledges during the breakout sessions this afternoon.
- The representatives of Educaid.be and Because health. Thank you for having organized this cross-sector initiative.

Making the link between education and health is not something we are suddenly coming up with here and now of course. Already the Romans were convinced of the importance of both aspects: "Mens sana in corpore sano" is a well-known expression, full of wisdom.

The view that education and health are separate topics in human development reflects a bureaucratic vision but does not serve best the needs of children and adolescents, girls in particular. Therefore, the Agenda 2030 indicates clearly that all Sustainable Development Goals are interconnected. Everybody is convinced that quality education is essential to obtain sustainable development. At the same time children who are in good health and who are well nourished are more likely to participate in school and to actually learn while there. In Low and Middle-Income Countries, an estimated 500 million days off school are due to sickness.

Over the past 15 years, we note an increase in access to primary school for many millions of children in developing countries. Yet, 264 million children or youth are unable to go to school and many millions more are not learning at a satisfactory level. There are many reasons: poverty, conflicts, living in a rural area or simply being a girl. Twice as many girls as boys are missing out on secondary school.

This has a huge impact, on the girls themselves of course, but in fact on the whole society. In every society education is the crucial leverage for development. Better educated girls and women are healthier, live longer, have a higher income. They also have their first child later in life and they have less children. In Mali for example, women who have enjoyed secondary education have three children on average. Women who did not get the chance to go to school have an average of seven children.

And those children are also healthier, better nourished and better educated. In Sub-Sahara Africa the child of a mother who knows how to read has double the chance to reach the age of five as the child of an illiterate mother. It's a vicious circle, but a positive one.

In order for schooling to be as effective as possible, it's urgent that schools support children's health by implementing school health programs. In several areas, school based interventions have been proven to be effective: malaria prevention, water and sanitation, school feeding, ... School health programs are a useful investment and special attention must be given to adolescent girls' comprehensive sexuality education, reproductive health or sanitary facilities.

Furthermore, we have to make sure that schools are safe environments for children. Both for boys and girls, but we see that very often girls are more vulnerable.

Lastly, it is clear that health and education contribute directly to gender equality. An educated woman, economically independent with her own income can stand up for herself and make her own choices in life, including on her sexual and reproductive health.

So we know what to do. We have to work together, across different sectors to offer to the present and the following generations the benefits of a good education and a healthy life. This conference is a very good initiative and I'm convinced that during the presentations and the further exchanges today, many ideas and good practices will be shared to contribute to this ambitious objective.

Thank you for your attention.