Developing countries, education and training: objectives and priorities in reducing poverty

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The committee adopted the report by Margrietus van den BERG (PES, NL) on the Commission communication. While approving the priorities set out by the Commission, it emphasised once again that the budget for education needed to be doubled to at least 8% of the Commission budget for development. Moreover, the Council was urged to agree a timetable for Member States to increase their aid to basic education with a view to meeting the commitments they made at the 2000 Dakar Conference. MEPs also suggested that the Commission establish a scoreboard to help track Community and EU bilateral aid to education. In a further point the committee, while welcoming the World Bank's Fast Track Initiative and the Commission's support in principle for this initiative, expressed disappointment that the Commission had not agreed to finance the first group of countries. The committee stressed that promoting high-quality primary education - and especially girls' access thereto - should be the top priority of the EU's and the Member States' development strategy for education. There was a general emphasis throughout the report on promoting education and training for girls and women, as MEPs felt that the communication had not come up with enough proposals in this area. The committee urged that preferential support be given to countries committed to educational strategies encompassing free universal primary provision and gender equality. It called on the Commission, at the forthcoming WTO negotiations, not to allow schooling to be included in the General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS) as a 'service' that must be subject to free-market rules and productivity criteria, as this could seriously restrict public education which might be deemed in breach of the rules on free competition. It insisted that education must remain the primary responsibility of the State and that it must be considered a public service even though it may be provided by the private sector. The report also called for reform of IMF and World Bank Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers so as to ensure that they support, rather than undermine, free, public, high-quality education. Lastly, MEPs stressed the importance of adapting education to local culture and mentality, for example by providing Pan-African editions of textbooks and by building schools out of local, cheap material.