If there has been one common slogan in the area of education and a single programme for the improvement of education in developing countries since the beginning of the 1990s, it is ‘Education For All’ (EFA). But EFA is not merely a programme and not just a development strategy, nor is it simply an approach to the problems of education in developing countries: It has taken the form of a movement, a philosophy, and a global commitment to education. Indeed, as the first Global Monitoring Report (GMR): Is the World on Track? (2002. Paris: UNESCO) observed, EFA “is development” itself (p. 14). (Although a previous GMR was produced for a High Level Group meeting in 2001, it was not part of the present series of annual reports.) The 1980s witnessed a re-emergence of faith in the role of education in development and of national and international endeavours towards educating society as a whole. The last decade of the 20th century began with the culmination of these efforts at the World Conference on EFA. As many as 155 Member States of the United Nations assembled at Jomtien in 1990 pledged to provide education for all by 2000. The conference, sponsored by the UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank and attended by world leaders from around the globe, concluded with the unanimous adoption of the World Declaration on Education for All and a corresponding Frame of Action calling for provision of quality education to all. EFA has subsequently been viewed as a major strategy of development – and more – all over the world.

The Jomtien conference was organised in response to widespread concerns about deteriorating education conditions and the end of the Cold War as well as the emergence of new market economies and democracies. The importance of education in national and global development and the need to strengthen educational structures were likewise being recognised. Maladies of the education system were alarming: Just a decade before the turn of the century, that is, at the time of the Jomtien conference, there were 880 million adult illiterates and 130 million out-of-school children in the world. While the world’s population and more particularly the school-age population were increasing rapidly, enrolments and enrolment ratios in schools were either declining or were at best stagnant. Public budgets for education were being
subjected to severe cuts. It was acknowledged that the world-order would be endangered if the growth of an illiterate and unskilled workforce and that of an ignorant and uneducated mankind were to continue unabated.

Accordingly, recognising education as a human right, the *World Declaration on Education for All* stressed meeting basic learning needs; universalisation of access to basic education; and promotion of equity with regard to gender, race and other characteristics including location (rural or urban). Five basic principles guided the declaration on EFA: equity in universalisation of access, emphasis on learning, broadening of the meaning and scope of basic education, improvement in the learning environment, and strengthening of partnerships. In short, EFA was an attempt to envisage a holistic approach to education of society, encompassing formal and non-formal systems of education, adult education, skills for youth, literacy movements and other conventional and non-conventional methods of schooling. Six main areas of action were identified in the *Framework of Action* adopted in the Jomtien conference: (1) expansion of early childhood care and development activities, (2) universal access to and completion of primary education, (3) improvement in levels of achievement in learning, (4) reduction in adult illiteracy, (5) expansion of basic education and skills training for youth and adults, and (6) increased acquisition of knowledge, skills and values for better living by individuals and families. Major goals and targets for reaching EFA were set as follows: universal access to and 80% completion rate in primary education by 2000; reduction in adult illiteracy rate to half of its 1990 level by 2000, with special emphasis on female literacy; improvement in learning achievements such that at least 80% of the appropriate age-cohort attains or surpasses a defined level of necessary learning achievements; and expansion of early childhood care and development activities, including family and community interventions, especially for the poor, the disabled and disadvantaged children.

The Jomtien conference represented a significant turn in the approach of the national governments and of the international organisations to education. First, it marked the emergence of a consensus that education is the single most important critical element in combating poverty, empowering the poor, enhancing economic growth, controlling population growth, protecting the environment and promoting human rights and democracy. Second, the Jomtien conference contributed substantially to expanding the vision and broadening the notion of basic education so as to include early-childhood care and initial education, primary schooling, the learning needs of youths and adults including literacy, skills training and knowledge, and information on social issues, among other points.

Following the Jomtien conference, the International Consultation Forum on EFA was set up as a mechanism to promote and monitor progress towards realising the EFA goals during the 1990s. The EFA Forum periodically brought together senior policy-makers in national governments, specialists in the area, and international organisations to deliberate on the progress and the