January 24 marks the first International Day of Education, a day proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations whose importance is reflected in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Agenda is an ambitious plan adopted in September 2015 by Heads of State, Government and High Representatives that seeks to end poverty, fight inequalities and counter climate change by 2030. At its core, the agenda contains 17 comprehensive goals, also referred to as the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. One of the goals stated is to obtain quality education, in particular to ensure that all girls and boys have the opportunity to complete primary and secondary education and have access to pre-primary education. In addition, efforts are being made to ensure that women and men are given equal chances of receiving high-quality higher education, such as in university institutions, and that gender imbalances in education are eliminated. To read all related objectives in the context of the goal of quality education, please refer to this page.

Of course it is interesting to have a look at where we stand at the moment, what has been achieved and which tendency we can expect. Mr. Hans Rosling has observed and documented encouraging trends in his book ‘Factfulness – Ten Reasons We’re Wrong About the World’, published in April 2018, which illustrate positive developments in the field of global education. The findings include that around 60% of all girls in low-income countries now finish primary school and that the gender gap in education is indeed closing: on average, women worldwide have spent 9 years in school, while men have spent 10 years in school. According to the World Bank Group, the literacy rate among adults aged 15 and above has increased steadily between 1970 and 2016. The global literacy rate was about 69% in 1970 and approximately 86% in 2016. This represents an increase of almost 17% as shown in the graphic below.
According to the United Nations Population Division, the number of children (0-14 years) will not continue to grow, as most assume, but will remain at around 2 billion by 2100. So there will be as many children in 2100 as there are today, in 2019.

Source: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.ZS
The challenge we still face today is access to education for girls and boys from poor families who simply have no choice to attend school as their families have such poor prospects that their children are needed to help with work and earn money. With regards to education, poverty is a stronger determinant than gender differences and most likely the reason why today 262 million children still do not attend school. In this sense, girls once enrolled in school are in most cases supported and do not drop out of school at a higher rate than boys. To quote Mrs. Audrey Azoulay, Director General of the UNESCO on the occasion of the first International Day of Education:

"This day is the occasion to reaffirm fundamental principles. Firstly, education is a human right, a public good and a public responsibility. Secondly, education is the most powerful force in our hands to ensure significant improvements in health, to stimulate economic growth, to unlock the potential and innovation we need to build more resilient and sustainable societies. Lastly, we urgently need to call for collective action for education at global level."

More information on the International Day of Education can be found in here.

The International Day of Education is a good day to remember one of our most recent heroes in the fight for universal access to education: the Pakistani child rights activist Malala Yousafzai, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014, and who is particularly committed to the rights of girls and the right to education. In her blog on her personal homepage, she gives girls from all over the world a voice and the opportunity to be heard, to share difficulties from their home countries and to share
achievements. You can find this blog here. She has already experienced many setbacks in her young years. She was born in Pakistan in 1997, and at the age of 11 the Taliban denied her and all the other girls in her home town access to school. In 2012 she started to fight for education, especially for girls. Her courageous nature made her a target and she was shot in a school bus. In spite of this, she did not allow herself to be intimidated and continued to fight for her rights after her recovery. You can read her moving story either here on her homepage or watch it in her documentary film "He Named Me Malala".