

A GLOBAL COMPACT ON LEARNING

TAKING ACTION ON EDUCATION IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

“The task of rebuilding the education sector is towering. National capacity must be restored throughout the education system. We cannot afford to lose another generation of pupils. So we must concentrate on providing children in those schools with better quality education and better systems to support them.¹”

– Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, President of Liberia

Education's Crucial Role in Today's World

Education is at the heart of improving the lives of everyone in the world. It provides people with more economic opportunities, empowers them to make informed decisions that impact their families' well-being and equips them with the skills to live secure and healthy lives. For every year of schooling, an individual can add 10 percent to his or her annual earnings. Each additional year of education on average reduces a country's chances of falling into civil war by 3.6 percent. A child born to a mother who can read stands a 50 percent greater chance of surviving past age five.

Access to good education can benefit all countries, but it benefits the least developed countries the most, where an estimated 136 million children and youth are still out of primary and lower secondary school; the majority of them are girls. In Sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia, more than 54 million girls are not attending school and therefore are missing out on crucial learning opportunities.

The cost for nations to provide a good quality education to its young people may seem great, but the costs of not doing so are even greater. The economic costs alone to a country of girls dropping out of school are significant. A recent report estimates that 65 low- and middle-income countries are losing approximately \$92 billion per year by failing to educate girls to the same standards as boys.

For more than two decades, global, regional and local leaders, advocates and parents have worked hard to get more kids in school. But while millions more are now in school, results show a simple truth—it is not how many years kids are in school, it is what they learn while they are there that counts. Today, in

some Sub-Saharan countries, children with five years of primary education still only have a 60 percent chance of being literate. In rural India, only 53 percent of grade five students can read at a second grade level.

There is a serious global learning crisis today, as many children and youth in school are not actually learning the crucial skills they need for work and life. Getting into school is just a first step in improving the quality of life through education. It is time to refocus the global education agenda on learning through increasing access to good quality education for all the world's children.

The Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution, in collaboration with education experts in both the public and private sectors, has identified a common set of policy goals to address the global learning crisis. If implemented, they can reinvigorate international efforts on education and build on the previous success in getting more children into school. There is emerging energy on the importance of learning for all from grassroots organizations in developing countries to new policy directions by major aid donors to increasing interest from private sector advocates and global leaders. It is imperative that these stakeholders work together toward a common goal of improved learning for all.

Progress Made, But an Unfinished Agenda

In 2000, the nations of the world adopted the Millennium Development Goals, an ambitious set of policy objectives to lift millions of people out of poverty. The goals include a pledge to have all boys



and girls complete a full course of primary school by 2015. There has been tremendous commitment, support, dedication, and resources from governments, educators, advocates, parents, and the private sector in fulfilling this pledge and there has been some significant progress to date. Since 1999, the number of children not enrolled in primary school has fallen by 39 million. Even in the poorest countries, primary school net enrollment ratios have increased from an average of less than 60 percent in 1990 to over 80 percent in 2008. However, these gains should not mask the enormity of the challenge that still lies ahead and the unfinished global agenda of providing good quality education to all the world's children.

Research and evidence shows that more needs to be done:

- **Progress has been highly uneven**
National averages often disguise large disparities within some countries, in particular, disparities related to income, location, ethnicity, language, disability, age, and gender.
- **Poor girls are often left behind, particularly in conflict areas**
Despite significant progress over the past two decades in ensuring that more girls have an opportunity to learn, girls and young women in many developing countries remain at a disadvantage—especially those in conflict areas. Investing in girls' education is arguably the most effective way to break the cycle of poverty and improve the health and welfare of their families and communities.
- **Better learning supports better lives**
Economic growth and poverty reduction require having an educated and skilled workforce. Quality learning outcomes are essential to reap the many benefits of education. An estimated 171 million people could be lifted out of poverty if all students in low-income countries obtain basic reading skills in school. That is equivalent to a 12 percent reduction in world poverty.

- **Learning is essential to address today's most pressing challenges**

Educated people are needed to tackle unprecedented issues that countries face today—everything from climate change, to food security, to youth unemployment to instability in key regions. There is broad agreement—and significant evidence to support the fact—that learning enhances individuals' abilities to lead healthier, more productive lives.

Three Policy Priorities to Promote Learning

A global breakthrough is needed to ensure that every girl and boy makes the transition to adulthood equipped with the skills, knowledge, and competencies needed to live a healthy, safe, and productive life. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach, recent research conducted by the Center for Universal Education at Brookings suggests that three policy priorities can make an enormous contribution if applied through collective action and concerted focus, and then appropriately adapted to each local context:

- **Support quality early childhood development and learning opportunities for girls and boys.** Quality early childhood development activities, which include health, nutrition and stimulation, reduce attrition and increase primary school completion rates. These returns are often greatest for children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.
- **Ensure that children acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills.** The ability to read, write and do math are foundational skills for future learning. Those who fail to learn to read fall further behind each year or risk dropping out altogether. This link is particularly important for low-income girls and conflict-affected young people who remain the most educationally marginalized.
- **Enable young people to transition to and complete relevant post-primary education.** Too few girls and boys continue beyond primary school. For those who do, many are not learning the skills needed to lead healthy and productive lives. It is important to support the transition to post-primary education while ensuring the applicability, or



relevance, of what they learn to their current and future lives.

A Call for Leadership

With fewer than four years remaining to meet the Millennium Development Goals, renewed international cooperation and a redoubling of efforts is essential. The Center for Universal Education at Brookings believes the international community must shift the global education agenda toward the goal of learning for all. The Center proposes a new **Global Compact on Learning** that provides a broad framework and concrete steps for achieving this vision of learning for all. There are important roles for developing and developed country governments, multilateral organizations, the business community and civil society to play in realizing the new vision set forth in the Global Compact on Learning. The stakes for the world's poorest children and youth are far too great to not support and act on these three priorities now.

Taking Action: Everyone Must Work Together

All the key interest groups have a role to play, as part of the Global Compact on Learning, to enact the policy priorities as they make sense locally.

Developing Country Governments

- Commit to action at the highest levels—including heads of state and ministers of finance and education—to align national education policies, resources and services with improved learning for all children and young people.
- Allocate sufficient resources (at least 5 percent of GDP) within the national budget to basic education and, where necessary, commensurate amounts in specific accounts that fund early childhood development and educational opportunities for adolescents.
- Ensure that adequate attention is given to the three essential priorities of early childhood development, literacy and math in lower primary grades and relevant post-primary education. This is especially important for poor girls and other marginalized groups.

- Develop and communicate learning goals in partnership with communities that provide equal opportunities for girls and boys, and put systems in place to measure progress toward meeting these goals tracked by gender, income, location, and other relevant characteristics.
- Focus education resources—financial and human resources—on programs that utilize proven strategies to improve learning for all. Prioritize those who have been left out, such as girls from poor families, ethnolinguistic minorities and children and young people living with disabilities or affected by conflict.

Developed Country Governments and Multilateral Organizations

- Prioritize education on the G-20 and G-8 agendas and focus on improving learning for all by investing in concrete initiatives for the three priorities: early childhood development, literacy and numeracy in lower primary grades, and relevant post-primary education opportunities.
- Ensure a strong commitment to learning in the next global development agenda following the Millennium Development Goals in 2015. UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA, and the World Bank, in particular, can play a significant role by embracing and championing the Global Compact on Learning. This is similarly true for the bilateral donors.
- Increase resources allocated to global education and find more effective ways of using aid by focusing on results-based financing.
- Work with governments of developing countries to build in-country measurement capacities and ensure a common set of metrics that captures learning data and regularly shares information with communities, teachers, civil society organizations and the public at large in an easily understandable format.
- Strengthen the core of the multilateral aid architecture by ensuring that the Education For All Fast-Track Initiative (FTI) builds on its existing reforms to serve as a centerpiece for international cooperation in education.



“ Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world. ”

– Nelson Mandela

NGOs and Civil Society

- Incorporate a strong focus on learning and gender equity within advocacy agendas that are pushing both to get children into school and to ensure they are learning while in school.
- Mobilize public opinion to send strong signals to national governments on the importance of learning opportunities and outcomes for all children and youth, especially those furthest behind, such as girls living in poverty.
- Build support among governments and multilateral agencies for interventions that enhance learning achievement, including teacher training and support.

Foundations

- Devote more resources to education in developing countries. Specifically, foundations should devote at least half of their education portfolio resources to improving learning for all, with a focus on reaching the most marginalized.
- Support one or more of the following three priorities in grant-making strategies: early childhood development, literacy and numeracy in lower primary grades, and transition to and completion of relevant post-primary learning.
- Commit a minimum of 10 percent of education resources to monitoring and evaluating progress toward achieving the goals of learning for all.
- Partner closely with other donors and research institutions to leverage resources, to share best practices, and to seed innovation based on research findings.

Corporations

- Align corporate giving with and devote half of the philanthropic resources for education to the three main learning for all priorities.
- Serve as vocal champions in support of quality education. In particular corporate CEOs and business leaders should use their profiles to raise education on the agenda of the business community.
- Utilize product design capacities to innovate and produce better, low-cost technology for improving learning in low-resource environments.
- Increase coordination with other education stakeholders and donors to ensure that investments meet the greatest need, move toward multi-year funding, leverage existing initiatives, and align with the education plans of developing country governments.

Today's Investment, Tomorrow's Success

Addressing the global learning crisis must become a priority for everyone. The Global Compact on Learning provides all stakeholders with a framework to take concrete actions to achieve learning for all the world's children and youth. Access to a quality education is the key to changing the lives of millions in poverty by giving them the skills and knowledge to have secure and fulfilled lives. The children of today and tomorrow deserve no less.

For more information and a copy of the full report, please visit www.brookings.edu/universal-education.

The Center for Universal Education at Brookings focuses on universal quality education in the developing world. We develop and disseminate effective solutions to achieve equitable learning, whereby all children and youth are able to access a quality education that supports their lifelong learning and development.

ENDNOTE
¹Deborah Harding, "Liberia: Funding Reading is Fundamental, Says President Johnson Sirleaf," allAfrica.com, October 1, 2010, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201010010047.html>

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