

## Project Syndicate

# Maintaining the Momentum Toward Universal Education

May 13, 2018 | **GORDON BROWN**

LONDON – On the surface, mass illiteracy seems like an evil that should be easy to eradicate. Achieving that goal requires neither a technological breakthrough nor a scientific discovery. With funding for good teachers and schools, we can provide an education for all children. We need only muster the political will to act.

And yet universal education has long eluded mankind, even when achieving it has been a globally shared objective. Today, 750 million adults – two-thirds of them women – are illiterate, and 260 million children are not in school.

Education is a basic right codified in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child. It was further enshrined in the 1990 World Declaration on Education for All, at a summit in Jomtien, Thailand, and then at the 2000 World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal. Achieving universal primary education was one of the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals for 2015, and universal education has since been included in the Sustainable Development Goals for 2030.

But, despite these commitments, the international community has yet to deliver for the world's children. In addition to those who are not in school at all, 500 million children currently receive no more than a primary education, which itself is often inadequate. And by 2030 – the year when the world has promised to provide universal primary and secondary education for all – an estimated 800 million people will enter adulthood without the qualifications necessary for the modern labor force. Many of them will be illiterate.

In many regions of the world, educational standards fall far short of what is needed. In Africa, for example, educational outcomes today are estimated to be 100 years behind those of a typical high-income country. As a result, there is a deepening divide between the half of the world's children who have access to a decent education and the half who do not. Whereas an earlier generation managed to travel

to the moon, our generation has failed even to provide a classroom for all of the children here on Earth.

So it is time for bold, innovative action. To that end, the International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity, which I chaired, has launched the International Finance Facility for Education (IFFEd) as a declaration of war against mass illiteracy and the evils of child labor, child marriage, and discrimination against girls. With discrimination and exploitation denying millions of girls the basic right to attend school, universal education is the civil-rights struggle of our generation.

The Education Commission is waging this war with the most innovative financing solutions we could devise. The IFFEd is mobilizing both public and private funds, marshaling international cooperation, and leading a multinational partnership to make education accessible to all.

The IFFEd has brought universal education to the forefront of the World Bank's plan to take development financing from "billions to trillions." In addition to multiplying donor funding, it is supporting countries that are committed to reforming their education systems, thus ensuring that every dollar goes toward delivering concrete results. By facilitating the largest single investment in education in history, and by encouraging developing countries to spend more, the IFFEd could, over time, provide 20 million more classrooms for children around the world.

The World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, the African Development Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development have each committed to using the IFFEd to leverage donations. And these efforts will complement the work of The Global Partnership for Education, the Education Cannot Wait fund, and UN agencies operating in the area of education – UNESCO, UNICEF, UNOCHA, and UNHCR.

By requiring governments to increase their own investments in education as a condition for receiving donor funds, the IFFEd promises to create \$4 worth of additional education resources for every \$1 donated. Our principal aim is to focus on the lower-middle-income African, Asian, and Latin American countries where the majority of out-of-school children – many of them refugees – now reside. These countries are host to some 700 million children – the missing millions in the middle.

Unfortunately, less than 1% of development bank financing currently goes to education in African and Asian middle-income countries. As a result, these countries are confronted with an untenable choice: either stop sending children to school, or borrow money at much higher rates and risk accruing unsustainable debts.

Looking ahead, it is time for donor countries to step up and respond to our requests for financial guarantees to the IFFEd. We are currently in discussions with 20 possible contributors, underscoring the message that if we achieve universal

education, *per capita* GDP in the poorest countries will be almost 70% higher by 2050 than if current trends continued. Extreme poverty rates will be reduced by one-third. The mortality reductions, measured in additional years of life, will be nearly equivalent to what could be expected if the world eliminated both HIV and malaria.

No less importantly, young people will be better prepared for the job market of the future. They will be in a position to become the next generation of innovators, teachers, and leaders, and all will have the opportunity to realize their full potential.

With innovative financing solutions, what was impossible has become eminently achievable. What seemed to be out of our reach is now within our grasp. Let this generation be the first in history to ensure that all children are afforded the education to which they have a fundamental right.



## **GORDON BROWN**

Writing for PS since **2010**  
50 Commentaries

Gordon Brown, former Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer of the United Kingdom, is United Nations Special Envoy for Global Education and Chair of the International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity. He chairs the Advisory Board of the Catalyst Foundation.

<http://prosyn.org/DtFWUXs>;

---

© Project Syndicate - 2018