FINANCING EDUCATION

Gordon Brown

THE 25-strong International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity, which will present its findings to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon in autumn 2016, is charged with making recommendations designed to bridge the multi-billion dollar funding gap in global education.

Despite the welcome agreement reached in September 2015 on the new Sustainable Development Goals—in particular the target ensuring that by 2030 every child will complete good quality secondary schooling—the sad fact is that 250 million of the world's 650 million primary school age children are not learning the basics. More than 50 million never enter a classroom and the quality of education for another 200 million is so poor that it adds little value. If we continue with business as usual, it will take more then 100 years before every child completes his or her schooling and well into the twenty-second century for that education to provide the quality of learning needed.

A $20 billion-plus funding gap has reared its ugly head, with little accord on how it can be bridged.

It is to the credit of the Norwegian Prime Minister, the Presidents of Chile, Indonesia, and Malawi, and the Director-General of UNESCO—the co-conveners of the Commission—that they have made education and new work on meeting the Sustainable Development Goal on education a global priority. And we must now find whether, across the world, there is a will to invest more—and more effectively—in education for the future.

The reward will never be greater. If we are successful, we could become the first generation in history where every child goes to school.

But we also know that education is not just a vehicle for individual opportunity: it gives young people hope—particularly those in conflict zones—that they can prepare and plan for their future. And it is the most

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Malala Yousafzai and Gordon Brown during the 2013 UN Youth Assembly on education

powerful antidote to violent extremism, showing that coexistence is not an impossibility, as ISIS claims, but is the best way forward.

When the world set its first development goals in 2000 (the Millennium Development Goals), an education objective that every child be at primary school by 2015 was included, and education aid and national education spending rose. That enabled an extra 40 million children to get to school, and pushed primary school enrolment up to nearly 90 percent.

But even as the benefits of education investment become ever more important to economic growth, aid for global education has been falling fast by nearly 10 percent in recent years. And with countries with the greatest needs continuing to spend too little of their domestic resources on schooling (in many cases just 2 percent), the education gap between rich and poor countries continues to grow. The share of education in total domestic spending fell from 16 to 14 percent in low-income countries over the last decade, while spending on health increased from 9 to 11 percent.

Moreover, spending can do little if it is not effectively used to best effect to tackle the challenges we face. In

many low-income countries, spending is not always linked to high learning outcomes. In low-income countries, almost half of all public resources are spent on the 10 percent most educated children. This explains in particular why we have done so little to ensure that the most marginalized children—children in remote rural areas, street children, and children in conflict zones—enjoy their right to education and actually reap the benefits of learning.

Recent surveys show that there are still more than 14 million children under the age of 14 who are child laborers, and upwards of 10 million girls of school age who are married off against their will every year.

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Today in sub-Saharan Africa there are 16.7 million girls who are not in school, and most of them will never set foot inside a classroom. Globally there are estimated to be 500 million girls who will never complete their education.

Moreover, few of the poorest children in developing countries make it beyond primary school; but beyond the issues of access, retention, and completion, the quality of education is also a crucial factor. In many countries, pupil-teacher ratios are extremely poor, which make it difficult for teachers to give children personal attention. According to UNESCO, in four countries—the Central African Republic, Chad, Guinea-Bissau, and South Sudan—the ratio of pupils to qualified teachers is greater than 100:1. Many schools and school systems also fail to provide appropriate performance feedback, incentives, and support to help teachers do their job.

Even after some years of education, young children are not learning the basics and cannot read and write. In Nicaragua, for example, 90 percent of second-grade pupils failed to correctly answer a basic math question and 60 percent were not able to correctly identify numbers.

In fact, learning standards are so low that less than two-thirds of primary school aged children are learning the basics in math and literacy in the least-developed countries, fragile low and middle income countries, and small island developing states.

And the gap in school outcomes continues to grow despite our increased

knowledge of what works: good school leadership, good school teachers, an emphasis on a disciplined curriculum backed up by testing, and the embrace of new technology.

While many argue that the secret to quality learning is good teachers, also important are good head teachers, a well-organized curriculum, and the effective employment of technology—all supported by a well-functioning education system. In none of the countries that are behind are teachers or head teachers well trained, nor is the curriculum or the use of technology well organized.

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So the question the world must confront is: are we prepared to make the right investments for high educational standards and outcomes that bring economic success, as well as individual opportunity and social cohesion?

Today around 60 percent of young Korean, Taiwanese, and Japanese adults complete higher education degrees. In Burundi, the Central African Republic, and the Democratic Republic of Congo that figure is just 1 percent. If current trends continue, by 2050 the gap will have grown further—with the Koreans, Taiwanese, and Japanese at 75 percent, and these African states still below 5 percent.

Performance in some countries has been so poor that some leading academics have suggested we have been too ready to claim the value of education to economic growth without scientific evidence to back it up.

So, in 2015, we are 59 million pupils short of meeting the Millennium Development Goals that every single child complete primary education. We are thus at a moment of truth: either we step up to make a serious attempt to meet the new Sustainable Development Goals—all pupils to complete secondary education by 2030—or we have to accept that we will be accused of letting down, even betraying, a whole generation of young people in poor countries. We will be accused of being too ready to make promises that we do too little to keep.

Breaking New Ground

In our work as a Commission, we will seek to break new ground. For too long we have downplayed important drivers of learning, such as the links between health and education, and now with innovative research and pilot programs, we will focus on how educational opportunity unlocks good health outcomes and vice versa.

And we cannot, at one and the same time, assert that in the advanced economies the first 48 months of a child's life are more important educationally than any of the next 48 years without applying these lessons to the millions who have no playgroups or nursery educational opportunities in the poorest countries.

Nor can we ignore the advances made when developing countries decide they will be judged by international standards, like the Programme for International Student Assessment, to push up standards in their schools.

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And because we sense there is no inherent contradiction between promoting the best access and promising the highest standards, we will not neglect the marginalized. If past initiatives have failed to recognize that the measures needed to get the street child, the rural poor, and the child laborer into education demand so much more than building a school and training teachers, we have to rectify this.

An approach sometimes called 'progressive universalism' needs consideration. While all must have the best basic education, more has to be done for those who need help most. We will have failed if in 2030 we have expanded secondary schooling but still cannot provide quality places for that bottom 10 percent who do not yet go to primary school.

But there can be no solution to the demands for universal education without better use of new technology—not at the expense of traditional teaching, but to its enhancement. Online learning offers us the chance to develop the two great skills that underpaid, undervalued, and under-resourced teachers have always brought to education. The first is the skills of the lecturer—the sage of the stage—some of which can now be employed online and the second is the skills of the tutor—the guide by your side—who can give the one-on-one encouragement and prompting which pupils the world over desperately need, and whose importance will become greater than ever.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and the SDGs that are integral to its success, is dominated by the numbers of children who are not in conflict countries. We know that 30 million of the world's 60 million inter-

nally displaced persons and refugees are children. Syria alone has six million displaced children and two million child refugees—most of them in Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon, and most of whom are denied their basic right to education.

So we cannot forget that half of the world's out-of-school children are in conflict zones and emergencies, and that the term 'universal education' means little if we cannot cater for their education where they are—either in the many camps or in huts, hovels, and tenants.

The education gap between rich and poor countries continues to grow.

In an emergency they must have food, shelter, and healthcare for survival. But we cannot afford to neglect the education of children. It is said that you can survive 40 days without food, eight days without water, eight minutes without air, and only for a second without hope. And it is education—the assurance that no matter the conditions you can plan and prepare for a future—that does more than anything else to give young people hope.

An exciting experiment has been tried in Lebanon, where double-shift schools have been adopted. In the morning, local children are taught with some refugee children; while in the afternoon, Syrian refugee children are taught in the same classroom. Altogether, approximately 200,000 children are being educated under the double shift system, with a plan to extend that number to include all 500,000 refugee children.

A further 600,000 or so places are needed in Turkey and Jordan, where a double-shift system has had some early success. In an emergency, the typical problem is lack of capacity—lack of facilities and lack of staff. But in the region there is no shortage of facilities if we operate the double shift system, and as yet there is a surplus of teachers.

The problem is a shortage of money—as well as the willingness to try bold new approaches.

With the support of the heads of UNICEF, UNESCO, and the Global Partnership for Education, the world has already agreed that a new platform should be created for the provision of education in emergencies. This could be formalized at the World Humanitarian Summit in Turkey in spring 2016.

The question is whether the Commission can go one better: to find a way—for not just conflict zones but all communities where education funding has been denied—to create millions of small beacons of hope and make them light up the poorest, most remote, and least promising corners of the world.

Pressure for change comes not just from an assessment of the desolation of children in conflict zones, but from a new and encouraging movement of young people across the world. But despite the Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted a quarter of a century ago, children's rights have not been given the same prominence.

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But in the last few years, organizations such as Girls Not Brides (fighting child marriage), the Global March Against Child Labor (calling for an end to slave labor for children) and A World At School's 1,000 Global Youth Ambassadors, have fundamentally changed the way we see education. No longer are children and young people passive recipients of services that depend on the adult community. More and more, they are actively pressing for their rights to be recognized and delivered.

So in Bangladesh, for instance, child marriage free zones have been created that have protected young girls against forced marriages. Due to their success, this model is being replicated in the rest of the Indian sub-continent and Africa.

Equally, local campaigns against child labor—whether in mines, factories, or domestic service—have pressed global companies that had previously turned a blind eye to the employment of children to look at their record and change course.

From the 1950s to the turn of the century, we have seen civil rights movements against oppression of African-Americans in the United States, colonialism, apartheid in South Africa, and discrimination against women, people with disabilities, and the LGBT communities. In 1990 and 2002, major world summits on children's rights forged a new agenda that emphasized these rights. It is time for yet another new summit, but this time one where the voices heard are not only adults but also young people themselves.

Whatever happens in the immediate future, the twenty-first century is going to be the century where civil rights movements are led by young people themselves. In that lies the best hope for the global pressure that will finally deliver universal education.

The Center for International Relations and Sustainable Development (CIRSD) is an international non-profit public policy organization based in Belgrade and New York. CIRSD was founded in late-2013 by Vuk Jeremić, the former Foreign Minister of Serbia and President of the 67th Session of the UN General Assembly, together with a core group of long-time collaborators.

CIRSD aims to help increase understanding and responsiveness to changing global circumstances. Its mission is to advocate for peaceful cooperation between states; encourage a more open, inclusive, prosperous and safe international system; and promote sustainable development as the foundation of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

CIRSD organizes on- and off-the-record conferences, panel discussions, round-tables, seminars, symposia and workshops, where senior government officials, top businessmen and entrepreneurs, and outstanding thinkers can come together and debate major international challenges.

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