On the road to universal primary education

Ruth Levine and Nancy Birdsall

Education is an end in itself, a human right, and a vital part of the capacity of individuals to lead lives they value. It gives people in developing countries the skills they need to improve their own lives and to help transform their societies. Women and men with better education earn more throughout their lives and participate more fully in the civic and political lives of their communities and countries. Particularly for women, education confers the skills and behaviours that lead to healthier lives. Education that reaches women, the poor, and marginalised ethnic groups not only benefits them directly; it contributes to a more equitable and just society.

Among the eight Millennium Development Goals issued in 2000, is a world commitment to ensuring that every child in every country will complete primary school by 2015; and that girls will be enrolled at the same rates as boys in primary, secondary and post-secondary education by 2015 at the latest.

To achieve these education goals, countries at risk of failure and the international donor community must take bold action. Reaching the goals requires money – more money than is now spent in many developing countries or by agencies providing either grants or low-interest loans. It also requires visionary political leadership in the rich world and a willingness to move well beyond ‘business as usual’ in many developing countries.

The report of the UN Millennium Project Task Force on Education and Gender Equality, on which this brief is based, calls for a global compact to foster and support such bold action (see Box 1).

Low enrolment, early drop-out, little learning, and weak institutions

The world is failing its children. More than 100 million 6- to 12-year-olds are not in school, with the worst shortfalls in Africa and South Asia (see Table 1: Net enrolment ratios in primary education). Girls are less likely than boys to complete the first schooling cycle, particularly in South Asian countries, where the primary completion rate is estimated at 84 per cent for boys and only 63 per cent for girls; and sub-Saharan Africa, where the primary school completion rate is 56 per cent for boys and 46 per cent for girls. Less than 15 per cent of girls from rural households in Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Madagascar, Mozambique, and Niger complete primary school. In Pakistan in the late 1990s, only 36 per cent of rural girls were attending primary school and 16 per cent secondary school. In every country, children from poor households are the least likely to complete primary school. In Western and Central Africa, for example, the median grade completed by the poorest 40 per cent of the population is zero.

Box 1 Outline of a global compact on education

To achieve universal primary education, leadership can and must be forged in the context of a global compact, in which the roles and responsibilities of developing countries and donors are clear and mutually agreed upon. That clarity must then be translated into specific targets and benchmarks set by individual countries; with clear commitments from donors, as a group, to the ongoing financing of the countries’ progress.

Under the compact, each side is accountable to the other for doing its part. Donors make a serious commitment and respond to countries that are doing things right, assured that external resources are being used well. Developing countries take on tough political reforms in their systems with the confidence that they will have sufficient and predictable financial support to deliver on promises made to their own citizens.

In 2002, donors took the first steps in addressing problems in the education sector. Under the umbrella of the Education for All Dakar Framework for Action, they worked with officials from developing countries to set up a Fast Track Initiative (FTI). That initiative seeks to achieve universal completion of primary school in a selected set of countries in which leadership and commitment to education have already produced visible progress.

The FTI emphasises greater donor coordination and focuses on broad sector support of national education plans. Perhaps more important, it could introduce an entirely new approach to donor financing – namely, financing that is predictable for the next decade as long as countries are making progress against mutually agreed upon benchmarks that have been set out by the country’s leadership, publicly discussed, and made fully transparent and visible.
because less than half of poor children complete even the first year of school.

In some countries, the main reason for low educational attainment among the poor is that children do not enrol in school. In other countries, enrolment is high but many students drop out early. Of the poorest 40 per cent of children in Bangladesh, Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, India, Mali, Morocco, Niger, and Senegal, more than half never enrol in school. In Latin America, almost every child starts school, but the poor drop out at alarming rates, often because they start school late and are repeatedly told they have failed and must repeat. Children aged 15 and still in third grade abandon school, discouraged. In Brazil, for example, more than half of all first-graders repeat the grade, and less than half of all children who start primary school make it through seven years.

Even when poor children stay in school, there is worrying evidence that they learn little. In Bangladesh, for example, about two-thirds of rural children of 11 years and older who had completed primary school failed to achieve a minimum competency level in tests of reading, writing, and mathematics. In Tanzania, only 21 per cent of children finishing seventh grade passed the language test, and only 19 per cent passed the maths test.

The weak performance is a reflection of institutions that all too often are unaccountable to parents, taxpayers or elected representatives. Among the interwoven problems that have been identified in education systems in many developing countries are the following.

- **Management weaknesses.** Public education systems involve millions of everyday transactions – between students and teachers, parents and school, school directors and communities, administrators and overseers at multiple levels – that are hard to judge and impossible to monitor. The experience of Peru illustrates the problem: the Ministry of Education has no idea how many teachers exist, despite the fact that it manages the payroll. The teachers’ union has no list of paying members. Both institutions suffer from political patronage in hiring.
- **Teacher absenteeism.** In a study of teacher absences in nine countries and 19 Indian states, teacher absenteeism ranged from 11 per cent to 28 per cent. Surprise visits to schools in four Indian states found 33 per cent of head teachers absent and only 25 per cent of them actively teaching. Other research demonstrated that better educated and more senior teachers were the most likely to be absent.
- **Poor management of expenditures.** An analysis of public expenditures, which tracked them from parliaments to individual schools in Africa, revealed startlingly high leakage. On average, only 13 per cent of central government allocations for non-wage costs reached Ugandan schools between 1991 and 1995.
- **Corrupt practices.** The lack of appropriate legislation, oversight, and regulation has allowed a host of behaviours to surface. These problems include irregularities in the hiring and firing of teachers; questionable procurements; selling of grades at, and admission to, all levels of education; and the charging of informal fees. In Cameroon, for example, headmaster posts were sold, the most prestigious ones by Ministry of Education officials.

### The good news: success is possible

Building and managing modern school systems is a daunting task. Even rich countries suffer from weak management, poor school performance, and inequitable financing. Yet evidence is building that education system performance is only weakly related to national income (see Figure 1), and that many poor countries with limited resources have achieved a great deal. Chile, China, Cuba,
South Korea (when it was still poor), Sri Lanka and Tunisia are examples of this. Rwanda and Vietnam have net primary enrolment rates that rival far wealthier countries. Benin, Burkina Faso, Eritrea, Ethiopia, The Gambia, Guinea, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, and Togo have all increased the primary completion rate by more than 3.5 per cent a year, well above the median 1.5 per cent annual rate of improvement for low-income countries as a whole. Other regions – Bhutan, Cambodia, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Mongolia, Nepal, and Nicaragua – are also making strong progress. There is much to learn from these experiences about pragmatic approaches to educating on a budget (see Box 2).

**One side of the bargain: how developing countries that are falling short can transform their education systems**

Over the long term, four types of commitment are needed to transform education systems, as outlined below.

**A strong national commitment to education**

Successful education requires a strong national commitment: expressed in powerful and consistent messages by the head of state; as well as in the legal and institutional framework; and budgetary outlays to the sector. A commitment to compulsory primary education signals that the nation’s leaders place high priority on education as a central pillar of development. Commitment at this level supports a healthy debate about what constitutes education and how it can be funded. Such leadership is not in itself sufficient to guarantee key institutional reforms, but it is absolutely necessary.

**Greater local control**

Institutional problems can be partly addressed through parental and community involvement, which anchors education in the social fabric of the community; fosters demand; and ensures that schooling provides social benefits and economic returns, and reflects local priorities and values.

Well-designed and implemented experiments devolving authority and fiduciary responsibilities to parents and communities have produced encouraging results. Evidence from around the world suggests that greater school autonomy – that is, greater parental and community control – leads to higher teacher attendance. 

Oversight and authority exerted by parent–teacher associations or parent councils bolstered student test scores in Argentina, Brazil, Nicaragua, Honduras, Mexico, Nigeria, Peru, and a number of Indian states link reduced absenteeism to greater parental, community, or school leader involvement.

Quality information about school performance and learning outcomes

Parents and school administrators need more and better quality information about the effectiveness of their local schools. Simple indicators of relative performance – spending per child, preparation of teachers, educational outcomes compared with other schools – are essential. Such information is generally

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**Figure 1** The relationship between primary school enrolment and GDP per capita

![Image of graph showing the relationship between primary school enrolment and GDP per capita](source: Toward Universal Primary Education: Investments, Incentives and Institutions. Millennium Project. 2004.)
Both middle-income and poor countries that are succeeding in achieving relatively rapid increases in primary completion rates offer some practical lessons, as follows.

**Be pragmatic to reduce costs**
Countries that have been able to jump-start progress towards raising primary completion rates have taken such pragmatic (though often politically difficult) steps as:

- introducing contract teachers
- shifting to low-cost school construction methods
- resisting pressures to reduce class size much below 40 until universal coverage is achieved
- providing free primary education and recovering a larger share of costs at other levels
- shortening the pre-service teacher training cycle.

All of these actions lower the unit costs of primary schooling and promote faster achievement of universal coverage.

**Focus on teaching and learning**
Even systems with modest standards can keep squarely focused on the teaching-learning process. This can be achieved by:

- recruiting teachers based on content mastery
- measuring student learning outcomes (and giving teachers the same tests)
- designing good-quality curricula, books and materials, and producing them in a cost-effective manner
- using local-language instruction for the first three to four years of schooling
- implementing inexpensive but effective models of in-service teacher training (master teachers, pedagogical advisers, rural teacher self-help networks)
- creating incentives for teachers that are linked to school and student performance.

**Make good use of the private sector**
Education systems can capitalise on what private providers can do well, by allowing high-quality for-profit private firms to serve the top 10 per cent of the income distribution with private finance; and by contracting out to private providers.

**Watch out for equity**
To ensure that the poor are benefiting from the expansion of the system, education sector policy-makers can:

- set clear rules for the distribution of resources across different regions and schools
- monitor outputs and outcomes across schools and regions to identify where performance needs strengthening
- increase support, pressure, inspection, and skill-specific capacity building that target the lowest-performing regions and schools
- develop condensed accelerated programmes to get drop-outs back into school and up to grade level
- provide targeted subsidies to get and keep vulnerable children in school
- introduce cost-effective programmes to enhance early child development (health programmes, nutrition programmes, and early stimulation of infants and young children).

Education systems attack rather than reinforce existing exclusion.

Areas and other marginalised children. Only with special efforts do poor children, including girls in rural areas and other marginalised children. Only with special efforts do education systems attack rather than reinforce existing exclusion. One such effort involves eliminating or reducing school fees.

When free schooling was introduced in Uganda in 1997, primary school enrolment nearly doubled, from 3.4 to 5.7 million children, rising to 6.5 million by 1999. Enrolment of girls increased from 63 per cent to 83 per cent. Enrolment of girls from the poorest fifth of households almost doubled, rising from 46 per cent to 82 per cent. In Tanzania, the elimination of primary school fees in 2002 raised enrolment by 1.5 million students.

Conditional cash transfers for education provide resources directly to targeted beneficiaries when (and only when) they keep their children in school. Such programmes serve as social safety nets, raising the immediate incomes of impoverished families while also increasing the human capital of the poor by educating their children. In Mexico, cash payments to mothers whose children completed the sensitive transition year to secondary school increased girls’ enrolment by 20 per cent and boys’ enrolment by 10 per cent. In Nicaragua, this kind of conditional cash transfer programme brought a 22 per cent increase in enrolment, with the poorest households benefiting most.

School feeding programmes disproportionately benefit poor children by creating incentives to attend school and by improving health, attentiveness, and capacity to learn. In Bangladesh, enrolment at schools where food was distributed rose 20 per cent at a time when enrolment fell in schools not offering food. In Kenya, a random-assignment evaluation demonstrated that
children’s school participation was 30 per cent higher among children attending schools with feeding programmes.

The other side of the bargain: how donors can make the difference

Actions to transform failing education systems will require both political fortitude and money. Without targeted support for institutional strengthening and the expansion of education opportunities to the margins of societies, developing country governments with fragile institutions and few financial resources may well focus on other priorities. The donors’ side of this compact boils down to fulfilling pledges and commitments already made in the context of the FTI.

An upfront commitment to adequate financing

The FTI is meant to reward ambitious country-level reforms in selected countries by substantially increasing financial support. Upfront and solid commitments of support provide an incentive for governments to undertake politically difficult and technically demanding changes in the way their education systems operate. The FTI got off to a rocky start. But the donors have made progress in coordinating themselves; and in reaching understandings with a dozen countries in which leadership and commitment to education have already produced visible progress.

It only remains now for the donors to fulfil their explicit and implicit commitments. In 2003, of the $170 million committed by donor agencies, only $6 million was provided. Another $15 million has come via the FTI Catalytic Fund. These are paltry sums. If the international community is serious about reaching the commitment to education have already produced visible progress.

Predictable financing tied to agreed benchmarks

The FTI could introduce an entirely new approach to donor financing – namely, financing that is predictable for the next decade as long as countries are making progress against mutually agreed benchmarks. Predictable financing would give leaders of developing countries the confidence to take on politically risky reforms. It would invite long-term investments in:

- expanding teacher training
- incorporating programmes of auditing and expenditure monitoring into education systems
- testing the effects of block grants to communities, and of giving communities more control over teacher hiring
- developing targeted programmes of cash subsidies to poor households contingent on their keeping children in school, and other activities.

Also, countries that are otherwise too poor would be able to cover the incremental recurrent costs of their new investments.

While not a stand-alone solution, additional and predictable resources are critical to maintaining quality when developing countries eliminate tuition and other fees or expand post-primary schooling. In the past, without additional resources, those welcome changes have led to overcrowded classrooms and acute teacher shortages, undermining the credibility of political leaders and the confidence of parents in the value of schools. At the same time, financing that is tied to agreed benchmarks can allow donors to engage with national governments in defining the concrete outcomes that constitute progress; rather than wrangling over the specifics of reform and institutional change, which ultimately make a difference only when they are shaped by the countries themselves.

The FTI is only a beginning; so far, few countries have even become eligible in principle. But it holds tremendous promise. That promise will be lost unless the donors as a group take immediate steps. First, they should come forward with bold, firm commitments that can be monitored. Second, for the first dozen eligible countries, they should agree on the benchmarks of progress against which these commitments will become real cash transfers.

About the UN Millennium Project Task Force on Education and Gender Equality

This brief includes excerpts from Toward Universal Primary Education: Investments, incentives and institutions, the report of the UN Millennium Project Task Force on Education and Gender Equality (2005). The Task Force was commissioned by the UN Secretary-General to: identify strategies that low- and middle-income countries can adopt to achieve universal primary school completion; and to then make recommendations to the international community on how best to support countries towards that end.

The Task Force was led by Nancy Birdsall, President of the Center for Global Development; Geeta Rao Gupta, President of the International Center for Research on Women; and Amina Ibrahim, Education for All Coordinator in Nigeria’s Ministry of Education. Members included presidents and directors of non-governmental organisations in India, Nigeria, Senegal, the United States, and Zambia; leaders of activist groups in the Dominican Republic and Kenya; scholars in Luxembourg, Mexico, Senegal, the United Kingdom; parliamentary and government officials in Brazil, Nigeria and Uganda; and senior staff and education experts of the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Children’s Fund, the United Nations Development Fund for Women, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the International Labour Organization, the World Food Programme, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the World Bank. The authors gratefully acknowledge the United Nations Development Programme for supporting the work of the Task Force. This publication does not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations Development Programme, its Executive Board, or its Member States.


Endnote

1 This brief is based on Toward Universal Primary Education: Investments, incentives and institutions by the Task Force on Education and Gender Equality of the Millennium Project, co-chaired by Nancy Birdsall, Geeta Rao Gupta, and Amina Ibrahim.

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**Biographical notes**

**Ruth Levine**, Director of Programs at the Center for Global Development (CGD), is a health economist with 15 years’ experience of working on health and family-planning financing issues in Latin America, Eastern Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. At CGD, she sets priorities and manages programmes that use research to address practical policy challenges; she manages the Global Health Policy Research Network. Before joining the Center, Ruth designed, supervised, and evaluated health sector loans at the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank. Ruth also conducted research on the health sector, and led the World Bank’s knowledge management activities in health economics and finance between 1999 and 2002. Between 1997 and 1999, she served as the advisor on the social sectors in the Office of the Executive Vice-President of the Inter-American Development Bank. Ruth has a doctoral degree from Johns Hopkins University, has published works on health and family-planning finance topics, and is the coauthor of the books, *The Health of Women in Latin America and the Caribbean* (World Bank 2001), and *Millions Saved: Proven successes in global health* (CGD 2004).

**Nancy Birdsall** is the founding President of the Center for Global Development. Prior to launching the Center, Birdsall served for three years as Senior Associate and Director of the Economic Reform Project at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Her work at Carnegie focused on issues of globalisation and inequality, as well as on the reform of the international financial institutions. From 1993 to 1998, Birdsall was Executive Vice-President of the Inter-American Development Bank, the largest of the regional development banks, where she oversaw a $30 billion public and private loan portfolio. Before joining the Inter-American Development Bank, Birdsall spent 14 years in research, policy, and management positions at the World Bank, most recently as Director of the Policy Research Department.

Ms Birdsall is the author, coauthor or editor of more than a dozen books and monographs, including, most recently: *Delivering on Debt Relief: From IMF gold to a new aid architecture*, *Population Matters: Demographic change, economic growth and poverty in the developing world*, *Washington Contentious: Economic policies for social equity in Latin America*, and *New Markets, New Opportunities? Economic and social mobility in a changing world*. She has also written more than 75 articles for books and scholarly journals published in English and Spanish. Shorter pieces of her writing have appeared in dozens of US and Latin-American newspapers and periodicals.