

# Parliamentarians Hold the Key to Turning Around the Education Crisis



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**Every child should have the opportunity to go to school, and every citizen of the world should be able to read and count.**

These statements feel like very basic, universally accepted aspirations. However, 23 years into the 21st century, and at the halfway point following the adoption in 2015 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), at current rates of global progress we are many decades away from achieving them. In fact, education is in a deep crisis: a crisis of equity, quality, and relevance. Hundreds of millions of the most vulnerable children, young people, and adults remain excluded from education. Millions more are in school but not learning. And as our societies, economies, and environment undergo fundamental change, contemporary education systems are struggling to respond.

Together, these crises have left the education-related goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda severely off track and risk leaving learners and societies ill-equipped to navigate uncertain futures.

Whilst the learning crisis is a global one, it has deep roots in the Commonwealth. Around the world, there are 244 million out-of-school children and young people. More than 40 million of those children live in two Commonwealth member states, Nigeria and Pakistan. Of the 763 million young people and adults who lack basic literacy skills, more than half live in the Commonwealth, and the majority are women.

One of the central causes of exclusion from education and poor learning levels, even for those with access to school, is the chronic underfunding of education. Pakistan is a case in point. The share of its government budget allocated to

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education had been stagnant for many years at around just 2 per cent of GDP, far short of the international benchmarks of at least 4 to 6 per cent of GDP, or 15 to 20 per cent of total public expenditure.

More than 30 Commonwealth member states are currently developing country partners of the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). This means these countries have been identified as having the highest rates of out-of-school children and the lowest levels of learning, but lack the resources to sustainably build their education systems. Of these 31 countries, only six currently allocate at least 20 per cent of their total government expenditure to education (the globally agreed benchmark). The four that spend between 17 and 20 per cent are sadly the exceptions.

The remainder of Commonwealth

developing country partners spend either less than 17 per cent of their total budget on education or have limited, or no available data. This is a major issue in itself because, without timely and accurate data on how much is being allocated, it is difficult to track overall levels of financing over time and impossible to determine whether it is being spent effectively.

The urgent task of increasing public spending on education poses a huge challenge. National budgets in low and lower-middle-income countries are under significant pressure – COVID-19’s negative impact on growth, together with the increased costs of responding to the pandemic, and high population growth all mean there is less money to meet growing educational needs.

Educational needs are also growing due to crises caused by climate change, conflicts and hunger. To make

matters worse, external support for low-income countries is in decline. Shrinking economies and the cost of the war in Ukraine have contributed to significant reductions in development assistance. The United Kingdom, the Commonwealth’s largest donor government, reduced its development spending by more than 20 per cent between 2020 and 2021.

There are, however, some promising developments that deserve support.

In July 2021, world leaders met in London for the Global Education Summit hosted by two Commonwealth leaders: Kenya’s then-President Uhuru Kenyatta and the UK’s then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

At the Summit, 19 heads of state and government, 12 of which are members of the Commonwealth, endorsed the heads of state’s call to action on education finance – the “Kenyatta

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Declaration” – with a focus on domestic public expenditure (domestic financing), committing to work towards spending at least 20 per cent of national budgets on education over the next five years – which translates to \$196 billion for their own education systems.

Originally championed by President Kenyatta, the Declaration is now being upheld by Ghana’s President Nana Akufo-Addo, who will also host the global meeting of Commonwealth parliamentarians later this year.

My hope is that the heads of government in all 35 of GPE’s Commonwealth developing country partners endorse the call to action on education financing. Universal endorsement across the Commonwealth would affirm the principle, that access to a quality educational opportunity is at the heart

of the Commonwealth project and that we are committed to putting the principle into practice.

Parliamentarians were instrumental in a number of countries in securing endorsement of the call to action and now hold the keys to ensuring that the commitments made by national governments are not only fulfilled but leveraged to supercharge the investment that is needed to fund and deliver a quality education for every child, no matter who they are or where they live.

The International Parliamentary Network for Education will be supporting our members in parliaments across the Commonwealth to call on their government to endorse the call to action or, if they already have, to implement it.

We will also be working with members of parliament in the

Commonwealth’s donor states, namely Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the UK, to ensure they all play their part in increasing the volume and improving the quality of their country’s aid to education.

Collectively these commitments have the potential to transform the financing of education across lower-income countries and lay the foundation for the investment in education that is required to address the global learning crisis.

Across the Commonwealth, we have some of the biggest education donors and universally recognised education leaders, like Singapore, alongside countries with the highest out-of-school populations and biggest rates of learning poverty. We can and must close these gaps and spread the opportunity and benefits of education across our Commonwealth of Nations. ■

