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To: Nancy Birdsall, President, Center for Global Development

From: Desmond Bermingham, Director, Save the Children Education Global Initiative

An Open Letter: Averting the Looming Global Education Crisis

The key message from a discussion held at the Center for Global Development last summer (and from the Education for All Global Monitoring Report published last month) was that many developing countries had made great progress in the education sector over the past decade, but there is a **hidden crisis looming in the sector**. Some countries are in danger of moving backward and desperately need a greater focus on the quality of education. The way to do this, in short, is through innovation. My own top-12 to-do list, delineated more fully in this letter's annex, includes recommendations for what national governments, bilateral donors and international aid agencies, and civil-society organizations, policy centers, and think tanks can do. What follows below is a recap of the consensus from last summer's meeting, with updated information on the state of global education, and a discussion of what can be done to avert the looming crisis.

After a decade of remarkable achievement, some of the poorest and most vulnerable countries are in serious danger of stagnating or even going backwards. There are still just under 70 million children who do not even have access to primary school.¹ According to some estimates, 10 times that number do not stay in school long enough to acquire even the basic knowledge and skills they need to survive in the modern world.² Less than a third of young people in Africa have access to secondary school, and only 4 percent have the chance to go to any form of tertiary institution.³ (Ministers of education in Africa frequently say that this is their most urgent priority.) Finally, there is the "forgotten EFA goal": reducing adult illiteracy by half by 2015. There has been some progress on this over the past decade mostly

Desmond Bermingham was a visiting fellow at CGD from 2008–2010. The views expressed are his own and do not represent official policy of any organization. He and the Center for Global Development thank the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation for its support of their work on global education. Desmond extends particular thanks to Lynn Murphy for her feedback on an earlier draft of this letter.

¹ Recently published figures from UNESCO indicate that the number of out-of-school children may have fallen in 2008 to 67 million—a drop of 5 million from the previous year.

² Keith Lewin. [Improving Access, Equity and Transitions in Education](#). CREATE. Sussex, England. 2007.

³ All figures are taken from the UNESCO EFA GMR 2011 unless otherwise stated.

as a result of impressive achievements in India and China. But more than 700 million adults still lack the basic literacy skills they need to function effectively. This places a huge drag on the social and economic development of a poor country.

There was a strong consensus at the CGD meeting on **the urgent need to focus more on the quality of education and improving learning outcomes**—although there was considerable disagreement about how to do this! There has been a back-to-basics drive in the international education community in recent years; in particular, many of the big donors such as the World Bank and USAID have focused on the assessment of basic reading and numeracy skills in the early grades of primary school.⁴ These assessments undoubtedly provide useful data, but they will only have an impact if the data is used to inform a system-wide reform that gives children greater opportunities to learn. As we have discovered the hard way in the United Kingdom and the United States over the past few years, testing and assessment are necessary but not sufficient interventions to raise achievement levels. Or, as the Africans say, you don't fatten a calf by weighing it.

Effective and regular testing is an essential part of any education toolkit. But an excessive focus on testing—particularly at the early stages of emergent education systems—can have the unintended effect of encouraging parents to withdraw their children from school because they have “failed” the test. We need a much more informed global debate on assessment and the best ways to provide 21st-century skills and knowledge for all young people in the developing world.⁵ We also need to inject a culture of innovation and experimentation into the education sector.

At a broader level, the meeting last year was in full agreement that **the failure to invest in the future of young people through high-quality education constitutes a shameful waste of human resources**. If this trend of underfunding continues, it will make it extremely difficult if not impossible for poor countries to achieve their development goals; it will put a serious brake on the global economic recovery; and it will ensure that the MDGs remain a pipe-dream for many countries, even beyond 2015. The importance of education for economic productivity, growth, and human development is well established by research. The OECD estimates that an additional year of education in developed countries raised GDP per capita in the long run by 4 to 7 percent.⁶ At the individual level, young people who have more education earn more—often much more—over the course of their working lives.⁷ The evidence is also well established on education's contribution to the achievement of the other development goals. For example, a young woman with a secondary education is more

⁴ See for example [USAID Early Grade Reading Assessments](#) and [UWEZO Learning Reports](#).

⁵ The OECD has produced an excellent report on [Recognising Non-Formal and Informal Learning: Outcomes, Policies and Practices](#) (OECD 2010) which could inform this debate.

⁶ OECD. *The Well-being of Nations: The Role of Human and Social Capital*. Paris, OECD Centre for Educational Research and Innovation. 2001.

⁷ UNESCO. *Financing Education - Investments and Returns: Analysis of the World Education Indicators*. Paris, UNESCO Institute of Statistics. 2002.

likely to seek basic health care for herself and her family, she will generally decide to start a family later and have fewer children, and she is also much less likely to contract AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases. As our former CGD colleague, Ruth Levine, consistently argued, this makes education one of the most cost effective interventions to improve the health and well-being of girls and young women.⁸

Education also has a critical role to play in tackling the central challenge of the 21st century: reducing global warming and mitigating the impact of climate change. Young people in all countries need to understand the basic science of climate change and appreciate the effect of their local decisions on global changes. They also need to acquire skills and knowledge to work in new jobs in green growth economies. Education systems in most countries—rich as well as poor—are currently ill-equipped to meet this demand. Many young people are finding ways to educate themselves in these new skills through open access learning programs. This trend needs to be encouraged.⁹

Finally, there is growing evidence on the contribution of education to establishing stable states and enhancing global security. Educated populations tend to demand better governments. On the whole, higher levels of education—especially secondary and tertiary education—are correlated with increased democratization and more open government.¹⁰ Of course, education can also be misused to promote intolerance and spread division. But this makes the case even stronger for investing in education systems that promote mutual understanding across cultures, religions, and nations. As the founders of UNESCO noted in the turmoil after the Second World War in Europe, “Peace begins in the minds of the young.”

What is to be done?

The short answer to the question of what is to be done is **innovation, innovation, innovation.**

The education sector is widely regarded as conservative, risk averse, and bound to tried and trusted methods.¹¹ In most developing countries, education is still provided through systems that were modelled on 19th-century schools in Britain, France, and the other colonial powers. The dominant delivery mechanism is still a teacher standing in front of a class using a mixture of chalk, talk, and (if they are fortunate) a textbook.

Young people in developing countries have already found new ways of learning beyond the limitations of the traditional classroom walls. Jenny Aker’s recent paper for CGD raises the

⁸ Ruth Levine et al. [Girls Count](#). Center for Global Development. 2009.

⁹ Sir John Daniel. [Mega Schools, Technology and Teacher Training](#). Commonwealth of Learning. 2010.

¹⁰ J. Gwartney, R. Lawson et al. [Economic Freedom of the World: 2007 Annual Report](#).

¹¹ Liesbet Steer of the Overseas Development Institute concluded that this was a key factor that dissuaded private foundations from investing in the sector Liesbet Steer. [Achieving Universal Basic Education](#). ODI. 2009.

fascinating prospect of children and young people – and indeed not so young people – in some of the poorest parts of the world using mobile phones to access new sources of information for themselves and developing their literacy and numeracy skills at the same time.¹² We have still only begun to explore the educational potential of this transformative technology.

But innovation is not just—or even mostly—about technology. It is what teachers and young people do with the technology that will transform education systems. We need a reorientation of education systems to place greater emphasis on the complex thinking and information processing skills that young people need to make the most of the wealth of knowledge that will become available to them. We also need new thinking about the role of teachers so that they become *facilitators of learning* rather than transmitters of knowledge. And lastly, we need a change in assessment systems so that children can be rewarded for their social, interpersonal, and problem-solving skills—21st-century skills that all new economies require.

Perhaps most important of all, new technologies must encourage new ways of thinking about education. We must shift the focus onto learning rather than teaching. This opens up possibilities for self-directed life-long education that is not limited by the boundaries of the school walls. Technology will not replace traditional schooling—even the most advanced computer cannot replace an effective teacher. But, as access to new technologies in the developing world grows, what happens in those schools will change. The key challenge now is to inject a new culture of innovation, risk-taking, and learning from what works—as well as what has not.

The CGD education discussion generated a wealth of ideas to **improve the quality of education** and **transform the way young people learn**. Here are a few of them:

- Provide every teacher (and maybe even every child) with a Kindle-type device that gives them access to relevant and up-to-date basic learning materials. This will help to overcome one of the major challenges facing developing countries—finding cost-effective ways to deliver up-to-date and accessible learning materials to schools across the country.¹³
- Increase opportunities for open learning and open access to education resources. Young people in developing countries are increasingly finding ways to teach themselves through a wide range of open and distance learning courses which allow them to continue to study and work at the same time.¹⁴ We need to find ways of supporting this movement and assuring the quality of the programs on offer.

¹² Jenny Aker. [ABC, 123: The Impact of a Mobile Phone Literacy Program on Educational Outcomes](#). Center for Global Development Working Paper 223. September 2010.

¹³ I am grateful to George Ingram for this great idea which captured the imagination of many at the CGD meeting. [Worldreader.org](#) has already started to put it into practice!

¹⁴ [Give them a laptop and they will teach themselves. Guardian.co.uk. Oct 2010](#)

- Provide a framework for new actors (including the private sector and foundations) to increase their support for education. Education is definitely the so-called poor cousin when compared to the health sector in securing private-sector support. We need to promote a social venture fund approach in the sector in order to inject new energy and innovation.¹⁵
- And, of course, CGD's own Cash on Delivery Aid, which proposes a radical change to the way that aid is delivered in the education sector to shift the focus onto the results and reward countries for achieving improvements. COD Aid has been thoroughly researched and warmly welcomed by several developing countries. We now need to move ahead with pilots and learn the lessons from putting the concept into practice on the ground.

(My own list of “to-do” items for governments, donors, and civil society is included as an annex to this letter.) None of these changes will happen without additional finance. And the picture from the Global Monitoring Report on this point is bleak. The increase in donor financing for education has stalled at a peak of around US\$4.7 billion in 2007. Several of the major education donors—including the Netherlands and Spain—have announced that they will cut back their education investments. The Education for All–Fast Track Initiative (FTI) has launched an ambitious replenishment drive for this year to raise over a US\$1 billion but it is not clear where the additional financing is going to come from.¹⁶ All of this points to the need to step up our search for innovative sources of finance for education and new partners to invest in the sector—and the need to use that finance to break through the barriers of conservatism that are preventing the sector from growing.

Conclusion: Averting the education crisis

The good news is that it is within our power to avert the looming education crisis. There are more children in school now than ever before in the history of mankind. Developing countries have made huge leaps forward over the past decade.

If we make the right decisions now, we can ensure that within the next two decades **every child in the world will have the chance of a good education**. This education will not be delivered through face-to-face teaching in schools as we know them now. The traditional approaches to teaching and learning will not be sufficient to develop the creative, problem-solving world citizens that we will need for the future. This will only be achieved by new partners and new approaches to achieving the education goals

¹⁵ N. Burnett and D. Bermingham. [Innovative Financing for Education. Results for Development Institute. Open Society Institute Education Support Program Working Paper Series. 2010.](#)

¹⁶ [FTI Catalytic Fund Report. November 2010.](#)

Annex

Averting the Global Education Crisis: To-Do List

Here is my top-12 to-do list to avert the looming education crisis for national governments, bilateral donors and international aid agencies, and civil-society organizations, policy centers, and think tanks.

National governments

1. **Use long-term financing, pension funds, and local currency bonds to fund education innovation.** There are an estimated 1 trillion dollars in pension funds in developing countries—\$180 billion in sub-Saharan Africa alone. These funds are usually restricted to low-risk investments such as government bonds. Results for Development has developed an innovative proposal to provide a financial guarantee insurance scheme to allow these funds to invest in higher-risk enterprises which could include universities or other education institutions.¹⁷
2. **Implement system-wide reform to improve learning assessment and testing mechanisms.** The aim should be to build on the existing national and regional assessment systems and use new technologies to improve data collection so that countries can track the impact of their investments.
3. **Protect expenditure on learning materials.** This is often the first part of the budget to be cut. The result: classrooms with only one book for the entire classroom which the teacher copies onto the board. Governments should also look for alternatives to the printed texts to teach children.
4. **Recruit, train, and retain top-class, qualified, and motivated teachers** and structure their salaries to reward excellent performance. There is a global need for 1.9 million additional teachers by 2015, yet many trained teachers have left the profession. Better salaries, inspiring leadership, and continuous professional development could bring these teachers back into the classroom.
5. **Make greater use of school-capitation grants to transfer resources down to school level.** The head teacher and the local community can then spend these grants on local measures to improve the quality of education in the school.¹⁸ Governments should also make sure that parents know how much money is being paid to their school so that they can hold the head teacher accountable.

¹⁷ [Innovative Financing for Education. Results for Development. 2010.](#)

¹⁸ In Rwanda, for example, parents are using these grants to pay teachers bonuses so that they don't have to take on second jobs.

Bilateral donors and international aid agencies

6. **Promote innovative approaches to financing for education** and use this financing to promote innovation within the sector.
7. **Strengthen the focus on results** through interventions, such as COD Aid, which encourage donors to focus their efforts on putting in place effective mechanisms to track results rather than managing projects.
8. **Deliver traditional aid more effectively.** Support for government services should be delivered through sector-wide program-based approaches to use national financial systems wherever possible and ensure that governments are held accountable for the use of these finances. Where this is not possible, measures should be taken to improve those systems rather than bypassing them.
9. **Target education aid more effectively.** The majority of aid still goes to middle-income countries and is used to support higher education programs including the cost of university scholarships in OECD countries. These are valid activities but they obviously do not help to meet the financing needs of basic education for all in developing countries.
10. **Learn lessons** from what has worked (and what has not) over the past four decades. The education sector has very weak evaluation mechanisms. We need more independent evaluations and better use of the knowledge they generate.

Civil society organizations, policy centers, and think tanks

11. **Promote local accountability in the education sector.** Independent organizations such as Pratham in India and AWESA in Africa have empowered parents to hold their own governments to account by collecting data on learning achievement through a range of household surveys and easy-to-use assessment tools. We should look for opportunities to extend this experience to other countries.
12. **Promote global accountability through an independent *Global Education Watch*** to track the delivery of aid commitments in the education sector. The GEW would measure the performance of all major multilateral and bilateral donors and assess their performance in terms of quality as well as the quantity of aid that they deliver and the results that are achieved.

These suggestions will not solve all the problems of the global education sector—but they would make a good start!