

## On the Road to Universal Primary Education

By 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 behaviors that lead to healthier lives. Education that reaches women, the poor, and marginalized 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—ideally by this year, 2005, and certainly by 2015.

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 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: Outline of a Global Compact on Education).

### 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 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

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\* Ruth Levine is Senior Fellow and Director of Programs and Nancy Birdsall is President, Center for Global Development. 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.

**Box 1: Outline of a Global Compact on Education** *(cont)*

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 of Action, they worked with officials from developing countries to set up a Fast Track Initiative. 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 Fast Track Initiative emphasizes 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.

**Low Enrollment, 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: Net Enrollment 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 percent for boys and only 63 percent for girls; in sub-Saharan Africa, where the primary school completion rate is 56 percent for boys and 46 percent for girls. Less than 15 percent 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 percent of rural girls were attending primary school and 16 percent secondary school. In every country, children from poor households are least likely to complete primary school. In Western and Central Africa, for example, the median grade completed by the poorest 40 percent of the population is zero, 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 enroll in school. In other countries, enrollment is high but many students drop out early. Of the poorest 40 percent of children in Bangladesh, Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, India, Mali, Morocco, Niger, and Senegal, more than half never enroll in school. In Latin America, almost every child starts school, but the poor drop out at alarming rates, often

**Table 1: Net Enrollment Ratios in Primary Education**

Region	1990 Net Enrollment Rates (%)				2000 Net Enrollment Rates (%)			
	Total	%Male	%Female	F/M Ratio	Total	%Male	%Female	F/M Ratio
World	82	87	77	0.88	84	86	81	0.94
Sub-Saharan Africa	55	59	51	0.86	58	61	56	0.92
Arab States	76	84	68	0.82	81	85	77	0.90
Asia and the Pacific								
Central Asia	81	82	81	0.99	91	91	90	0.99
East Asia and the Pacific	96	98	94	0.96	93	93	93	1.00
South and West Asia	73	87	58	0.67	81	87	74	0.85
Latin America and the Caribbean	87	87	86	0.99	97	97	96	0.99
Central and Eastern Europe	90	90	89	0.99	92	92	92	1.00

**Source:** EFA Global Monitoring Report 2003/4. UNESCO

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 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 percent of children finishing seventh grade passed the language test, and only 19 percent passed the math 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:

- **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 percent to 28 percent. Surprise visits to schools in four Indian states found 33 percent of head teachers absent and only 25 percent 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.** Analysis that tracked public expenditures from parliaments to individual schools in Africa revealed startlingly high leakage. On average, only 13 percent 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 behaviors to surface. These problems include irregularities in hiring and firing teachers, questionable procurement, selling of grades at and admission to all levels of education, and 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, the Republic of Korea (when it was still poor), Sri Lanka and Tunisia are examples. Rwanda and Vietnam have net primary enrollment 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 percent a year, well above the median 1.5 percent annual rate of improvement for low-income countries as a whole. In 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: Follow the Leaders).

## 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:

**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 alone 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

## Box 2: Follow the Leaders

Both middle-income and poor countries that are succeeding in relatively rapid increases in primary completion rates offer some practical lessons:

*Be pragmatic to reduce costs.* Countries that have been able to jump-start progress toward 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 includes:

- 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).

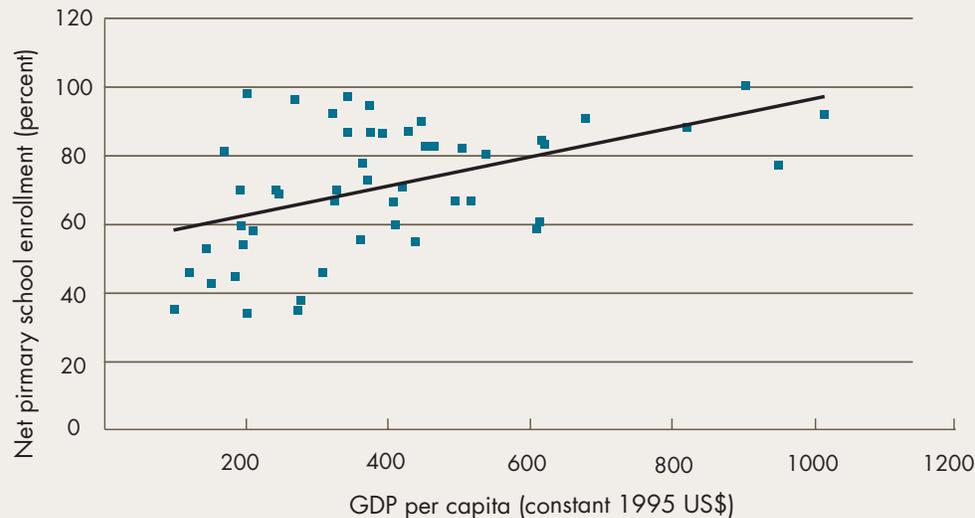
- Creating incentives for teachers that are linked to school and student performance.

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

*Watch out for equity.* To ensure that the poor are benefiting by system expansion, 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 programs to get drop-outs back in school and up to grade level.
- Provide targeted subsidies to get and keep vulnerable children in school.
- Introduce cost-effective programs to enhance early child development (health programs, nutrition programs, and early stimulation of infants and young children).

**Figure 1: Not a Simple Story: In low-income countries, the relationship between GDP per capita and primary school enrollment rates is not simple**



**Source:** Toward Universal Primary Education: Investments, Incentives and Institutions. Millennium Project. 2004

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. Evaluations in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, Mexico, Nigeria, Peru, and a number of Indian states link reduced absenteeism to greater parental, community, or school leader involvement.

Oversight and authority by parent-teacher associations or parent councils bolstered student test scores in Argentina, Brazil, Nicaragua, Honduras, India, and Indonesia, and it reduced drop-out and repetition rates in a subset of these. In a study of 10 Latin American countries, parental participation had the strongest impact on student achievement, while greater community control without parental involvement was only marginally important.

*More and better quality information about school performance and learning outcomes.* Parents and school administrators need 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 unavailable to parents, particularly to the parents who are most likely to be faced with failing primary schools.

The State of Parana in Brazil has done a good job of providing parents with the information they need by introducing the *bole*

*tim da escola*, an annual report card of the performance of each primary and secondary school. The report cards seek to increase accountability of schools and government to the community. The school report cards help the community, the government, and the school all adopt a shared vision of universal primary education; they empower parents to participate in the education process; and they inform decision making at all levels.

Parents and communities need information about their schools. But it is a central government's role to collect, share, and use that information for projecting future needs, for budgeting and expenditure management, and for assessing the cost-effectiveness and impact of a range of investments and interventions.

*Use of special interventions to reach poor children, including girls in rural areas and other marginalized 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 enrollment nearly doubled, from 3.4 to 5.7 million children, rising to 6.5 million by 1999. Enrollment of girls increased from 63 percent to 83 percent. Enrollment of girls from the poorest fifth of households almost doubled, rising from 46 percent to 82 percent. In Tanzania, the elimination of primary school fees in 2002 raised enrollment 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 programs 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' enrollment by 20 percent and boys' enrollment by 10 percent. In Nicaragua, this kind of conditional cash transfer program brought a 22 percent increase in enrollment, with the poorest households benefiting most.

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

### 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 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 Fast Track Initiative.

*An upfront commitment to adequate financing.* The Fast Track Initiative (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 among themselves and in reaching understandings with a dozen countries in which leadership and commitment to education have already produced visible progress.

It remains only for the donors to now fulfill 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

education Development Goals, it must commit massive funding—on the order of spending on HIV/AIDS.

*Predictable financing tied to agreed benchmarks.* The Fast Track Initiative 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.

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 programs 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 programs 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-upon 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 Fast Track Initiative 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, in 2005. First, they should come forward with bold, firm, and monitorable commitments. Second, for the first dozen eligible countries, they should agree on the benchmarks of progress against which 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 1) to identify strategies that low- and middle-income countries can adopt to achieve universal primary school completion and 2) to make recommendations to the international community on how best to support countries toward 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 organizations 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.

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The report is available for download at  
[http://unmp.forumone.com/eng\\_task\\_force/EducationEbook.pdf](http://unmp.forumone.com/eng_task_force/EducationEbook.pdf).

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