



SEND MY FRIEND 25
TO SCHOOL YEARS

Invest In My Friends' Learning

How the UK can reprioritise and protect funding for global education

“ Education is not just about learning subjects like maths or science. It’s about giving young people the tools to build a better future. It helps communities grow, reduces poverty, and even improves health. When children are educated, they can help change the world. That’s why campaigns like Send My Friend to School are so important. They remind leaders that education should be a top priority. And as young people, we have a voice too. We can speak up, raise awareness, and encourage real action. Education is a right, not a privilege. Every child, no matter where they are, deserves the chance to learn, grow, and have a brighter future. Let’s make sure we don’t leave anyone behind.”

Davi & Ewurakua,
2025-2027 Send My Friend to School Campaign Champions



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ACRONYMS

BII	British International Investments
ECW	Education Cannot Wait
EiE	Education in Emergencies
FCAS	Fragile and Conflict Affected States
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GNI	Gross National Income
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
ICAI	Independent Commission for Aid Impact
IDRCs	In-Donor Refugee Costs
IFFEd	International Finance Facility for Education
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD-DAC	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SDRs	Special Drawing Rights
TES	Transforming Education Summit

Foreword



Twenty years ago, I was a history teacher in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets and my class took part in the very first Send My Friend to School campaign. The young people thoughtfully created their cut-out buddy message, and I posted them off to 10 Downing Street. The idea that children in British classrooms are powerful advocates for the universal right to education immediately caught my educator's imagination and still inspires me today.

2005 was the optimistic era of Make Poverty History, governments were cancelling developing country debt, and the UK was scaling up its support for education for all. The Millennium Development Goal of universal primary school education appeared achievable within a decade.

The intervening years have seen the adoption of the much more ambitious and comprehensive Sustainable Development Goals in 2015. But hampered by the deepening climate crisis, conflicts and the recent COVID-19 pandemic, the promise to the world's children of an inclusive and equitable quality education by 2030 risks slipping out of our grasp. The future for learning has become even more unclear, following the UK Government's recent announcement of aid cuts to 0.3 % GNI. Past experiences have shown us how the global education sector is disproportionately affected by such measures.

This is why Send My Friend to School is urgently calling on the UK Government to 'Invest in My Friends' Learning'. We know how to get every child in the world into school. We know that quality education is a wise investment and will help us to successfully tackle many of the challenges our world is facing. What we lack is sufficient resources and investment. 2030 is only five years away.

Many young people in the UK deeply value their education and for twenty years they've been persistent and determined advocates for the right of all children to go to school. That's why they're still calling on our government to listen, fund education and 'Invest in My Friends' Learning'.

A handwritten signature in white ink that reads "John McLaverty". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

John McLaverty,
co-Chair of Send My Friend to School
March 2025



Grace, 22, loves science and playing games with friends. In partnership with the European Union, ZAFOD and the Zambian government, the Tusambilile Chapamo ‘Let’s Learn Together’ project has helped Grace and other children with disabilities to learn alongside their peers across all levels of schooling. © Sightsavers/Tom Jenkinson (2023)

Executive summary

With the 2030 deadline for Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) fast approaching, the world is running out of time to deliver on its promise of inclusive, quality education for all. Despite bold commitments, financing for education remains critically short of need. Millions of children continue to be left without access to learning—undermining their futures as well as global economic growth, equality, stability, and all of the other social benefits education brings.

Investing in education is a proven driver of economic development, social progress, and poverty reduction. It creates opportunities for upskilling populations, fosters resilience, and strengthens communities. Since 1980, investment in education has contributed to half of global economic growth, 70% of income gains among the world’s poorest quintile, and 40% of extreme poverty reduction.¹ Beyond economic benefits, education plays a crucial role in promoting inclusion, gender equality, and social cohesion.

Chronic underinvestment has denied millions of children their right to education and left global goals unmet, with an estimated \$97 billion shortfall to meet SDG4 targets.²

Since 2015, progress on SDG4 has stalled, with 251 million children still out of school—a mere 1% reduction since the goal's inception.³ This lack of investment not only deepens inequality but also carries immense economic costs, with inadequate investment in basic skills estimated to cost \$10 trillion in losses every year.⁴

Despite profound costs of inaction, education has been deprioritised globally. The situation is even more dire for education in emergencies - an area critically underfunded despite its role in providing life-saving support for children affected by conflict, displacement, and natural hazards.

Once a widely recognised champion of global education, UK Official Development Assistance (ODA) to education plummeted in priority from 13.5% in 2013 to just 3.5% of ODA in 2023.*

In February 2025, further significant funding cuts to the ODA budget were announced for 2027. The Send My Friend to School Coalition is profoundly disappointed by this action, which will have devastating effects on millions of marginalised children's education and their futures. At a time when investment in building better futures is urgently needed, the UK is turning its back. We urgently call for a reversal of these aid cuts.

With key replenishments approaching for the two multilateral funds for education, the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and the Education Cannot Wait Fund (ECW), it is imperative that funding is available for strong, multi-year pledges.

Domestic public resourcing is the largest and most sustainable source of education financing, but international reforms are needed for the budgets of low-income and lower-middle income countries to reach their potential.

Constraints governed at the international level on raising tax, crippling sovereign debt burdens, and coercive conditionalities restricting spending have made it difficult for countries to adequately fund education. The UK is uniquely positioned to support reforms called for by governments across the Global South by leveraging its influence at home and in international fora on tax, debt and international financial architecture.

Refocusing on education is a strategic move for the UK.

Investing in education fosters stability and reduces conflict,⁵ aligns with the UK Government's broader ambitions of fostering modern partnerships with the Global South and driving economic growth, as well as Labour's five missions domestically. Strategic investments in education are essential not only to achieving SDG4 but all of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Addressing the education financing crisis requires every country to step up.

Increased investment in ODA for education is important, as is rethinking how money is spent to ensure it is effective, well-coordinated and focused on reaching those who need it most. ODA alone will not solve the problem—the UK Government must also take ambitious steps to tackle systemic barriers that prevent countries from raising sufficient funding for public education systems through international financial architecture reforms on tax, debt and governance. The time for clear recommitment to funding education and increased prioritisation is now.

*UK bilateral ODA figures (up to 2023) include earmarked funding for multilateral spend, including multilateral funds such as GPE and ECW.

Recommendations

The Send My Friend to School coalition is calling on the UK Government to protect and reprioritise global education within its international development budget and agenda, while also supporting efforts to sustainably grow domestic public budgets.

1 Reprioritise and protect UK ODA to education.

The UK Government should work to progressively increase the proportion of ODA allocated to education to meet the international benchmarks of 15% of ODA and 10% of humanitarian funding. The UK should also enact a clear, time-bound plan to restore ODA to 0.7% of gross national income (GNI) and ensure spending is laser focused on poverty reduction in low- and lower middle-income countries.

2 Take action to ensure the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and Education Cannot Wait (ECW) are fully funded.

The UK Government must ensure that GPE and ECW are fully funded by delivering at least its existing funding commitments, rallying support among other donors, and making strong, multi-year pledges for their 2026 replenishments.

3 Support reforms to enable growth of domestic budgets for public education.

The UK Government should support reforms on tax, debt and the international financial architecture called for by civil society organisations and governments in the Global South to enable countries to increase their public spending on education, reduce dependency on ODA and sustainably address the funding gap.



Tenneh, 13, from Sierra Leone loves going to school even though it's difficult to reach. She wants to become a nurse, and feels encouraged by her friends and teachers.
© Tom Maguire/Save the Children (2021)

Investing in a Brighter Future

As we approach the target date for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) in 2030 and reflect on the last 25 years of our coalition's advocacy, it is clear that ambitious action on education is needed now more than ever.

Education is a public good and one of the most powerful drivers of sustainable development, fuelling economic growth, advancing equality, and strengthening global stability. It is a fundamental human right, a cornerstone of poverty reduction, and a foundation for the achievement of all of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Yet, globally, education faces persistent funding challenges. After several decades of repeated global political commitments to education for all, the funding needed to fulfil them has failed to materialise, breaking promises to children over multiple generations with effects that will be felt for generations to come.

Without immediate action, the financing outlook for education is only set to get worse. Education has slowly fallen off donor agendas amidst proliferating crises, with widespread cuts to budgets exacerbating this existing trend. UK Official Development Assistance (ODA) has seen a decade of declining prioritisation of education within its budget, with devastating fresh cuts announced for 2027 threatening to lower its education spending even further at a time when other major donors, most notably the United States, have also made drastic cuts to aid. Meanwhile, despite efforts by many low- and lower-middle-income countries to increase their education spending, public budgets are too small overall to adequately fund free, inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all.

With millions of children continuing to miss out on their right to education as a result of broken promises, every country must step up to address the issue. The UK has a critical role

to play as a longstanding champion of global education and an influential figure on the global stage with the ability to drive lasting change and transform education financing.

Over the next two years, Send My Friend to School's 2025-2027 'Invest In My Friends' Learning' campaign will bring together tens of thousands of young people across the UK, engage Parliamentarians and use several global moments to positively shift the UK's action on education financing. These global moments include the Fourth Financing For Development Conference (2025), growing momentum in the UK on debt justice through private creditors, a new United Nations Convention on Tax, and replenishments for the Global Partnership to Education (GPE) and Education Cannot Wait (ECW) (2026).

A brighter future for all of us relies on investment in education. At a time when setting the right priorities is more important than ever, it is crucial that the UK demonstrates its commitment to a world free from poverty on a liveable planet through investments in education.

Achieving global goals on education: a long road ahead



Education has been a key feature of global goals for development for several decades. From the World Declaration on Education For All in 1990, to the Millennium Development

Goals in 2000, and the current Sustainable Development Goals in 2015, world leaders have made strong political commitments to ensuring that every child receives their right to safe, quality and inclusive education.

Yet, slow progress means each of these goals is far from being met by their target dates.

Progress has been especially slow in the last decade. Since 2015 when the SDGs were adopted, advancement on SDG4 - '*inclusive and equitable quality education and the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all*' - has been minimal.

251 million children and youth remain out of school globally, with only a 1% decrease of 3 million since the goal was established.³ This rate of progress is 90% slower than in the 8 years before 2015, when the out-of-school population declined by 43 million, or 14%.³ Education quality is also an issue, with many children attending school still not learning the foundational skills they need to grow and thrive. It is estimated that 70% of children in low- and middle-income countries are unable to read basic text with understanding by the age of 10, rising to 89% in Sub-Saharan Africa.⁶

With 5 years to go until its target date, there is an urgent need to accelerate progress to reaching SDG4.

Chronic underfunding is failing students and teachers

One of the biggest barriers to progress on the global goals for education is insufficient funding. From 2005 to 2021, public spending on education increased by just 0.3%.⁷ This is a remarkably insufficient amount to get all children in school and learning, close opportunity gaps, provide essential materials and infrastructure, and ensure teachers are adequately paid and trained.

To meet even selected SDG4 country targets in the 79 lowest and lower-middle income countries by 2030, there is an estimated **\$97 billion annual financial shortfall**.²

Failing to invest in education has widespread repercussions for poverty reduction, social exclusion, the sustainability of social security systems and economic growth.⁸ UNESCO, the OECD and the Commonwealth Secretariat have estimated that the price of inaction to ensure all children learn basic skills is an **annual global loss of US\$10 trillion**,⁴ dwarfing the annual education financing gap⁹. More importantly, underinvestment entrenches and exacerbates inequality, contributing to ever growing gaps between countries and individuals.¹⁰

Improving educational outcomes requires more than just increased funding, and there are many effective low-cost interventions. However, until sufficient resources are made available, the amount needed to provide quality education for all school-aged children will exceed available resources and limit progress on education as a route to social and economic mobility.

Why is education underfunded?

Priorities: A rise in the scale and multiplicity of global challenges has shifted priorities, leading to global education falling off political agendas.

Pressures: Limited public budgets and growing debt burdens make it difficult for many low- and lower-middle-income countries to allocate 15-20% of public expenditure, or 4-6% of Gross National Product (GDP) to education. Even countries that do meet these benchmarks often still do not have sufficient funding for education due to the small size of their budget overall.

Perceptions: Education can be seen as a cost rather than an investment that pays dividends, and often suffers during cost-cutting exercises under austerity measures.

Postponement: Education's benefits can be long-term and intangible, leading policymakers to focus on needs seen as more urgent, quantifiable or quick to pay-off. Postponing investment overlooks education's crucial role in future growth and stability as well as its immediate life-saving and life-sustaining benefits.

Global trends in education funding

Over the last decade, total spend on education by governments, households and donors modestly increased. However, allocations per child have not significantly increased, especially in poorer countries with growing populations. These increases are also slower than global economic growth rates, demonstrating declining political will on funding education, particularly among donors.¹¹

Declines in donor development spending to education

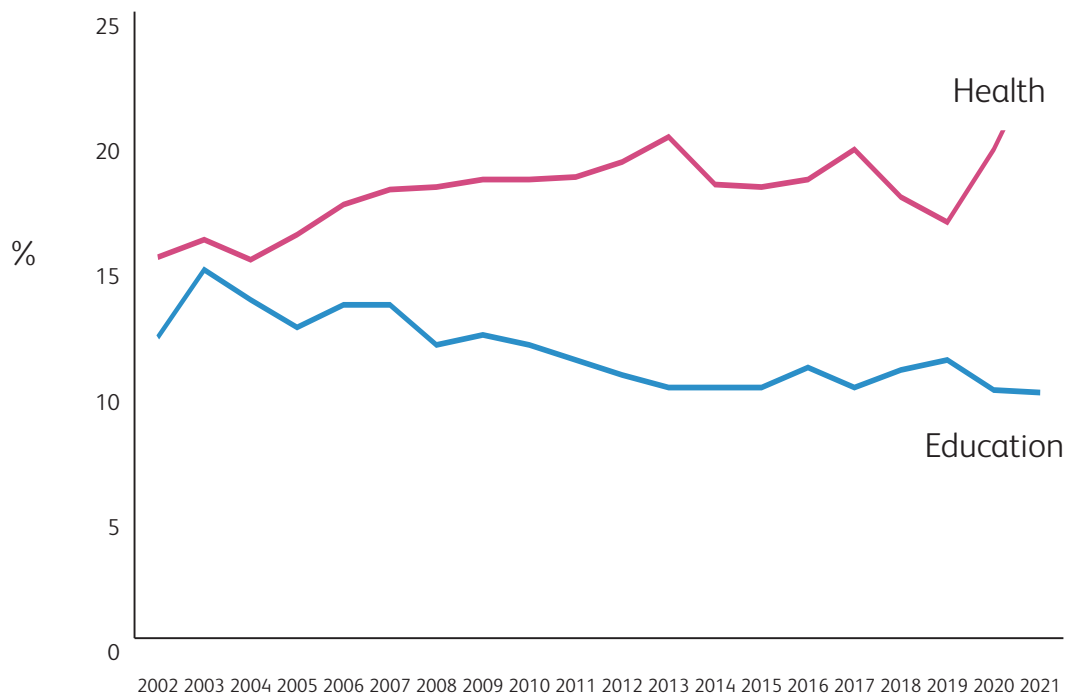
Between 2019 and 2022, the share of Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee's (DAC) country ODA budgets

allocated to education declined from 9.3% to 7.6%.¹¹ As many major donors move to cut their overseas development budgets, this trend stands to continue or accelerate unless explicit efforts are made to protect and prioritise education.

While many other essential sectors, such as nutrition, have also suffered declining global funding, some have grown substantially in this period, demonstrating clear shifts in donor priorities. For example, global ODA to the health and population sector increased from 17.5% in 2019 to 23.8% in 2022.³

Children's learning outcomes rely on the success of other public services to meet the needs of their family and their communities, and we celebrate

Figure 1. Share of ODA to education sector compared to health sector, 2002-2021



Source: Education Finance Watch 2023

85 million (37%)

of all crisis-impacted children and adolescents are completely out of school, of which:



52%
are girls



17%
are refugees or internally displaced

over 20%
are children with disabilities.



increases in funding for all of these sectors. However, education increasingly appears to be relegated to lower priority status, highlighting an urgent need to refocus on bringing spending priorities back in balance with need, particularly drawing from sectors not geared toward supporting basic services and human rights.

Declines in humanitarian funding to education

In 2023, humanitarian funding for education fell following nearly a decade of annual increases.¹² This is despite record need, with the number of school-aged children impacted by crises and requiring urgent education support rising by 35 million over the past 3 years to a total of 234 million children.¹³

85 million crisis-impacted children and adolescents are completely out of school, many of whom already experience significant marginalisation.

About half of all crisis-affected children who are out-of-school are concentrated in just five protracted crises: Sudan, Afghanistan, Ethiopia,

the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Pakistan.¹³ Analysis by the Geneva Global Hub for EiE, using Save the Children's Risk to Education Index, found that 11 countries of 'extreme' or 'high' risks to education in 2023 were also the places where the education sector was critically underfunded, receiving less than the global average of humanitarian funding that year.¹²

Protecting education during times of crisis is essential to upholding the right to learn. Education in emergencies not only ensures continued learning but also provides life-saving support, protection, and access to basic services like health and nutrition. Yet, this remains one of the most underfunded and under-prioritised areas of humanitarian aid, with rising needs outstripping any increases in donor funding year after year. **This is in stark contrast to the value that children and communities in crises place on education, with surveys consistently showing education as their top priority.**¹⁴

Constraints on domestic public budgets

Many low- and lower-middle-income countries have made significant increases in investment



“I want to become a doctor because I like to help people!”, Sahra, 10, lives in a displacement camp in Somalia, where local Child Friendly Spaces provide education, nutrition and a place for children to be themselves. © Save the Children (2024)

for education over the past decade. Since 2010, total education spending in these countries has increased by 60%, with government education spending in low income countries rising from 2.9% to 3.9% of GDP.¹¹ International benchmarks recommend countries allocate at least 15-20% of public expenditure and/or 4-6% of GDP to education. While many low and lower-middle income countries still fall significantly short of these targets, there have been positive trends in the right direction.

Even when countries reach or exceed international spending benchmarks, many have such small public budgets that the amount they spend is still insufficient to adequately fund education.¹¹ Many African countries spend a higher percentage of their budget on education than countries in Europe and North America, but still can only afford a small fraction of what

is spent per child in rich countries.¹⁰ Whilst these gaps persist, families are forced to pay out of pocket for private schools that often lack oversight and safeguarding, trained teachers and proper infrastructure, or they do not send their children to school at all.¹⁵ On average, households in low and lower-middle income countries spend more on education than households in high-income countries.¹¹

To increase domestic funding for education, efforts must go beyond focusing on the share of budgets allocated to education and address systemic barriers which constrain budgets overall. Growing the amount of funding available for education relies heavily on growing the revenue countries can collect through progressive taxes, addressing sovereign debt burdens and removing imposed austerity measures that undermine countries' ability to fund public services.¹⁶

Why invest in education?

Investing in education has been a pathway to prosperity for many countries over the past century, and continues to be a key factor for reducing poverty, upskilling populations, and improving wellbeing.

The benefits of education extend far beyond the classroom, boosting economic growth and social progress at every level. Its multiplier effect strengthens communities, builds resilience, and offers pathways for addressing inequality.

Education is a catalyst for economic growth. It fuels job creation, increases wages, and reduces economic inequality that hinders development. Education has played key role in reducing global poverty since 1980. Modest estimates show that

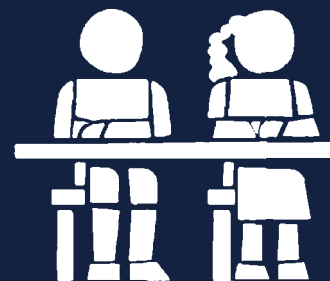
over the last 40 years, education has accounted for half of global economic growth, increased income amongst the world's poorest people by two thirds, reduced extreme poverty, and halved gender labour income inequality.¹

Each year of education generates about a 10% increase in individual earnings overall,¹¹ and 20% for girls.¹⁷ The returns are even higher in low income countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.

For every \$1 spent on education an economic return of \$10 is generated¹⁸. It is estimated that if every child and young person was in school, global GDP would be boosted by \$6.5 trillion per year.⁴

Education

is a catalyst for economic growth. Since 1980, investment in education has accounted for:



50%
of global
economic
growth



70%
of income
gains among
the world's
poorest quintile



40%
of extreme
poverty
reduction



50%
of the
reduction
in gender
labour income
inequality





Lynette, Juliet, Jemimah, and Florence rest during break time at their schools Catch-up Club in Wakiso, Uganda. These clubs use Teaching at the Right Level, an approach which targets instruction based on student knowledge to help children whose learning has been disrupted gain the foundational skills they need to continue their education. ©Esther Ruth Mbabazi / Save The Children (2022)

Education strengthens societies and promotes inclusion and gender equality. Out-of-school children are at greater risk of violence, abuse and exploitation, in particular forms of sexual and gender-based violence (such as rape and child marriage), harmful work, recruitment into armed groups and other life-threatening activities. Inclusive education helps reduce systemic barriers that exclude often marginalised learners from actively contributing to society. Gender-transformative approaches enable girls to increase their agency and employability,¹⁹ whilst early investment in disability inclusive education improves the self-sufficiency of learners, reduces pressure on social protection programmes, and fosters community inclusion.²⁰

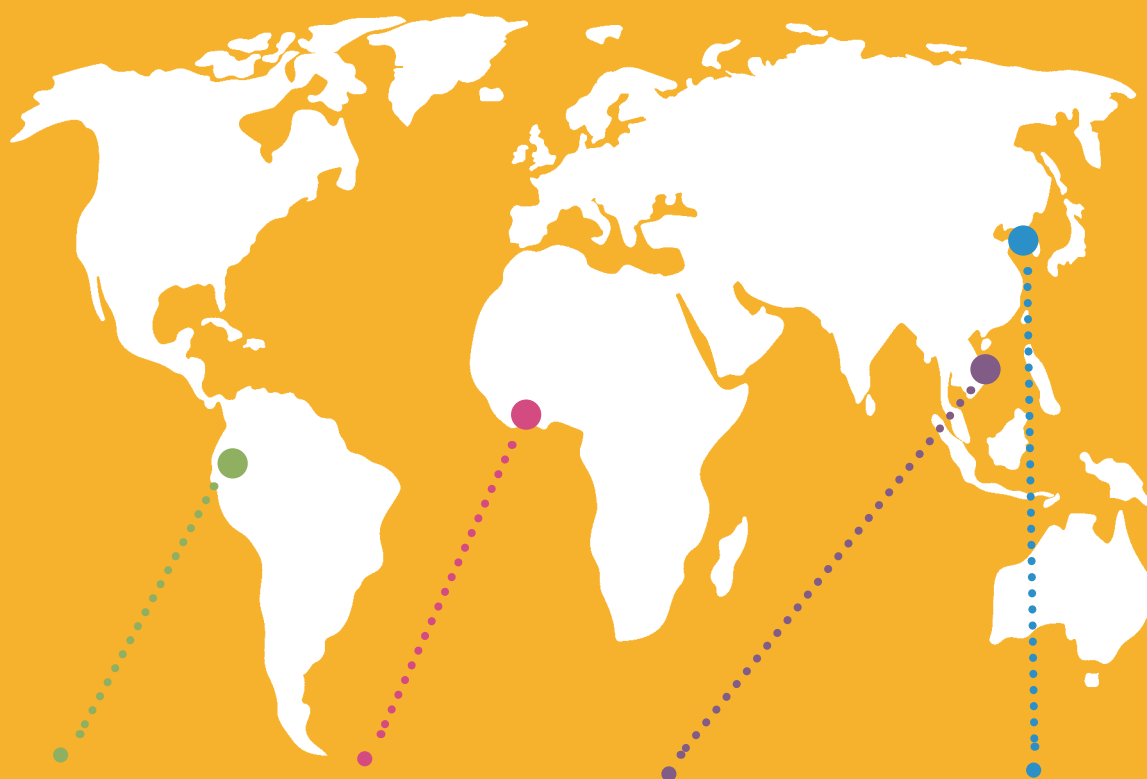
Education plays a critical role in addressing the climate crisis. It enables individuals and communities to understand and address the

impacts of climate change, empowering them with the knowledge and skills to build resilience and act as agents of change as the world changes rapidly around them.²¹

Education fosters global stability and reduces conflict. Educated populations develop their critical thinking, understanding, tolerance and capability for peaceful coexistence, reducing conflict and paving the way forward for lasting peace.⁵ Studies have shown that increased educational opportunities lead to lower rates of violence and political instability⁵. Educated populations are more likely to participate in democratic processes and less likely to support extremist movements. A person who has completed secondary education is more likely to be concerned and engaged in political actions than an individual with only primary education.²²

How investing in education fuels progress and transforms nations

When robust investments are made in strengthening public education systems, empowering teachers, and promoting equitable learning outcomes, education produces transformative results. Countries around the world have dramatically transformed their prospects by prioritising education.



Ecuador

invested heavily in education in the late 2000s as part of efforts to create a “society of Buen Vivir”, or ‘good life’. Budgetary prioritisation of education has been used to promote social change for a more intercultural, equal and sustainable society.²⁴

Ghana’s

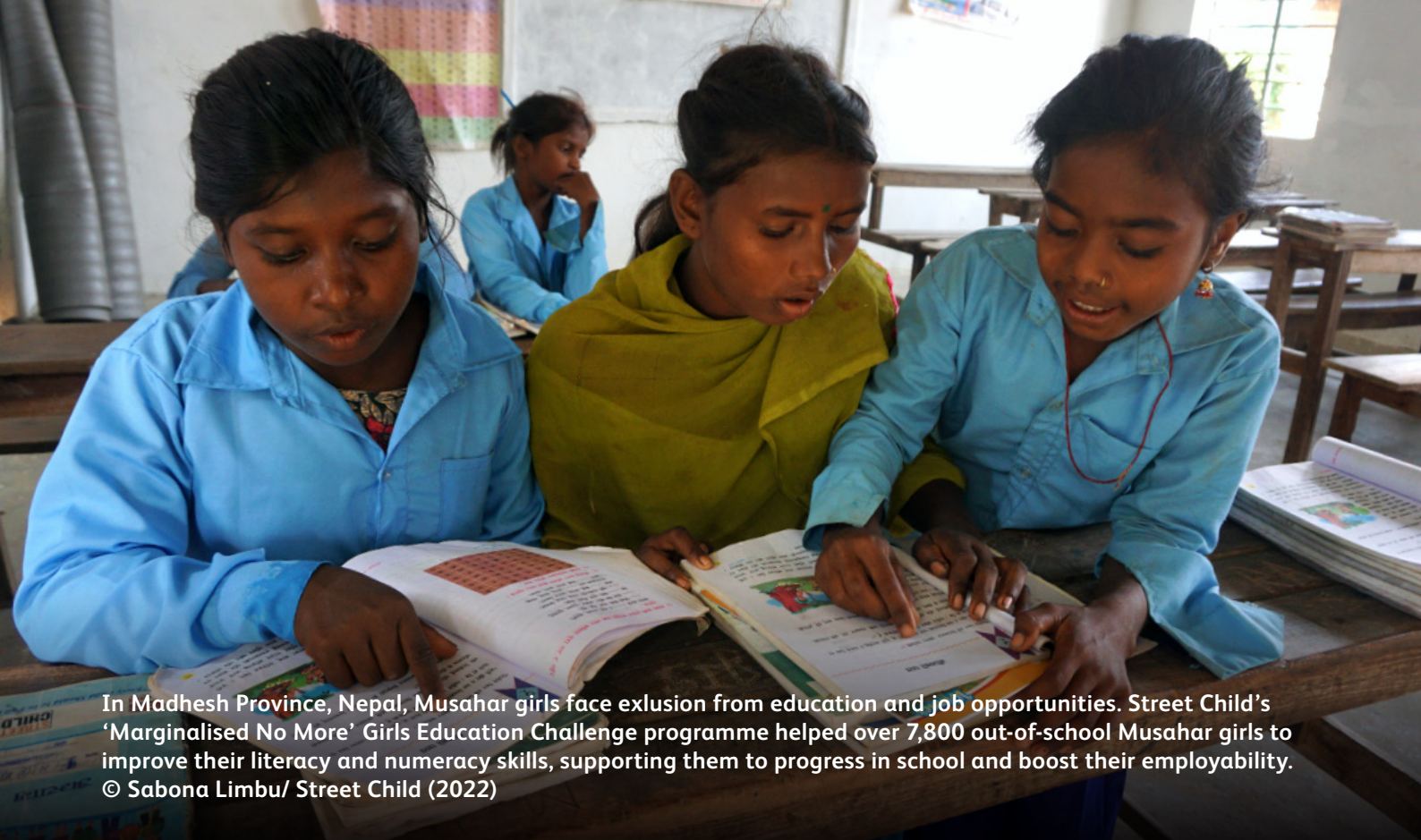
expansion of free education from kindergarten to senior high school has lifted the nation to have the third-highest enrolment rate in sub-Saharan Africa for both pre-primary and secondary education.²⁵

Vietnam’s

investment in education over the last two decades has led to impressive results in school enrolment, years of schooling, and learning outcomes, attracting international attention and new foreign investment.²⁴

South Korea

experienced rapid economic growth following the Korean war, transforming into a high-tech industrial powerhouse by prioritising universal education, investing in teacher training and expanding higher education.²³



In Madhesh Province, Nepal, Musahar girls face exclusion from education and job opportunities. Street Child's 'Marginalised No More' Girls Education Challenge programme helped over 7,800 out-of-school Musahar girls to improve their literacy and numeracy skills, supporting them to progress in school and boost their employability. © Sabona Limbu/ Street Child (2022)

The UK's role in championing education

The UK has historically been one of the largest donors to global education, both in relative and absolute terms. Through this funding, the UK has made important strides in advancing global education, with a particular focus on supporting marginalised children, especially girls, while also addressing broader challenges like climate change and foundational learning. Key successes include:

- **Supporting 15.6 million children** to access education, between 2015 and 2020, surpassing its target by 4 million.²⁶
 - **Securing education for marginalised girls** through the Girls' Education Challenge. Over 1.6 million marginalised girls across 17 countries were reached, including 179,000 who had never been to school, 150,000 girls with disabilities, and 65,000 who were excluded due to motherhood.²⁷ By targeting at-risk and out-of-school girls, the programme
- transformed lives and changed attitudes through challenging gender stereotypes, empowering women and girls, and tackling cycles of poverty.
- **Integrating education into the global climate agenda.** In partnership with the GPE and UNESCO, the UK co-launched the Declaration on the Common Agenda for Education and Climate Change at COP28, marking the first global political recognition of the critical link between education and climate action.²⁸
 - **Shining a light on the global education skills gap** as a founding member of the Global Coalition for Foundational Learning. The UK has championed the importance of foundational learning—literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skills—and has driven commitments to reduce the global share of children unable to read and understand a simple text by age ten.²⁹

- **Promoting the importance of education in emergencies** by playing a positive role in moving education from the margins of humanitarian policy making and financing. By recognising the importance of education for children in crisis, the UK has helped to promote a recent shift among donors towards focusing more on education in emergencies.²⁶

A gradual deprioritisation of education in UK ODA

While the UK has long been a leading champion of **education, it has fallen away from international benchmarks over the past decade. As a proportion of ODA, education spending has declined from 13.5% in 2013 to just 3.5% in 2023.*** The UK's contributions to core funding for multilaterals who work on global education is also lower than OECD-DAC averages.³⁰

Despite high-profile policy announcements and assurances by the previous government that girls' education was a key priority for UK international development, the reduction in the ODA budget from 0.7% to 0.5% resulted in disproportionate cuts to education. Between 2019 and 2023,

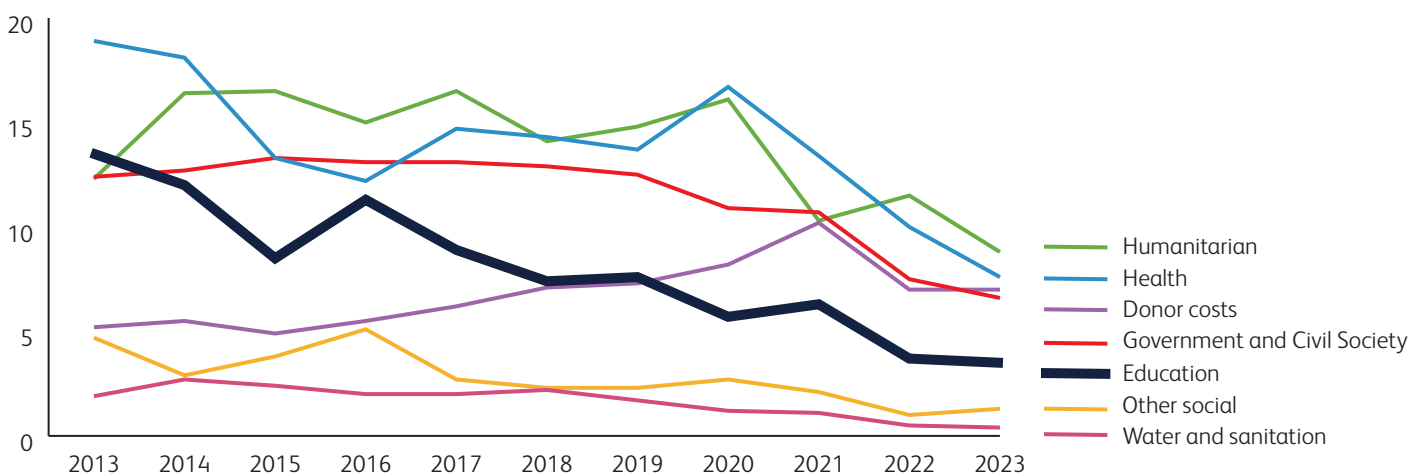
spending for education fell by 57%,³¹ with consecutive official reports on aid spending for 2021 and 2022 identifying education as one of the sectors which experienced the largest change in spending from the year prior.^{32,33} Increases in overall ODA spending due to economic growth in the time since 2021, and when the budget reached 0.58% in 2023, have failed to result in more money for education, signifying a clear and persisting shift in priorities. Today, the **UK ranks a disappointing 25th** in its prioritisation of education among OECD-DAC countries.³⁴

The UK has also decreased the amount spent on education from humanitarian funding, an area where education is often neglected but is sorely in need of robust support. In comparison to the EU, which has maintained the share of its funding allocated to EiE at the recommended 10% since 2019,³⁵ the UK allocated just 3% of humanitarian funding to education in 2021.³⁶

Cuts have hit the most marginalised

Analysis has shown that some of the regions and populations that need external spending the most were worst affected by the last round of UK ODA cuts in 2020.

Figure 2. The steady decline in prioritisation of education for UK ODA



Source: Statistics on International Development: Aid Spend 2023, UK FCDO

* UK bilateral ODA figures (up to 2023) include earmarked funding for multilateral spend, including multilateral funds such as GPE and ECW.

Since 2019, UK bilateral ODA has sharply declined in Africa and Asia - the regions with the highest numbers of out-of-school children and the lowest learning outcomes.³³ Cuts to funding for fragile and conflict-affected states have further weakened humanitarian education support.³⁷

Decreases in funding for both child-focused sectors³⁸ and gender equality in recent years have left girls at increased risk of being left behind, despite being a key strategic focus for the UK for the past several years. Following the reduction of the ODA budget to 0.5 % in 2020, the UK's programmes for girls' education lost 25 % of their funding in 2021 and an additional 54 % in 2022.³⁹

Similarly, the proportion of inclusive education programmes has reduced. In 2019, the UK marked 66 % of education projects as disability inclusive compared to only 41.2 % in 2022, UK ODA,⁴⁰ illustrating a drop in inclusive education

programmes. This impact could have a disproportionate impact on access to learning for children with disabilities, who are already two and a half times more likely to be out of school compared to their peers.⁴¹

Allocations to basic education have also declined in recent years, with funding shifting away from primary schooling and towards higher education and adult life skills, particularly through scholarships to universities in the UK.⁴² Considering the poorest children are most likely not to complete primary school and gain basic foundational skills, such as literacy and numeracy, the share of ODA allocated to basic education is an important marker of equitable spending.⁴³

Should trends over the last decade and the 2020 ODA budget cuts be indicative, education is under threat of being disproportionately impacted by the announced 2027 budget cuts, further decimating an already depleted sector.

The cost of UK cuts in Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, over 9 million children are currently out of school due to crisis, conflict, and displacement.⁴⁴ Aid cuts to basic services continue to have far-reaching consequences. It is estimated that the previous round of UK aid cuts resulted in 41,700 teachers and school leaders missing out on training, which could have improved the quality of education for generations of students. Access to learning for 330,000 children, half of whom are girls, was also impacted. For an additional 16,000 children in crisis situations, these cuts removed not just education, but the stability and protection that school provides in times of emergency.⁴⁵

The impact extended beyond the classroom. In August 2021, disability inclusion activities were abruptly cut in a UK-funded programme in Ethiopia following budget reductions, leaving girls who had received assistive devices without the critical follow-up and rehabilitative support they needed to stay in school.⁴⁶ For these girls, education had been more than just a venue for learning—it was an opportunity for independence and inclusion.

These financial decisions have tangible human consequences. Reductions in UK aid directly affects access to education, teacher training, and critical support services, impacting some of the world's most vulnerable children and young people.

A series of broken promises

In the UK and beyond, broken funding promises have prolonged the education financing crisis. In 1970, wealthy nations pledged to spend 0.7 % of GNI on international assistance, but few met this target. As donor countries deprioritise education within their aid budgets and move away from the 0.7 % commitment, the amount owed to low-income countries is mounting into the trillions.⁴⁷

Between 2013 and 2020, the UK Government achieved this, and in 2015 enshrined 0.7 % of GNI as statutory in law. However, in 2021 the UK reduced ODA to 0.5 % of GNI.⁴⁸ Despite Labour's 2024 manifesto promise to restore spending to 0.7 %, they announced a profoundly disappointing further reduction to 0.3 % by 2027—the lowest share since 1999. This further reduction threatens to land another blow on education, both through direct cuts and reductions in other critical public services necessary for children's learning. The UK must stop borrowing from children's futures to balance its books.

Record levels of ODA spending within the UK, particularly for IDRCs, have in turn reduced the amount reaching low-income countries. Without reforms, analysis by the Centre for Global Development suggests the UK's actual international spending could drop to 0.17 % of GNI by 2027.⁴⁹

An opportunity for the UK to rethink and recommit to education

A world free from poverty on a liveable planet is simply not possible without investment in safe, quality, inclusive education. As the Labour Government evaluates and plans its approach to international development, the UK has an opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to long-term solutions and modern partnerships with the Global South through education.

In recognition of the critical importance of preparing young people with skills fit for the 21st century, 90 % of low-income countries have increased their education budgets in the last decade and the African Union declared 2024 as the Year of Education. Surveys have shown families, particularly in low income countries, view education as a vital pathway out of poverty, with parents and children ranking education as their highest development and humanitarian priority.¹⁴ Simultaneously, dynamic grassroots movements, many powered by youth activists, continue to advocate for universal access to quality and inclusive education, along with other basic rights, across the globe.⁵⁰

Mirroring the priorities of partner governments, parents, children, activists and communities by recommitting to education in the UK's global development agenda is a principled way of demonstrating the Labour Government's mission to build more equitable, modern partnerships. Investing in education, directly through ODA and indirectly through supporting reforms to help grow domestic public budgets, is a smart way for the UK to bring ODA spending better in line with its priorities and work alongside nations to strengthen their own systems. Focusing on education supports the UK's mission to spur global economic growth and brings a human face to the government's stated ambitions to improve the financial architecture.

Furthermore, making education a priority within the UK's global agenda would mirror Labour's domestic agenda, which places education at the heart of one of its five missions to break down barriers to opportunity for young people.⁵¹ Global education has passionate advocates among the UK public. Through the Send My Friend to School campaign, hundreds of thousands of young people annually participate in local campaigning to call on the UK Government to support education in solidarity with their peers around the world.



Send My Friend to School Campaign Champions at Parliamentary Action Day, Westminster (2024)
© Send My Friend to School (2024)

Our Vision for UK Action

The scale of the global education crisis presents an undeniable challenge for governments around the world. However, if the UK Government wants to achieve its missions at home and abroad, and improve global peace and prosperity, then investing in global education must be re-prioritised. The UK has the potential to play a pivotal role in overhauling the global education financing system to unlock education's potential to drive progress.

The financing gap results from systemic inequities, inefficiencies, and a failure to adapt to interconnected crises. Current funding mechanisms have struggled to address these inequalities that perpetuate poor outcomes for the most marginalised. Simultaneously, growing privatisation and commercialisation in and of education systems have worsened these disparities, deepening economic exclusion and threatening progress towards SDG4.⁵²

Bold reforms are needed to tackle these root causes, increase domestic investment, restructure international aid, address global debt justice and embrace equitable, modern partnerships with the Global South.

Decolonising education financing: Standing with our global community

The Send My Friend to School coalition joins our partners in the Global Campaign for Education in calling for investments to build a more just world, including efforts to decolonise education financing.

Decolonising education financing means shifting power dynamics, ensuring national governments, in consultation with citizens, drive education reforms. The current international financial systems perpetuate colonial relationships, concentrating power in the Global North while extracting wealth from the

Global South, ultimately making it difficult to expand equitable education financing with lasting results. While aid has a role, it must align with domestic resource mobilisation and not dominate the global development agenda.

A decolonial mindset rejects Western-centric models and prioritises local knowledge and struggles. Education systems too often perpetuate neo-colonial power structures, racism, and patriarchal histories. Decolonising education means valuing diverse knowledge systems, including those marginalised by traditional systems.

In solidarity with over 100 national and regional education coalitions and international organisations who make up the Global Campaign for Education, the Send My Friend to School Coalition is committed to playing our part in ensuring the UK takes a decolonial approach to education financing that is sensitive to colonial histories and aims to chart a path forward based on respect and modern partnerships.



Students and young people in Liberia take to the streets to mark the launch of the Justice for Africa Campaign, joining youth organisations around the world in demonstrations to demand increased investment in education and social protection services.

© Justice for Africa (2023).

“Aid is not an act of charity, but one of political responsibility in a globalised world. Rich countries that have benefited from systemic and historical exploitation of Africa must meet their responsibilities [and address] the global injustices behind the rising education inequality facing African children and young people.”

100 Million Campaign and the All-Africa Students Union⁵³

A global movement calling for increased education financing

Students, teachers unions, civil society organisations and Heads of State all around the world are taking a stand to call for more funding for education.

Justice for Africa: Don't Cut Our Future Campaign (2023-present)

Youth and student-led organisations worldwide have rallied behind an African-led response to the alarming decline in the rights of young people across Africa driven by unjust and discriminatory global inequalities. The Justice for Africa campaign, with support from the All-Africa Students Union, the 100 Million Campaign, and the Global Student Forum, has mobilised young people in over 30 countries to demand justice and advocate for increased investment in education and social protection services.⁵⁴

Go Public! Fund Education (2023-present)

Education International, the world's teachers union federation, launched a campaign advocating for fully funded public education systems and to resist budget cuts, austerity and privatisation. The campaign calls for increased investment in teachers, the single most important factor in achieving quality education, through guaranteed labour rights, good working conditions, competitive salaries and respect for teachers and educational workers.⁵⁵

GCE Global Action Week for Education on Decolonising Education Financing (2023)

Thousands of civil society organisations across the planet from the Global Campaign for Education joined forces to call for more funding for education through actions on tax, austerity, debt, paradigms and Special Drawing Rights. The campaign emphasised the importance of a transformative and decolonial approach to financing.⁵⁶

Transforming Education Summit Call to Action on Education Investment (2022)

Heads of State from around the world gathered in 2022 for the UN Transforming Education Summit (TES), where a call to action for more equitable education financing was launched. Over one third of countries set education financing targets, vowing to maintain or increase domestic public education spending in line with international benchmarks.⁵⁷



Class V & III Fr. M.E. Friday 1st December 2023
Topic: Relationship
Importance of relationship
① It helps us to have mutual love.
② It helps us to have common understanding.
③ It helps us work together for the betterment of our community.
④ It helps us to maintain (Goals
Com...)

It brings about unity and peace among us.

Children in Kroo Bay, Freetown, Sierra Leone, attend classes in a makeshift school after their previous building abruptly closed.

© Jack Hill/ Street Child (2023)

Our guiding principles for education financing

Investment in education has the ability to both empower and disempower, which is why it is important that the UK Government takes a principled approach to education financing. The following principles guide our approach and advocacy on education financing, and form the basis on which we judge the UK's investment in education.

1 Promoting localisation and challenging power imbalances

Decision-making power should rest with national governments, local actors, educators, and communities, rather than external donors or private actors. Financing should be aligned with local, cultural, social and economic realities, supporting locally-led solutions that strengthen national education systems. To ensure lasting impact, investment should focus on building local capacity and long-term sustainability, rather than creating dependency on external expertise or short-term projects.

2 Strengthening public education systems

All funding should support the free provision of public education systems to ensure equitable and sustainable access to education. This includes the development of public education infrastructure through quality teacher training and continuous professional development, safe schools, curriculum development, and effective accountability systems.

3 Equity and non-discrimination

Funding should be focused on marginalised groups, prioritising initiatives that reduce disparities in education access and outcomes, and that promote gender equality and inclusivity. This should support marginalised populations, including girls, children with disabilities, rural communities, refugees and displaced communities, to have access to quality education. Ensuring financing mechanisms do not incentivise serving only high-performing or less costly students.

4 Alignment with human rights law

All financing mechanisms should uphold the right to free, quality, and inclusive education as outlined in international human rights treaties and the Abidjan Principles.⁵⁸ Financing mechanisms should be oriented toward supporting the state's ability to fulfil its obligations to provide free, quality education.



5 Transparency and accountability

Financing mechanisms should be accountable to the public, allowing young people, teacher unions, local communities and civil society to monitor and influence projects. Reporting should reflect holistic educational goals that go beyond easy-to-measure metrics and require transparency in the design, implementation and evaluation of financing projects.

6 Public, not private, education

Public funds should not be used to support for-profit education providers or privatisation schemes which undermine the state's role as the duty bearer for the right to education. Private funders and providers of education should be robustly regulated and assessed to prevent exploitation, inequity and unethical sources of funds.

7 Progressive and sustainable

Progressive domestic resource mobilisation should be prioritised to reduce reliance on external financing. External financing should contribute to building sustainable public education systems and complement state efforts. Financing models that increase debt should be avoided, ensuring countries are not burdened with unsustainable debt levels.

8 Inclusivity in decision-making

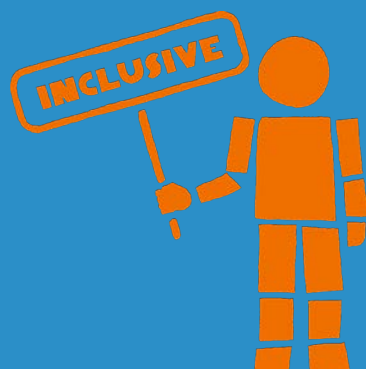
Students, teachers, parents, civil society and recipient states should be involved in the planning and monitoring of funding, ensuring it is tailored to local needs and avoids externally imposed priorities or profit-driven models. Youth should be meaningfully engaged in decision-making.

9 International cooperation and coordination

Donors, international organisations and private financiers should harmonise financing efforts, aligning with government priorities and global commitments to SDG4. Donor governments should aim to fulfil their fair share in supporting the right to education in line with international benchmarks.

10 Reject austerity

Austerity policies and public sector wage bill constraints that put downward pressure on school funding, the teacher wage bill and other areas of education spending must be rejected by governments, donors and international finance institutions.





Samrawit, 10, attends an ECW-supported primary school in Tigray, Ethiopia. She loves learning and playing with her friends. Children here have returned to school following years of disruption due to conflict in the region.
© Education Cannot Wait/Tesfaye (2024)

Our asks of the UK Government

The global community stands at a crossroads. We can continue with business as usual, allowing inequities to deepen and millions of children to be left behind. Or we can seize this moment to build a financing architecture that meets the scale of the crisis and reflects the principles of equity and justice.

The Send My Friend to School Coalition calls on the UK Government to actively demonstrate its legacy as a champion of global education by giving it the priority it deserves within its global development agenda:

Recommendation 1: Reprioritise and protect UK ODA to education

The UK Government should work to progressively increase the proportion of ODA allocated to education to meet the international benchmarks of 15% of ODA and 10% of humanitarian funding. The UK should also enact a clear, time-bound plan to restore ODA to 0.7% of gross national income (GNI) and ensure spending is laser focused on poverty reduction in low- and lower middle-income countries.

While it constitutes a relatively small amount of total global education spending, ODA remains critical to closing the education funding gap, particularly in low-income countries where it accounts for 13 % of total education spending.⁵⁹ In addition to providing funding for systems strengthening and increasing equity and inclusion, it is essential for addressing the impacts of climate change, conflict, and protracted crises.⁵⁷

In the face of record deprivation, there is an urgent need for the UK to reprioritise education within its ODA budget. With each year the UK fails to raise the proportion of ODA it allocates to education, it becomes increasingly difficult for the UK to remain a credible champion of global education.

The UK has been close to international benchmarks before

While the UK's education spending is significantly below international benchmarks, at its current level of 3.5 % of bilateral spending and bilateral earmarked for multilateral, in the past decade it has been very close to reaching 15 % of ODA for education.

After several years of progressive increases in aid spending, and building on the 10.9 % spent bilaterally on education when Labour were last in government, bilateral spending on education reached a high of 13.5 % in 2013 and exceeded 10 % in six out of eight years between 2009 and 2016.³¹

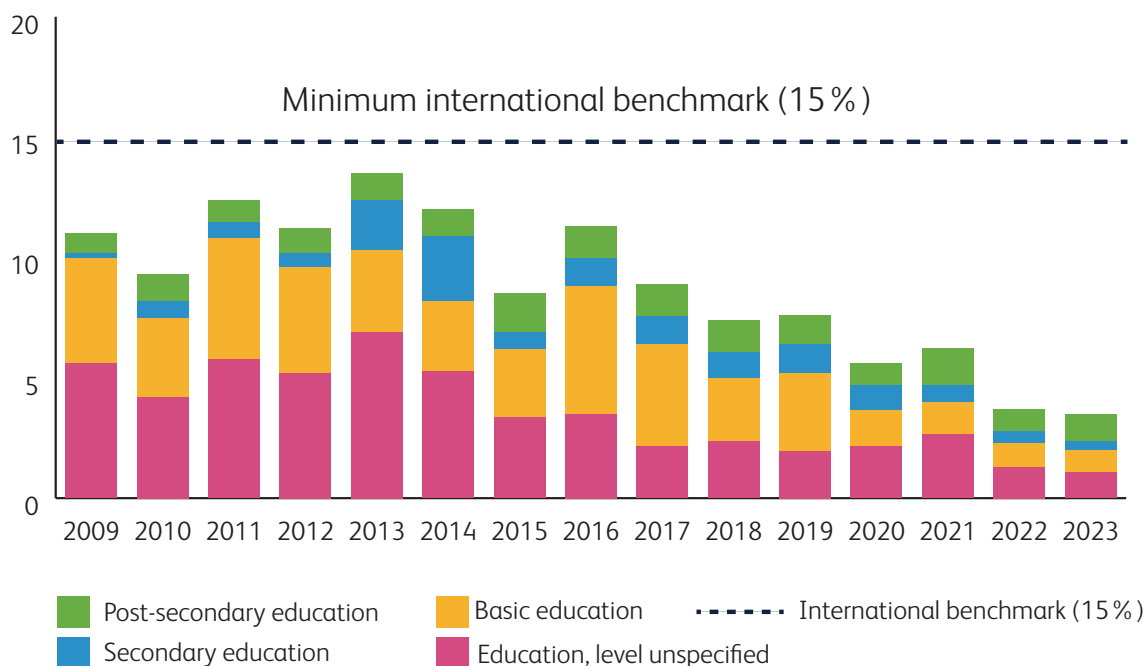
While there are different pressures on UK ODA today, achieving this benchmark is not unrealistic. By valuing education as the smart, cross-cutting investment it is for long-term outcomes, this benchmark is sensible not only for achieving goals on education but other issue areas as well.

Prioritising the right investments alongside education

It is important that any increase to education does not come at the expense of other critical sectors that support basic human rights such as nutrition, WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene), health, and other essential services which enable children to fully reap the benefits of education.

Cuts to education are part of a wider trend of declining proportions of UK aid spent towards child-focussed sectors. A recent report by

Figure 3: Proportion of UK Bilateral ODA to education, 2009-2023



Source: Statistics on International Development, UK FCDO (2024)

UNICEF revealed child-focused UK ODA fell by 56% between 2016-2022.³⁸ Bond, the UK’s network of development NGOs, has also raised alarm about declines in UK aid going to basic needs sectors and to supporting the most marginalised.⁶⁰ The Send My Friend to School coalition stands with other advocates in the UK international development sector calling for refocusing aid on these and other key areas for poverty reduction.

Freeing up funds for global education

In order to ensure that limited available funding is directed to the areas most in need, the UK should consider shifting its spending within the ODA budget

to ensure it is focused overseas and on the most marginalised children.

- In-donor refugee costs (IDRCs):** Support for asylum seekers and refugees within the UK, which the Home Office funds using the ODA budget, has increased substantially while global education spending has declined. The UK is an outlier among OECD-DAC countries in the amount of ODA it spends domestically on IDRCs.⁶¹ In 2023, £4.3bn, or 28% of the aid budget, was spent on hotel accommodation and housing costs for asylum seekers.⁶⁰ This was more than 12 times the amount of ODA spent on global education that year.* Using the ODA budget so heavily within

* FCDO (2024): The UK spent 4,273m on bilateral ODA to refugees in the UK versus 346m on education - bilateral education spending includes funding for multilateral funds GPE and ECW.

the UK dilutes ODA's utility as a reliable source of finance to support poverty reduction and sustainable development in low-income countries and fragile states, where other sources of finance are hard to raise.³¹ While support for refugees and people seeking asylum in the UK is crucial and must be maintained, sourcing adequate resources should not come at the expense of vulnerable groups overseas who need assistance.

- **British International Investment (BII):** ODA spending on British International Investments (BII) increased by 49% in 2023/24. The UK Parliament's International Development Committee inquiry into BII's investment activity found 'questionable investments' some of which 'do not have a clear poverty focus, are in conflict with the UK Government's policies or may actually have harmed society and the environment'.⁶² The Committee challenged whether the ultimate beneficiaries of BII's interventions were the world's poorest people, with a high concentration of BII's investment portfolio in middle-income countries and investments in companies owned by high-net-worth individuals. The use of intermediaries for investments also means that BII has diluted control over its money, which has led to continued investments in for-profit, low-fee schooling, despite the UK exiting direct investment in fee-charging K-12 education.^{62*}
- **Other ODA spending in the UK:** In 2022, the UK spent £82 million of education ODA on scholarship costs for

use at UK universities, making the UK the largest country recipient of UK ODA to education. This, together with IDRCs and administrative costs of development spending, means a third of all ODA was spent within the UK in 2023.⁶³ While these scholarships provide important pathways for bright scholars from global majority countries, the balance of ODA spending should be shifted to focus more on low-income countries and basic education in order to support transformative systems strengthening and better reach the most marginalised children.

Innovative financing for education

Innovative financing has been increasingly turned to by the UK and other donors to mobilise additional resources in the absence of adequate traditional ODA funding for education. While there is potential to bring in more funding through these methods, the Send My Friend to School coalition urges the UK Government to take a critical, cautious approach to innovative financing, noting its limitations and risks.

The UK should ensure that funding dedicated to new innovative mechanisms does not detract from efforts to bring ODA to education in line with international benchmarks, and should be additional to traditional, grant-based ODA. It should also evaluate any opportunities to engage with innovative financing mechanisms against our principles outlined in the previous section to ensure all money is raised with the long-term, sustained mission of delivering free, public, locally governed education for all.

* Civil society organisations around the world have raised concerns about investments in fee-charging schools education due to impacts on educational outcomes, poverty and inequality. Particular concern has been levied around New Globe/Bridge International Academies following a series of serious allegations, including child sexual abuse. While the IFC has divested from Bridge following allegations, BII remains invested in Bridge through the intermediary fund Novostar. (UK Parliament International Development Committee (2023) Investment for development: The UK's strategy towards Development Finance Institutions)

The International Finance Facility for Education

The International Finance Facility for Education (IFFEd) is an example of an innovative financing mechanism spearheaded by the UK, which uses established channels of development funding to lower-middle income countries through multilateral development banks. IFFEd aims to increase multilateral development bank's lending capacity at a low cost to donors, offering a substantial increase in concessional loan financing available specifically for education. Once fully operational, IFFEd has the potential to leverage \$7 of additional funding for every \$1 contributed.⁶⁴

As the fund develops, we encourage all stakeholders to closely monitor the outcomes and ensure the fund follows the key principles laid out above to ensure this mechanism operates as an equitable and sustainable fund which serves the public good.

Targeting education spending for greatest impact

With smaller budgets, it is more important than ever that the UK has a laser sharp focus on spending in the right areas. In addition to value for money considerations and our financing principles recommended above, the Send My Friend to School coalition encourages the following focuses to guide spending.

- **Target regions with the lowest learning outcomes:** Since 2019, bilateral ODA has decreased sharply in Africa and Asia, where learning outcomes in basic skills such as reading and maths are lowest, and the numbers of out of school children are highest. This decline halved what the UK spent in low-income countries.³³ In 2022, only 41 % of country-specific bilateral UK ODA to education went to 45 low-income countries.⁶⁵ Given the limited funds, the

UK should prioritise directing its ODA to low-income countries that already receive an insufficient portion of global ODA for education—only 0.45 % of the \$5.8 trillion spent in 2022.⁶⁶

- **Target areas experiencing acute and protracted crises:** Emergencies and protracted crises are a major disrupter of education and building resilient education systems to withstand hazards and crises requires significant investment. The UK decreased the amount of bilateral ODA spent on humanitarian assistance by 20 % in 2023 at a time of proliferating conflict and climate-related crises. The UK should target spending on countries identified⁶⁷ as most vulnerable to shocks to school systems that threaten children's learning. As climate change increasingly impacts the ability of school systems to operate, UK climate finance should also earmark funding for education.



Schools in Chiang Rai province, Thailand were heavily damaged by flooding, leaving classrooms and school grounds submerged. Climate related emergencies has disrupted the education of thousands of children.
© Ronnachai Jintanathum/ Save the Children (2024)



Teachers like Kamal Hossein have had a big impact on children's learning, happiness and wellbeing at the Learning Center in Cox's Bazar, Myanmar.
© UNICEF/Sokol

- **Focus spending on educational inequality to reach the most marginalised children:** Girls, children with disabilities, and other marginalised learners should be the focus of UK education spending. The UK has made high profile commitments to girls, including through the 2021 UK-led G7 Global Objectives on Girls' Education²⁷, and to students with disabilities through the 2022 Transforming Education Summit Call to Action on Disability-Inclusive Education.⁶⁸ These commitments include outcomes-based and spending objectives that the UK should double-down to meet under a constrained budget. It should also focus on foundational learning to ensure all children have the basic skills they need to be able to continue their education.
- **Well-coordinated, systems-level interventions:** Focus on strengthening education systems, which is essential to shifting long-term education outcomes. These investments should support national priorities and be well-coordinated with

other donors and non-state actors to avoid duplication. Examples of long-term, systems-level work include: investing in efforts to lower the cost of learning assessments; supporting the recruitment, training and retention of teachers; developing national capacity, and using national institutions for implementation to ensure sustainability.

A return to 0.7%

Without restoring the overall size of the ODA budget, critical trade-offs will persist. This is especially important as other high-income countries turn away from their obligations to international development assistance and multilateralism. We join our colleagues across the UK international development sector and the globe in calling on the UK to urgently make time-bound commitments to bring the ODA budget back in compliance with its legal obligation to 0.7% of GNI. Now is not the time for the UK to scale back its development and humanitarian support.

Recommendation 2: Take action to ensure GPE and ECW are fully funded

The UK Government must ensure that GPE and ECW are fully funded by delivering at least its existing funding commitments, rallying support among other donors, and making strong, multi-year pledges for their 2026 replenishments.

A multilateral approach to investing in education is critical to boost the impact of UK aid and promote localised approaches. Working through multilateral channels allows the FCDO to leverage additional funds to progress its global education priorities and extend the UK’s reach beyond the countries where it works bilaterally, including the most fragile and conflict-affected communities. Multilateral approaches are also key to opening doors to more locally-led development, with the two major education

funds, the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and Education Cannot Wait (ECW), committed to centering the priorities of country partners and channelling funding through national and local governance structures, including civil society.

The value of a multilateral approach has been consistently demonstrated by the effective performance of, and return on the UK’s investments, to GPE and ECW. These two funds work together to offer a

Figure 4. Complementary funds working to secure education for all



Source: ECW and GPE (2025)

comprehensive approach to education, with ECW focusing on rapid emergency responses which complements GPE's system-building and strengthening efforts. Both offer diverse funding options for addressing short- and long-term needs, strengthening coordination mechanisms under government stewardship, and forging diverse partnerships with a range of education actors. Together, GPE and ECW generate more funding for education and provide support across the humanitarian-development spectrum.

The impact of GPE and ECW

Crises are becoming more complex and lasting longer, demanding more resources to address urgent education needs.

Since 2022, **GPE grants** have reached 253 million children, accounting for close to 40% of school-aged children in 76 countries.⁶⁹ During their last strategic period (2021-2025), GPE grants helped to distribute 169 million textbooks, train 1.9 million teachers and construct or rehabilitate 36,000 classrooms.

ECW has reached over 11 million girls and boys, from early years to secondary school, and mobilised more than \$1.6 billion for its Trust Fund since 2017.⁷⁰ In 2023 alone, ECW, together with its strategic partners, provided quality education to 5.6 million children and adolescents.⁷⁰

2026 - a year for making strong, multi-year pledges for multilateral education partners

GPE and ECW will both enter new funding cycles in 2026, aiming to replenish and grow their pots to deliver their objectives. The UK is a major donor to both funds - it is currently the largest donor to GPE, accounting for 17.96% of all contributions to GPE⁷² and is the second largest bilateral donor to ECW, committing 9% of total mobilised funds to ECW.⁷³ As a long-time champion of GPE and ECW, the UK has been a highly valued and impactful partner in supporting education transformation through these mechanisms.

Reflecting low donor prioritisation of education, both funds have fallen short of



Aisha, 13, happily goes to school to learn and play like other children. Displaced by conflict, ECW's Multi-Year Resilience Programme in Maiduguri, Nigeria, provided Aisha with a handcycle and enrolled her in an Accelerated Education Programme for out-of-school children.

their targets for replenishments in the past, with the funding picture ahead increasingly difficult. Despite being one of the largest donors to both funds, the UK has also fallen below expected contributions in past replenishment cycles. In 2021, as co-host of GPE's Global Education Summit, the UK pledged £430 million to GPE's 2021-2025 replenishment cycle, £170 million short of the figure that the Send My Friend to School coalition calculated was needed as a fair contribution.⁷⁴

2026 is a critical moment for the UK to demonstrate its leadership and confidence in these critical funds to other donors. As a leading donor to the GPE and ECW, the global education community needs the UK

to make a strong pledge and use its voice to call for other donors to increase investment. The UK must ensure that GPE and ECW are fully funded by delivering at least the existing funding commitments, rallying support among other donors, and making multi-year pledges ahead of their 2026 replenishments.

We also urge the UK to continue to use its influence on GPE's Board and ECW's Executive Committee (ExCom) and High Level Steering Group to further strengthen collaboration and harmonise approaches across both funds, improve governance, accountability and transparency and the meaningful engagement of young people in decision-making at all levels.

Why education matters to me!



Massah Bockarie, GPE Youth Leader, Sierra Leone

“Both my parents were the first in their families to graduate from college. They attended public schools that weren't perfect, but they worked; classrooms were equipped, and teachers were trained and committed. This was in the 1980s when fewer than 13% of children in their communities had access to education. Today, because of that investment, their lives, mine, and so many others have been transformed for the better.

More children in their communities and all over the world now aspire to follow the same path. But while access has expanded in some communities, funding has not kept pace. Education financing is not just a local issue; it's a global one. Today, 244 million children and young people are out of school, and many of those in school face overcrowded classrooms, untrained teachers, and a lack of learning materials.

In our Answer the Call⁷¹ Youth Statement to world leaders, we make it clear: **education is not just a right; it's a smart investment.** If we are serious about achieving the SDGs, education must be a priority. Young people are ready to lead the change.”

Recommendation 3: Support reforms to enable growth of domestic budgets for public education

The UK Government should support reforms on tax, debt and the international financial architecture called for by civil society organisations and governments in the Global South to enable countries to increase their public spending on education, reduce dependency on ODA and sustainably address the funding gap.

Government mobilisation of domestic public resources is the most sustainable source of education financing. As the UK and other donor countries around the world reduce development assistance budgets, transformative action to enable countries to fully fund their education systems in the long-term using domestic resources has never been so urgent.

From the Transforming Education Summit Call to Action on Educational Investment to the Bridgetown Initiative and the UN Framework Convention on Tax, global momentum is growing behind progressive tax reform, addressing debt and the revision of the international finance architecture - a system that currently neither represents the voices and needs of the majority of the world's population nor responds to today's major challenges. The most impactful way the UK can demonstrate its commitment to modern partnerships, global education and building a fairer and more just world is by backing the reforms needed to enable countries to progressively increase their public spending.

Tax Reform

Tax is the primary way that education is funded everywhere in the world, and is a cornerstone of solving the education financing crisis. Under human rights law, the state is the duty bearer for fulfilling the right to free, quality, public education, and must allocate the maximum of their available resources to funding it, which includes raising more progressive tax where possible.⁷⁵

Low tax revenue is a key reason why many countries struggle with inadequate budgets for funding education. The average low-income country has an extremely low tax-to-GDP ratio of just 16%, contrasting with middle-income countries whose ratios are nearer to 30% and high-income countries which often exceed 40%.¹⁶ 83% of low-income countries and 43% of lower-middle income countries are below the recommended international tax-to-GDP benchmark, leaving an immense amount of funding to be gained for education through increased revenues.¹¹

Low revenue collection is not inevitable for low-income countries. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that most countries could raise their tax-to-GDP ratios by five percentage points by 2030, which would allow a doubling of spending on education and health and some other services.¹⁶

To raise more tax revenue, countries need to implement fair and progressive tax reforms, which focus on taxing the wealthiest individuals and companies, rather than putting more pressure on people with lower incomes. When taxes are increased for low-income people, it can lead to unrest, as seen in Kenya in the summer of 2024 when protests erupted over new taxes applied to basic goods.⁷⁶

Tackling illicit financial flows holds major opportunities for raising additional funds for education. It is estimated that African Union countries lose an estimated \$8 billion annually through illicit financial flows.¹⁶

Internationally, OECD member states are responsible for facilitating the vast majority of revenue losses to international tax abuse.⁷⁸ Higher-income countries are responsible for 99.4% of countries' tax losses, costing countries around the world over \$469 billion in lost tax every year, while lower-income countries are responsible for just 0.6%.⁷⁹

The UK alone is responsible for 12.5% of global tax losses and ranks in the top 20 countries for global tax abuse via corporations and private individuals,⁷⁹ making it a major contributor to lost domestic revenue for education. Clamping down on global tax abuse alongside a wealth tax on the richest countries could raise enough revenue to provide education for the 72 million primary aged children currently out-of-school as well as hire 13 million more teachers worldwide - vital at a time when the world needs an additional 44 million teachers in order to meet SDG4.⁷⁷

Impact of tax havens on global education

Every year, \$483 billion is lost in tax to corporations and the super-rich through tax havens. Over \$30 billion of this is lost by 27 low income and 36 lower-middle income countries, where 41 million children are out of primary school. If these countries did not lose this money every year and instead spent 20% of that extra tax on education, nearly 20.8 million children who do not have access to education could go to primary school.⁷⁷

“ For too long, the voices of developing countries, especially from Africa, have been sidelined in global tax deliberations...we have yearned for a more just and inclusive international tax system...the future belongs to those who choose cooperation over division and dialogue over discord.”

Statement by Nigeria, on behalf of the UN Africa Group, at negotiations over the terms of reference for the new UN Framework Convention on Tax.⁸⁰

Seizing the moment: The UN Tax Convention provides an opportunity for reform

A new UN Tax Convention called for by the United Nations' Africa Group proposes fairer, more effective and inclusive international cooperation on tax.⁸¹ For centuries, international tax rules have been primarily determined by the OECD, a small group of rich countries and some of the world's biggest tax havens. A UN Tax Convention would represent a major shift in how international taxation is approached, with the potential to significantly impact the architecture of global financial systems and how tax dollars are used for the public good.

Current negotiations on the new UN Framework Convention on Tax are an essential step for levelling the playing field in global tax governance to enable low- and

lower-middle-income countries to raise more funds through more progressive tax and a crackdown on evasion. Throughout this process, the UK has sadly proposed amendments to dilute the power of the Convention,⁸² and stands out as one of only nine countries to vote against the adoption of a mandate for the new UN Tax Convention in November 2025.⁸³

The UK must change course to back reforms to shift tax governance to the United Nations and become a leader in transparency and reforms on trust law to make it harder for rich and powerful people to shield assets from tax authorities and legitimate creditors.

Debt Restructuring and Relief

Sovereign debt burdens have significant impacts on governments' ability to properly fund their education systems.



Jonathan, 15, a Child Campaigner from South Sudan lives in a Ugandan refugee settlement. He has encouraged his peers to return to school, and lobbied to Ministers to ensure schools reopen for all classes. © Esther Ruth Mbabazi/Save the Children (2020)

Twenty-five African countries spend more on debt than education,⁸⁴ and 3.3 billion people currently live in countries that spend more on debt interest than education or health.⁸⁵ Across low income countries, debt servicing on net interest payments alone accounts for 60% of education expenditure.⁸⁶ The severity of this situation is only expected to grow, with more than half of countries either in or at high risk of debt distress and urgently requiring debt relief.⁸⁷

Current debt structures reveal deep inequalities and unfairness in the global system. The average interest rates for African countries are eight times higher than those for Germany and four times those for the USA.⁸⁶

The UK is in a unique position to end this crisis, as 90% of debts to private creditors owed by lower-income countries that are eligible for the Common Framework (the current debt restructuring framework) are governed by UK law. The UK Government should implement new debt justice legislation, as recommended by the International Development Committee, to bring financial giants to the table to negotiate fair debt relief for lower-income countries.⁸⁸ Additionally, the UK should drive reforms to enhance the Common Framework, ensuring that countries receive transparent, timely, and sufficient debt relief, creating a level playing-field and critical route out of crisis.⁸⁹

Long-term change requires meaningful, lasting reforms on governance, and the UK has a role to play in this as well. The UK should engage in efforts to improve global governance on sovereign debt by supporting calls for a new debt workout mechanism in similar fashion to the UN Convention on Tax. This would move decision-making on debt from the IMF, dominated by Global North countries, to the United Nations, where each country has one vote, offering a more just and democratic approach to this issue which has historic roots in colonialism.⁹⁰

International Financial Reform

The international financial architecture, designed by industrialised countries after the Second World War in 1945, is increasingly unfit for purpose in a world of climate change, extreme inequality, entrenched gender bias, and other dramatic demographic, technological, economic and geopolitical changes. Deep rooted inequities and inefficiencies in the system have made stable, long-term financing for education and the other sustainable development goals impossible. The global community has made small changes to respond to these issues, but much more fundamental reform is needed on global economic governance, debt and borrowing, international public finance, the global financial safety net, regulatory frameworks, and the global tax architecture.⁹¹

The Fourth Financing for Development Conference in June 2025 offers a critical opportunity to make lasting change by democratising global economic

governance. It is a chance to address the key barriers to raising the finance needed for services like education by ensuring meaningful representation of low- and middle-income countries in economic institutions, whose development agendas donors are supposed to respond to. The UK must be responsive to calls led by civil society organisations and governments in the Global South to push through the reforms needed to make the global financial system more fair and effective.

The UK is also well positioned to influence negotiations, but also put pressure on existing structures to do better to help close the gap on education financing as we await deeper reforms.

The UK should push the IMF to ensure that policies tied to loans or public spending advice do not hinder low- and middle-income countries' ability to fund public services, particularly education. IMF recommendations to cut or freeze public sector wages, while simultaneously neglecting options to increase tax revenue have had disproportionately negative impacts on education systems.⁹² Alongside health workers, teachers are the largest group on the public sector wage bills, so when this spending is cut or frozen, reductions in teacher numbers and pay almost always follow. This has been acutely seen in 15 low-income countries, which were urged by the IMF to cut nearly \$10 billion from their public sector wage bill —equivalent to the salaries of over 3 million teachers.⁹³

Addressing the teacher shortage through domestic resourcing



Changkuoth is a grade 4 science teacher in Ethiopia. He joined Tierkidi School No. 3, Refugee Camp in 2014 ©UNICEF Ethiopia/2018/Mersha

The shortage of qualified teachers represents one of the greatest barriers to universal primary and secondary education, as teacher recruitment and retention have not kept pace with enrollment. In low income countries, a primary school teacher has an average of **52 pupils per class**, and in many countries including Bangladesh, Chad, Malawi, Sierra Leone, and Pakistan the pupil to trained teacher ratio - which measures the average number of pupils to trained teachers, as per the minimum required national qualification - exceeds 60:1.⁹³ An estimated 44 million additional teachers are needed to achieve universal primary and secondary education by 2030, including 15 million teachers in sub-Saharan Africa.⁹⁴

Improving domestic resource mobilisation is central to addressing this crisis. Inadequate and unsustainable financing can lead to teachers going months without a regular and adequate salary, forcing teachers to find alternative sources of income and classrooms to close. Tax reform, debt relief and rejection of austerity measures are all part of the solution, with the IMF holding a particularly impactful role. Rather than routinely advising countries to cut public spending, the IMF should prioritise advice that will support countries to expand their tax revenues through progressive tax reforms. The IMF should also be at the forefront of calling for debt cancellation or radical debt renegotiation wherever debt servicing impacts on education spending.

Case study from the National Education Union's report 'Prioritise teachers to transform education: How tackling the global teacher shortage can unlock the UK's development agenda'

The UK should also push for the reform to the allocation of Special Drawing Rights (SDRs). SDRs are a reserve asset originally created to help IMF member countries face balance of payment crises. SDRs create no debt and come with no conditionalities, which are extremely valuable in a crisis. However, the allocation of SDRs is based on IMF quotas which do not reach the countries that need it most.⁹⁵ The UK's pledge to recycle 20% of their 2021 SDR allocation to lower-income countries was a welcome move to addressing this. However, this falls short of more ambitious pledges from Spain (50%), Netherlands (40%), Japan (40%), France (40%), Australia (39%) and China (34%).⁹⁶ Furthermore, this does not address the original issue of inequitable IMF quotas which requires recycling in the first place. Deep reforms to the international financial architecture which created these inequities are needed to deliver fair allocations to low- and lower-middle income countries. The UK should recycle more of its SDRs, at minimum in line with other donor countries, and support structural reforms and work to democratise governance.

Championing education and offering technical assistance

Once public budgets are grown, it cannot be taken for granted that education will be funded. The UK should remain a vocal champion of education on the global stage to encourage and empower all countries to prioritise education in their budgets and meet international recommendations to spend 4-6% of GDP or 15-20% of public budgets on education.

The UK also has a role to play in offering technical assistance to improve domestic resource mobilisation mechanisms to be effective, equitable, transparent and accountable. Once the size of budgets and the share going to education are grown, it is imperative that budgets and spending address educational inequalities, ensuring the most marginalised are reached. Monitoring to ensure accountability across stages of the budget cycle and governance levels to ensure money arrives where it is needed in a timely manner is also critical, particularly by empowering members of civil society closest to the issue.

Join our call for investing in a brighter future

The UK has an important role to play in ensuring that the next generation is equipped with the skills, knowledge and support they need to navigate a rapidly changing planet. We encourage the UK public, NGOs, activists, students, Parliamentarians and all who care about the right to education to join their voices with us in calling for the UK Government to re-establish itself as a steadfast and reliable champion for education and restore education as a key priority within its development agenda.



Waleed, 8, participating in a class at a Temporary Learning Space, Syria.
© Roni Ahmed/Save the Children (2024)

GLOSSARY

Debt Justice: the movement to rectify the unfair and inequitable conditions surrounding debt, particularly in developing countries. This includes advocating for the cancellation or restructuring of unsustainable debts that prevent countries' ability to invest in essential services like education. Debt justice seeks to create a fairer economic system that prioritises human well-being over debt repayment.

Domestic Resource Mobilisation (DRM): the process of governments raising and spending their own funds to provide national public services, which is critical for sustainable financing and reducing dependency on ODA.

Innovative Financing: an umbrella term that broadly refers to mechanisms designed to mobilise resources beyond traditional funding methods, such as taxes and grant-based aid. This includes social actors sharing costs, risks and responsibilities of financing to further multiply donor funds and/or draw in additional money from diverse actors.

Special Drawing Right (SDRs): a financial asset created by the IMF for its 190 member states. They are meant to be used as 'reserve assets' (the remaining balance on a country's current account) to meet external financing needs and is based on five international currencies (the U.S. dollar, Japanese yen, euro, pound sterling and Chinese Renminbi), but is not itself a currency. The value of the SDR is set daily by the IMF.⁹⁷ Countries can recycle, or reallocate, unused SDRs to other countries who need them.

Tax Justice: involves ideas, policies and advocacy that aim to achieve equality and social justice through fair taxes on wealthier members of society and multinational corporations. Tax justice tackles havens, stopping corruption and tax abuse by multinational corporations and the super-rich.

ANNEX 1:

Different forms of financing global education

Domestic Public Resources

Governments allocate funds for education through national budgets, primarily sourced from taxes and other public revenues. This is the largest and most sustainable source of education financing.

Bilateral Official Development Assistance (ODA)

Education aid provided by one country to another, often through grants or concessional loans.

Multilateral Official Development Assistance (ODA)

Funding channeled through international institutions such as the World Bank, UNICEF, and regional development banks. This includes core funding for institutions, as well as multilateral funds such as the Global Partnership for Education (GPE, hosted by the World Bank) and Education Cannot Wait (ECW, hosted by UNICEF), the two major education funds. In UK ODA reporting, funds for GPE and ECW are classified

as ‘bilateral earmarked for multilateral spend’, and contributions to these funds are reflected in bilateral data.

Private Sector & Philanthropy

Corporations, foundations, and high-net-worth individuals contribute through corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, scholarships, and funding for education innovation.

Innovative Financing Mechanisms

Mechanisms designed to mobilise or reorient resources from non-traditional funding sources such as taxes and grant-based aid. Often refers to new ways of sharing costs, risks and responsibilities among social actors to multiply donor funds and/or draw in additional funds from previously uninvolved actors.

Households

Families often contribute directly to education costs through school fees, learning materials, transportation, and private tutoring, particularly in contexts where public financing is insufficient.

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Adama, 17, reads books in the small library of the Bayam Texaco temporary learning centre in Maidaguri, Nigeria. The library supports children whose education has been disrupted through poverty, displacement and conflict.
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Send My Friend to School is the UK civil society coalition of international development NGOs, charities and teachers' unions calling for quality, inclusive education for all children around the world. As the UK coalition of the Global Campaign for Education (GCE) movement, our campaign undertakes a diverse range of activities to increase community awareness on the state of education internationally and generate the political will to ensure the UK plays an active role in securing education for all.

Over the past twenty-five years, Send My Friend to School has supported hundreds of thousands of young people in schools across the UK to campaign, using their voices to demand quality education for every child, everywhere.

Our 2025-2027 campaign, 'Invest In My Friends' Learning' will work with schools and young people across the UK to call on the UK Government to reprioritise education within its international development agenda and play its part to close the funding gap.

Coalition members



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Front cover photo:

Bih*(13) lives with her four siblings and her mother in Cameroon. Through the support of Street Child and Stars Foundation, Bih was able to enrol in school with financial support and the provision of essential school supplies. Her mother says "I hope my child becomes successful and breaks the cycle of poverty in our family and helps her siblings". Education can be the key to unlocking a promising future, not only for a child, but their entire family.

* All children's names have been changed to protect their identity