Putting the spotlight on education at the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly
12-25 September 2017, New York, U.S.A

Education has been the focus of many high-level UN events, but this year’s UN General Assembly (UNGA) truly put the spotlight on education – and particularly on the financing of quality, inclusive, equitable, and free education. The Global Campaign for Education (GCE) and its members have long fought to deliver financing at national and international levels, and this year’s shift by the UN to explicitly focus on financing to strengthen public education was welcome – and long overdue. Civil society has been consistent in the message – now widely acknowledged – that education is a foundational right, and SDG4 underpins the full sustainable development agenda: failing to deliver this goal risks failing the agenda as a whole. Two years into the Education 2030 period, now is the time to act: we must fund education.

France and Senegal will co-host the February 2018 financing conference of the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), with Presidents Emmanuel Macron and Macky Sall personally announcing this during the high-level event ‘Financing the Future: Education 2030’. The landmark event, hosted by the governments of Norway and Malawi, as well as France and Senegal, saw UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Malala Yousafzai, Prime Minister Erna Solberg of Norway, and President Peter Mutharika of Malawi, among many others, take the stage and make commitments to support both the increase of financing for education, and to mobilise others to do the same.

Welcome boost for education in emergencies
A small number of new financial pledges were made during the event; as it is expected that the February conference will be the moment for commitments to GPE, all commitments at the UN event focused on education in emergencies:

- The European Union: 8% of its humanitarian budget will go to education in emergencies in 2018 – this is far above the global average of 3.6% and follows its earlier pledge to increase to 6% in 2017; it also pledged a further US$13.2 million to the Education Cannot Wait fund.
- Dubai Cares committed US$500,000 to the Education Cannot Wait fund.

In addition, President Macky Sall reiterated Senegal’s commitment to allocating 25% of its domestic budget for education.

Sustainably financing education: supporting domestic resource mobilisation
GCE also co-convened a major event during the UNGA, which focused the spotlight on tax justice to achieve sustainable financing for education at the domestic level, as a balance to the donor focus at several of the other education-related events during UNGA.
Hosted by GCE, Education International, and the Global Alliance for Tax Justice, and in alliance with ActionAid, RESULTS, Light for the World, the Open Society Foundations (OSF), the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE), and Oxfam, ‘Sustainably Financing Education’ highlighted the fact that the vast majority of financing – 97% – must come from domestic budgets. Yet, without radical action to increase overall domestic resources, a pledge to spend 20% of national budget on education, in line with commitments made in the Education 2030 Framework For Action, will not deliver the full agenda, because many domestic budgets are woefully insufficient to start with.

Speakers all underlined the criticality of an overall push to find new resources to finance education. Shermaine Barrett, ICAE Vice President for the Caribbean, reminded participants that SDG4 concerns more than education in schools; adult literacy is consistently overlooked in global education debates – an oversight which becomes all the more acute when it comes to financing.

Both Professor Jeffrey Sachs, Special Advisor on the SDGs to the UN Secretary-General, and the Chair of the Global Alliance for Tax Justice, Dereje Alemayehu, specified that this financing already exists: it is money being denied to governments by tax avoidance, tax havens, and unfair tax rules. As UNESCO Director General Irina Bokova and GPE Chief Executive Alice Albright pointed out, civil society must continue to hold governments to account to ensure that the resources are not only found, but also allocated and spent in a way that delivers the full vision of equitable, inclusive, and free quality education and lifelong learning for all.

Education International (EI) stressed the importance of sustainable education funding. EI President, Susan Hopgood, and Deputy General-Secretary, David Edwards, were at the UN General Assembly where they represented the world’s teachers. President Hopgood participated in a series of meetings and events where she advocated for greater investment and prioritisation, cautioned against short-sightedness, and condemned governments that outsource their responsibility to for-profit companies.

EI joined forces with GCE and the Global Alliance for Tax Justice to co-convene a meeting to discuss strategies for domestic resource mobilisation. In her opening address to participants from civil society and government, she pointed out that 10% of global GDP is hidden in offshore havens and that quality public education requires predictable and sustainable long term investment.

“We see how essential our schools are to the public good. To our towns, cities, and countries, they are the source of our collective values. They are the engines of our democratic principles,” said Hopgood.
“Now is the time that we must double down, reinvest both our efforts and our financial resources into making public education the first and strongest option for our children and for our societies.”

Her remarks were echoed by UNESCO Director General, Irina Bokova, ActionAid’s David Archer, GPE CEO Alice Albright, and Jeffrey Sachs, amongst others, to make the case for concerted and unrelenting pressure to ensure a quality education for all.

Highlighting education in other UNGA side events
Working with GCE in giving prominence to SDG4 and education in the SDGs, especially in calling attention to issues in the Asia Pacific, ASPBAE’s Helen Dabu and Cecilia (Thea) Soriano, participated not only in key education financing events, but also in other side events during the UNGA week.

Helen Dabu participated in a high level youth-led event on 18 September 2017 which focused on comprehensive sexuality education, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and gender equality. Helen emphasised, in the open forum session, the need to ensure access to and right to education by youth (from basic to higher education) which makes it important to ensure that Sustainable Development Goal 4 is achieved as all the other SDGs are discussed. She also highlighted the need to ensure that marginalised youth are provided a space in the SDG processes.

Thea Soriano participated in discussions on ‘Can we leapfrog? The role of innovation in reaching the Education Commission’s goals’ held on 20 September 2017. This side event presented the Brookings (CUE) global scan of innovations in education. The report states that 65% of innovations come from NGOs, many in the marginalised sector. Thea raised the need to leapfrog education systems, financing non-formal and informal education along with formal education, so that education innovations can reach out to more marginalised communities.

Yet another important side event attended by ASPBAE was organised by Equal Measures 2030 that presented the results of its survey of 109 policy makers and their understanding of gender equality and the extent by which this understanding is grounded on data and evidences in their respective countries. The survey was done in five countries, namely India, Indonesia, Kenya, Senegal, and Colombia. Equal Measures 2030 argued that influencing policies on gender equality in the SDGs and in particular, SDG5, would mean looking at gender policy spaces, opportunities for working with policy makers, and strategising on data-driven decision making on gender equality.
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While many side events happened at the periphery of the UNGA, their importance cannot be discounted. They provided new knowledge on education and the SDGs, key strategies for advocacy, and possible networks that can benefit the work in Asia Pacific. As ASPBAE prepares to continuously engage the global platforms, it is important for the network not only to critically participate but equally bring its own narratives into the global policy spaces.

What happens next?
After this strong demonstration of support for financing education at the UNGA, there is a need to maintain the pressure on governments to transform words into action. This means a working partnership between supportive and champion governments, education actors such as GPE, national civil society education coalitions, teachers’ unions, academics, individual education activists, and international NGOs – with each using its strengths to make the most of the opportunities before us in the coming months.

Citizens of the countries represented at September’s UN events must follow up with their Heads of State and senior ministers. At the same time, the World Bank Annual Meetings are shortly to take place in Washington DC, and civil society must use the twin opportunities of the support shown during the UNGA, and the Bank’s first-ever World Development Report exclusively focused on education, to ensure education financing is firmly on the agenda of finance ministers.

In advance of the replenishment conference itself, there is a need to ensure that Heads of State make concrete and credible commitments to financing education, whether this be in donor pledges to GPE’s global fund, or pledges made by developing country partners to their citizens to increase the share of the domestic budget for education. Any pledge must be made following thorough work behind the scenes, and include a commitment to find significant new financing for education. Realistically, ambitious and bold pledges made by developing countries can only be realistically met through domestic revenue mobilisation, which, GCE believes, must be supplemented by action on tax justice.

However, the GPE financing conference cannot be regarded in a vacuum. Rather, it must be seen as a critical starting point for governments to increase their commitments to financing for education within ongoing advocacy work on both donor and domestic finance.

A recent UIS fact sheet, which presents the first findings against the SDG4 target on learning in schools, found some shocking results. 133 million children of primary, and lower-secondary-age, are either not in school, or are likely to drop out before completing school – and this figure stands alongside the 142 million children of upper-secondary age out of school. However, even these combined figures do not
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come close to the 484 million children in school and not receiving quality education. In total, that’s three quarters of a billion children who are not receiving quality – or any – education. Another recent UIS fact sheet identified that 750 million adults (of which 102 million are aged 15-24) are unable to read or write.

Much of this comes down to money: to build education infrastructure for all levels and ages, to train and pay for teachers, and to provide learning materials and resources.

It has been two full years since the SDG4 and Education 2030 agendas were agreed on, and these figures alone must act as a call to action.

Civil society will maintain pressure on governments to increase financing to education overall, and on donor countries to include GPE as part of the overall commitment, but there has to be collective action to ensure that the loud noises made by governments during the UN General Assembly are transformed into louder actions. There must be a commitment to seize the moment and secure greater financial commitments for every adult and child to access their right to education.

This write-up contains information appearing on the GCE website, and the Equal Measures 2030 and Education International websites.

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