



Transforming Education: An urgent political imperative for our collective future

Vision Statement of the Secretary-General on Transforming Education

Education is a fundamental human right. It has long held a special place in the hearts and minds of people across the world, and for good reason. Throughout history, it has been a source of personal dignity and empowerment and a driving force for the advancement of social, economic, political, and cultural development. Yet today, beset by inequalities and struggling to adjust to the needs of the 21st century, education is in crisis. The impacts of this crisis play out over time and often go unseen. But they are profound and will be felt for decades to come. If we are to transform our world by 2030 as envisaged by the Sustainable Development Goals, then the international community must give this crisis the attention it deserves. We must respond decisively, with conviction, imagination, and in solidarity to transform education. Informed by an extensive and inclusive preparatory process, we offer this Vision Statement to Member States and the global public to support our joint efforts towards that transformation, to contribute to the upcoming Summit of the Future, and as a manifesto for collective action.

I. A crisis in education affects us all

Education is the great enabler, but today, in many cases, it is also the great divider. This is a universal challenge, most intense in emergency settings and developing countries. Some thirty years after global commitments to ensure Education for All, nearly half of all children of the world are not enrolled in pre-primary education. Studies show that up to 70 per cent of children in poorer countries are unable to read a basic text by age 10. In a world that is experiencing a fourth industrial revolution, nearly half of all students do not complete secondary school and a full 700 million adults are illiterate, the majority of whom are women. In developed countries, education disparities that are often related to income, race and gender are reinforcing privilege and further entrenching poverty. Across these different contexts, the impacts are greatest on those who are already marginalized or disadvantaged, particularly adolescent girls and people with disabilities. These are the people that education systems systematically leave behind.

The crisis in education, however, runs much deeper and goes beyond the challenge of equity and equality. Study after study, poll after poll, draw the same conclusion: education systems are no longer fit for purpose. Young people and adults alike report that education does not equip them with the knowledge, experience, skills, or values needed to thrive in a rapidly changing world. Learning continues to underplay skills, including problem solving, critical thinking and empathy. Employers complain of a major skills mismatch while many adults are left with little or no access to affordable training and re-skilling opportunities. Teachers are often poorly trained, undervalued, and underpaid, and are held back by outdated roles, methods, and tools of instruction. Parents



and families decry the value or lack of return on the investments they make in education and their children.

The COVID-19 pandemic both exacerbated and illuminated this crisis. It resulted in dramatic learning losses and widespread cuts to education budgets, dealing a hammer blow to securing access to quality education for all by 2030 - the central promise of Sustainable Development Goal 4. Today, millions of learners are denied their fundamental right to quality education, and societies are left ill-prepared to overcome intersecting crises that threaten our collective future – climate disruption, poverty, increasing inequality, cultural and political polarization, lack of trust, and conflict. All of this can, and must change.

Our first task is swift and targeted action to recover the learning losses inflicted by the pandemic, particularly on marginalized groups. As we do this, however, there can be no going back to the education models of the past. We must reimagine education systems and raise the status of education. We must ensure that learning empowers individuals and societies to both reshape the present and lead us to a more just, sustainable, resilient, and peaceful future.

II. Rethinking the purpose and content of education in the 21st century

The crisis in education requires us to fundamentally rethink its purpose and curricula. The seminal report from the UNESCO International Commission on the Futures of Education, led by Her Excellency Mrs. Sahle-Work Zewde, President of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, provides a solid point of departure. It makes a strong case for a new social contract for education, grounded in two principles: ensuring the right to quality education throughout life; and strengthening education as a public endeavor and a common good. The inputs from Member State consultations, from young people and from the Summit's Action Tracks, helped to define what those principles might mean in the classroom, for teachers and students.

A truly transformative education should build on what communities, families, parents, and children treasure most, and respond to local, national, and global needs, cultures, and capacities. It should promote the holistic development of all learners throughout their lives, supporting them to realize their aspirations and to contribute their families, communities, and societies. To achieve this, transformative education must support learners in the following four key areas.

Learn to learn: This calls for equipping every learner with the ability to read and write, to identify, understand, and communicate clearly and effectively. It will help every learner to acquire and develop numeracy, digital, and scientific skills. It should also instill the curiosity, the creativity, and the capacity for critical thinking and to nurture social and emotional skills, empathy, and kindness.

There is abundant evidence that, to maximize its potential, such learning should start at the earliest stages of life. Universal access to early childhood education offers governments and



families a critical tool to prevent and reverse inter-generational inequalities. It is one of the most important investments to improve educational outcomes.

Learn to live together: In a world of rising tensions, fraying trust and existential environmental crises, education must help us not only to live better with each other, but also with nature.

There has been a significant weakening of social cohesion and rising levels of violence within the home, among communities, and across borders in recent years. Attacks on truth, facts and democratic institutions have become more widespread online and in real life. Education can prepare learners to fulfil their responsibilities to their societies and to be active and responsible citizens in their own communities, in their countries and in the world. It can support them to advance human rights. It can contribute to their understanding of social justice, respect for diversity and global solidarity. It can sow the seeds of a culture of peace.

Young people are also keenly aware that humanity faces existential threats in the form of the triple planetary crisis: climate change, pollution, and biodiversity. Throughout the Summit process, they made clear that they want to know more about these issues and to become part of the solution. As countries advance their commitments to Education for Sustainable Development, I urge them to consider how curricula and pedagogy could empower learners with the awareness, values, attitudes, and skills necessary to drive the change we need.

The pursuit of gender equality and the rights of women and girls remains a crucial goal of the international community and education is also critical to this endeavor. Education systems can put in place essential equity, inclusive and non-discriminatory measures to support girls. They should remove all legal and other barriers, such as the ban on secondary education for girls that is causing untold suffering in Afghanistan. They should also include an age-appropriate and gender-sensitive curriculum for all that addresses gender-based prejudice, norms, or stereotypes, empowers and equips learners to combat violence against women, and ensure sexual and reproductive health.

Learn to do: The world of work is undergoing fundamental change. Technological advances are creating new jobs and making others obsolete. The green, digital and care economy transitions hold enormous potential to align economic activity with social and environmental outcomes. Education holds the key to ensuring that workers are prepared for this future. It must allow people of all ages to learn to do, with a focus skilling, reskilling, and upskilling.

First and foremost, this calls for education systems to embrace the concept of life-long learning, with more flexible pathways and financial policy incentives to allow people to re-engage with education systems several times throughout their lives. Different avenues should be made available including non-formal routes, catch-up and bridging programs, accelerated learning, and the use of digital platforms. Learning to do calls for a focus on a whole new set of skills, including digital literacy, financial skills, and emerging technical and STEM skills. Transformed education systems should develop flexible career management skills, and promote innovation, creativity,



and entrepreneurship. This also calls for qualifications that recognize skills, work experiences and knowledge throughout life, and beyond formal education.

Learn to be: This implies the deepest purpose of education, which is to instill in learners the values and capacities to lead a meaningful life, to enjoy that life, and to live it fully and well. In part, it is a biproduct of learning to learn, to live together, and to do. Learning to be requires developing every student's potential for creativity and innovation; their capacity to enjoy and to express themselves through the arts; their awareness of history and the diversity of cultures; and their disposition for leading a healthy life, to practice physical activities, games, and sports. This cannot be achieved by chance; it requires an evolution in curricula and mindsets, so that building the capacity to develop our individual and social identities is not a mere add-on, but an integral component of 21st century education.

III. Transforming education systems to meet our higher purposes

To meet these higher purposes, we need to transform education in the following four areas:

Ensuring a learning environment that supports the development of all learners

The schools of the future, whether formal or informal, physical, or virtual, must evolve to become more inclusive, safe, healthy, and stimulating learning places. With the right to education curtailed for millions of children and youth across the world today, we are far from such a reality. At the sharpest end of the exclusion crisis, are refugees and persons displaced by emergencies, conflicts, and protracted crises. In other contexts, disadvantage can be because of where one lives, or one's family income or status. Children and youth can also face discrimination in education on grounds of sex, disability, ethnicity, religion, language, sexual orientation, gender identity, and legal status. Violence, harassment, and bullying are all too commonplace. All of this undermines our collective effort to build tolerant and inclusive societies, in which we learn to respect and appreciate our cultural and human diversity.

Legislation and policies are essential to protect rights, promote inclusion, prevent and address all forms of violence, stigma, discrimination, and exclusion. It is also critical to support learners' nutrition, physical and mental health, for example, through the expansion of school counselling and school meals programmes. Inclusion must also be reflected in curricula and learning materials, which should promote equality, respect for diversity, and confront harmful stereotypes, norms, attitudes, and practices. Urgent action is needed to reach those most directly affected by crises and conflict today, and to transform education systems to prevent, prepare for, respond, and recover from crises.

Enabling teachers to transform themselves and become agents of change

Teachers are the backbone of all good education systems. To fulfil their essential roles in the education systems of the future, however, fundamental change is needed – both in how societies view and value teachers and how teachers approach their roles and fulfill their responsibility.



Teachers must become knowledge producers, facilitators, and guides in the comprehension of complex realities. They must be trained and empowered to transcend from passive to active, from vertical and unidirectional to collaborative. They must promote learning based on experience, enquiry, and curiosity; develop the capacity, the joy and discipline for problem solving. To spark such a transformation, action is required in four areas.

The capacity, agency, and autonomy of teachers must be broadened, empowering them to design, interpret and manage the curriculum and to adapt and prioritize content and pedagogy. This includes implementing and mainstreaming context-responsive learning options, pedagogies, and curricula in diverse forms, assessment strategies and expected learning outcomes, from high tech to low-tech, and no-tech contexts. The global teacher shortage must be tackled head-on, including by making the teaching profession more attractive for younger generations. This calls for decent working conditions and an enhanced status of teachers, including through wages comparable with professions requiring similar levels of qualifications, and continuous professional development. Recruitment and promotion mechanisms for teachers must also become more equitable, fair, and non-discriminatory, ensuring opportunity for women and people from vulnerable and marginalized groups. Integrated teaching career management systems can also foster constant professional development. Monitoring and evaluation of teaching is essential to support accountability and to ensure effective learning outcomes and the efficient use of educational investment. Finally, educational systems must ensure the participation of teachers in the formulation of educational policies, including curricular and pedagogical transformation. Their right to organize themselves is fundamental.

Harnessing the digital revolution for the benefit of public education.

If harnessed properly, the digital revolution could be one of the most powerful tools for ensuring quality education for all and transforming the way teachers teach and learners learn. But if not, it could exacerbate inequalities and undermine learning outcomes, as the pandemic made all too apparent. In low- and middle-income countries, a large majority of learners and teachers had no access to digital connectivity or resources.

Confronting this challenge requires unlocking the *three 'keys'* of digital learning: connectivity, capacities, and content. For the connectivity key, we need universal access to broadband connectivity for teachers, students, schools, and other educational environments, which in turn requires the closing of existing deficits in access to electricity. For the capacity key, we must assure universal digital literacy for education and other empowering purposes, with particular attention to preparing and supporting teachers to use technology effectively. And for the content key, we need robust and open public digital learning platforms and content, and to guarantee that digital learning resources are treated as global public and common goods.

Countries should take rapid action towards full educational connectivity and the international community must back the ongoing expansion of the Giga initiative to support country action. We also urge all actors to join and support the new multi-partner initiative to create and strengthen



inclusive digital learning platforms and content. Building on existing efforts, this initiative will search for and promote solutions to the financing, design, production, and free distribution of high quality public digital learning content. This is an important contribution to the broader push to secure a Global Digital Compact proposed in my report on the “Our Common Agenda”.

Investing more, more equitably, and more efficiently in education

Quality education is the single most important investment that any country can make for its future and its people. Investing in education is investing in people and in our collective future. This is a moral, political, and economic imperative. Put simply: the cost of not financing education is much higher than the cost of financing it.

Global inequalities in education spending are particularly shocking, with high-income countries spending on average about US \$8.000 a year per school-age person compared to a mere US \$50 invested in lower income countries. These disparities are compounded by educational inequalities within countries, where the benefits of educational investment rarely reach those who need them the most. To solve this problem, we must reframe how we see education and act in three critical directions.

First, **we must invest more in education**. This will require a fundamental shift in how education is seen and treated by Ministries of Finance and governments. Education spending is not just a consumption expenditure – it is a crucial national investment. Such a shift can provide the basis for an increase in the proportion of GDP and the total public expenditure that governments devote to education. There is also a need to increase real investment per student and per school-age person, aiming towards an ambitious national benchmark established according to the national and regional context. This could require a progressive revamping of existing tax systems, increasing the proportion of taxes to GDP, and establishing social protection floors.

As developing country governments boost education spending, international partners can play a much more supportive role. As outlined in “Our Common Agenda”, a New Global Deal is needed to allow developing countries to invest more in people, avoiding “race to the bottom” tax strategies, countering illicit financial flows and tackling the debt crisis. Donors can also reverse current trends by repositioning education in their development cooperation: allocating 15 - 20 per cent of ODA to education, capitalizing existing education funds and ensuring that funding reaches the most vulnerable people and countries. International financial institutions can ensure their policies and practices support government plans to increase spending on education, including teacher recruitment. They can also work towards doubling their current education portfolios including by exploring education debt swaps and innovative financing. In this regard the establishment of the International Financing Facility for Education (IFFEd) is a welcome step forward. Its full funding and increased engagement with multilateral development banks will allow it to expand in the years ahead. Private philanthropies can also step up their contribution to transforming education, building on early signs of progress in this area.



Second, we must invest more equitably in education. We must make sure that educational investment reaches those who have been traditionally excluded from quality education. Education investment must be equitable in geographical terms, so that rural, distant, and emergency-affected communities have access to adequate infrastructure, good teachers and learning resources. It must also be equitable along socioeconomic lines, making sure that families living in poverty will have access to the opportunities offered by high-quality public. And it must also be equitable in terms of all those groups and sectors usually discriminated against in their access to these opportunities, such as women and girls, ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, indigenous populations, and those in protracted crises amongst others. We must make sure that education investment leaves no one and no community behind.

Finally, we must invest more efficiently in education. We must ensure that education investments transform the lives of learners and the future of societies. This requires effective public financial management systems and monitoring, as well as regular assessment of the impact of educational investment, to ensure that increased resources reach the intended destination and produces the expected learning outcomes established in educational policies. Effective investments in transformational education are essential.

IV. OUR COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP: KEEPING THE PROMISE

Education transformation requires the collective commitment and action of visionary political leaders at all levels, parents, students, teachers, and the public at large.

Countries that have registered a National Statement of Commitment can translate those commitments into a clear road map for transformation and proactively engage the education leadership from the local to the regional and national levels. This can evolve into a whole of government effort necessitating a new eco-system for education, with a clear line of accountability between vision, commitments, resources, actions, and results. And by results, we are thinking of the learners whose lives should be transformed by education.

A new approach from government requires a new approach from all of society, demanding transformative education. Young people will be the heartbeat of this effort, leveraging their voices, experiences, knowledge, and agency. Inclusive and participatory mechanisms to accompany and guide national transformation efforts are also critical. Students, parents, teachers, unions, employers, academia, and civil society must take up their respective roles – with an openness to change. The One Million Conversations, the Youth Flagship initiative and a series of coalitions launched at the Summit can support such efforts, working together to meet people where they are. The Summit has helped to generate a new momentum and to seed a public movement for the transformation of education. Moving forward, it must be nurtured and supported at all levels, led by the learners and teachers across the world, inspired by civil society, and connected with broader movements for positive change.



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The UN system is primed to support governments and communities on this journey. UN Resident Coordinators and leading members of UN Country Teams including UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank, can begin to reenvision their own offer to developing countries, working with other international education partners like the EU and global funds to transform our collective contribution.

Looking ahead, the SDG4 High Level Steering Committee co-chaired by UNESCO and Sierra Leone will play a key role in ensuring the effective follow-up of the Summit – strengthening global, regional, and national level cooperation, the alignment of action between education partners and the provision of support across its three functional areas. UNESCO and partners can also identify ways to strengthen political accountability for transforming and financing education, taking current arrangements for monitoring SDG4 implementation including the Global Education Meetings and the national SDG4 benchmarking process, to the next level. Finally, the UN Summit of the Future in 2024 provides a further opportunity to take forward the progress from this input.

The Transforming Education Summit was a collective effort. I stand ready to work with Member States and partners to keep the flame of transformation burning. We must push forward together, with a focus on tangible actions where it matters most: on the ground, in the classroom, and in the experience of teachers and learners alike.