




***"Education is quite simply, peace-building by another name.  
It is the most effective form of defense spending there is."***

*—Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary-General*

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# INVESTING IN EDUCATION

## BUILDING A BRIDGE TO PEACE



Education is the bedrock of strong, stable and prosperous societies. Inclusive public education is an engine for improving economic prospects and stimulating growth, reducing inequalities, and improving health and well-being.

Education is also an important driver of peace. Inclusive, quality education enables human rights, improves social cohesion, promotes tolerance, and fosters civic participation and more open, democratic societies. Schooling also builds the skill base young women and men need to resolve conflicts, find productive employment and otherwise contribute to their societies and economies.

Education should be at the forefront of global strategies and investments aimed at fostering a more peaceful and stable future, particularly in a world that is already becoming less peaceful.

Instead, education globally is in a state of crisis. Nearly 7 in 10 of the world's children are unable to read a simple story by age 10;<sup>1</sup> a quarter of a billion children and youth are out of school entirely.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, the proliferation of conflict and other crises is upending the lives of millions of children, exacerbating this already dire situation. Many countries experiencing fragility, conflict and economic stress have a large proportion of youth in their population

(‘youth bulge’) and high rates of population growth.<sup>3</sup> Without additional investments in education, more and more children and young people in these countries are at risk of being out of education, employment or training in the future—putting their countries at higher risk of conflict and instability.

In an increasingly interconnected world, this will have global economic and social impacts. Education must be prioritized as a global investment now.

### **The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and its partners are working to:**

- Prioritize investment in education in countries affected by conflict and fragility
- Greatly expand investments in the education of girls and women
- Develop 21<sup>st</sup> century skills in today's children and youths through the provision of quality, equitable learning opportunities
- Enhance cooperation between humanitarian, development and private sector organizations in providing the range of resources needed to transform education systems in countries affected by conflict and fragility.

### **Correlations between education and peace**

A recent study<sup>4</sup> conducted by GPE with the Institute of Economics and Peace found that:

- Countries with higher average primary school completion rates are on average more peaceful.
- Countries that have a high percentage of their youth not engaged in employment, education or training have lower levels of peacefulness.
- Countries with higher government spending on education have on average higher levels of peacefulness.
- Countries where children stay longer in school and have better learning outcomes are on average more peaceful.<sup>5</sup>

## Why invest in education for peace

Education is a crucial pillar of peace, and countries that invest more in education on average enjoy higher levels of peacefulness.

Education can:

- **Reduce underlying drivers of conflict:**

There is a positive link between higher levels of education and economic outcomes such as higher wages, increased rates of labor participation and poverty reduction which in turn contribute to economic growth and more stable societies. UNESCO estimates that doubling the percentage of youth with secondary education can cut the risk of conflict in half.<sup>6</sup> Quality education can also be a powerful equalizing tool to reduce inequalities between social or cultural groups, which in turn reduces the likelihood of violent conflict.<sup>7</sup> Conversely, studies have found that in places where educational inequality doubled, the risk of conflict more than doubled.<sup>8</sup>

- **Forge open and tolerant societies:** Education plays a role in fostering more tolerant societies. Quality education can be a powerful tool to combat discrimination and build learners' resilience to violent extremism and hateful narratives.<sup>9</sup> Greater investments in education can lead to more equal, inclusive and open societies, greater civic engagement, increased adoption of democratic values and stronger social cohesion.<sup>10</sup>

- **Rebuild social cohesion and resilience after conflict:** Education can play a pivotal role in rebuilding social relations, strengthening social cohesion and fostering peace among excluded groups in countries after experiencing conflict.<sup>11</sup> Getting children back to learning, expanding access to education for vulnerable groups and rethinking school curricula are often prioritized as critical to strategies for reducing the risk of relapsing into conflict.

### Timor-Leste: Investing in peace in a youthful nation

When Timor-Leste's independence was restored in 2002, most of the country's infrastructure was destroyed, including 95 percent of schools, and there were very few trained Timorese teachers. With 42 percent of its population under 18,<sup>12</sup> the government made education a key priority.

Since then, the country has made impressive progress in education, achieving 95 percent primary completion.<sup>13</sup> School completion rates for lower secondary education have risen significantly from 67 percent (2010-2015) to 91 percent (2017-2022). At the same time, Timor-Leste has transitioned from conflict to stability, with the withdrawal of UN peacekeeping forces in December 2012 and successful competitive elections and peaceful transfers of power, most recently in 2022.

## Underinvestment in education is a threat to peace

Even though education is one of the most crucial pillars of peace, it suffers from chronic underinvestment in the places where it is needed most.

Education spending in countries affected by conflicts and fragility averages at 3.5 percent of GDP,<sup>14</sup> well below the international benchmark of 4-6 percent of GDP. Of the US\$5.4 trillion spent on education annually worldwide, only 0.5 percent is spent in low-income countries while high-income countries account for

66 percent; this, despite the two groups having roughly an equal number of school-age children.<sup>15</sup> Spending per school-age child, which tops \$8,500 in high-income countries, averages just \$56 in low-income countries and \$341 in lower- and middle-income countries.<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile, aid to education is declining alarmingly (by \$2 billion between 2020 and 2021) and the brunt is borne by those who need it the most. Sub-Saharan Africa, which has experienced the most severe deterioration in peacefulness in the last 15 years<sup>17</sup> and is home to more than half the world's primary age children who are out of school, receives just over one-third of all aid for basic education.<sup>18</sup> Sub-Saharan African nations affected by crises are most likely to be left out of humanitarian aid for education which decreased by 25 percent between 2010 and 2020.<sup>19</sup> Today, only 2.6 percent of humanitarian aid goes to education.<sup>20</sup>

## A Future Generation with Uncertain Prospects

This underinvestment is shortsighted. Countries affected by fragility and conflict are home to a large and growing number of the world's children and young people. In the 60 countries and territories the OECD classifies as "most fragile," almost three-quarters of the population is under 30.<sup>21</sup> The population in these areas is also growing faster than in the rest of the world, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Central and Southern Asia.<sup>22</sup>

Quality education is a key ingredient for countries with young populations to harness their productivity and boost economic development. Yet on average, more than one in four young people in fragile contexts are not in employment, education or training—and three fourths of these are women.<sup>23</sup> This poses a significant risk as research has shown that countries with a higher proportion of young people—especially young women—not engaged in education, employment or training are less peaceful.<sup>24</sup> Young people who are out of school may be more vulnerable to

recruitment by criminal organizations or armed groups.<sup>25</sup> The lack of economic opportunity and decent work conditions is also a major factor driving youth migration.<sup>26</sup>

The economic impacts of underinvestment in education will reverberate globally. The young generation growing up in fragile contexts represents a substantial portion of the world's future workforce. While in many regions of the world, the share of the working-age population has begun to stabilize or decrease, in sub-Saharan Africa as well as parts of Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean, the workforce is growing. By 2050, Africa's working age population will more than double to exceed 1 billion.<sup>27</sup>

Young workers need a new set of skills to thrive in the job market of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the demand for digital skills is growing. Globally, nearly 25 percent of jobs will be disrupted by technology—especially by artificial intelligence—in just the next five years.<sup>28</sup> In Africa alone, 230 million jobs will require digital skills by 2030.<sup>29</sup> Digital skills can also contribute to building stronger democracies by helping citizens engage with governments, including throughout situations of conflict and displacement.<sup>30</sup> Yet 1 billion children lack connectivity to the Internet at home and only around half of the world's schools are online. This digital exclusion particularly affects the poorest communities, girls and persons with disabilities.<sup>31</sup>

## Education in Countries Affected by Fragility and Conflict

Quality education can help set young people on a path towards greater productivity, which in turn is an investment in more peaceful and stable societies. Yet this is exactly where the world is failing. In fragile contexts, learning poverty almost always exceeds 90 percent.<sup>32</sup> In the Democratic Republic of Congo, which is also among the world's eight fastest-growing countries, learning poverty is as high as 96 percent.

The United Nations estimates that one in five children globally are now living in or fleeing from conflict, 333 million children are living in extreme poverty and nearly one billion children are living in countries with a high risk of climate crisis.<sup>33</sup> Children and young people in these contexts are at greater risk of having their learning disrupted by conflict, violence or displacement. Of the world's 117 million people who are experiencing displacement, 40 percent are children.<sup>34</sup> Nearly half of all children living as refugees are out of school, and it has been estimated that 34 million children

are likely to lose additional years of education due to protracted situations of displacement.<sup>35</sup>

Altogether, 224 million school-aged children are affected by crises globally, including 72 million who are out of school.<sup>36</sup> Crucially, girls are almost two-and-a-half times more likely to be out of school if they live in countries affected by conflict, while young women are nearly 90 percent more likely to be out of secondary school than their counterparts in countries not impacted by conflict.<sup>37</sup>

### **Children and youth in countries affected by fragility and conflict face overlapping challenges**

**Poverty:** Children and young people in these contexts are disproportionately poor. By 2030, more than half of people living in poverty and two-thirds of people living in extreme poverty will also be living in situations of fragility, conflict and violence.<sup>38</sup>

**Inequality:** Gender inequalities, which remain considerable at the global level, are often magnified in fragile contexts. Nine of the ten countries with the widest gender gap are also experiencing fragility.<sup>39</sup> Income inequality, social exclusion of marginalized groups and the digital divide are also prevalent.

**Food insecurity:** People living in countries affected by fragility and conflict are more than twice as likely to experience food insecurity<sup>40</sup>—a driver of conflict.

**Displacement:** Fragile contexts also generate the majority of the world's people who have been forcibly displaced and host the majority of the world's refugees and internally displaced people.<sup>41</sup>

**Climate vulnerability:** Of the 25 countries most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, 15 are also impacted by conflicts and fragility.<sup>42</sup>

**Digital divide:** Although 66 percent of the world's population is using the internet, it is estimated that only 36 percent of the population in least developed countries are Internet users.<sup>43</sup> There is a risk that the digital divide and the inequalities tied to technology further exacerbate social divides. Alongside these risks, information and communications technology (ICT) can also help to reduce conflict and facilitate peace building and peacekeeping.<sup>44</sup>



## Invest in Education, Boost the Prospects for Peace

Today's underinvestment in education risks stunting global capacity to prevent conflicts and build lasting peace. The evidence is clear: education is a pillar of peaceful societies. It is a platform for democratization, economic prosperity, reducing inequality and improving social cohesion.

To foster a more peaceful future, governments and the international community urgently need to increase investments in education in lower-income countries—especially those experiencing fragility and conflict—so that:

- **Children and young people stay in school and complete their education:** The longer children stay in school, the better they are able to contribute to peaceful societies. The study conducted by IEP and GPE found that countries with higher primary school completion rates are generally more peaceful, while those countries with high levels of peacefulness have secondary school completion rates of 99 percent. UNESCO has estimated that doubling the percentage of youth with secondary education to 60 percent would halve the risk of conflict<sup>45</sup>, a finding reaffirmed by the IEP/GPE analysis.
- **All children have the opportunity to have an education:** The inclusion of at-risk and marginalized children in quality education can reduce social exclusion and help break generational cycles of poverty and overcome tensions between groups, fostering more peaceful and resilient societies. Gender equality in education can be particularly transformative: greater gender equality is highly correlated with reducing the risk of conflicts and violence (see box below).
- **The quality of education increases:** The quality of education matters. When students perform better in school, there are reduced levels of societal volatility.<sup>46</sup> Countries with higher learning-adjusted years of schooling (a measure that combines quantity and quality of schooling) are more peaceful on average.
- **Education can reinforce peace:** Schools are instrumental by teaching children civic education, the use of technologies, socio-emotional competencies and lifelong skills.
- **Education prepares youth for the future:** There is an urgent need to ensure children and young people are appropriately equipped to meet the demands of a modern workforce that will require competencies such as creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving and digital skills. In many countries, this will require a fundamental shift in pedagogical approaches.

Governments and policy makers also need to reverse the trend in dialogue around peace and security that fails to factor in the role and importance of education. In particular, education should be central to the Women, Peace and Security and the Youth, Peace and Security agendas. Only when education is recognized as a vital pillar and fundamental investment in peace and stability can we hope to build inclusive societies, reduce conflict and foster long-term resilience.

## The role of women and girls in promoting peace and stability

Research shows that there is no better development investment than the provision of quality, relevant education for girls. Educating girls generates huge dividends for girls' agency, economic prosperity, climate resilience, public health and lasting peace and stability.<sup>47</sup>

Gender equality can be a critical predictor of stability and security when women and girls are given roles within the peace building process.<sup>48</sup> Changes in women's status or vulnerability, such as an increase in domestic violence or a reduction in girl's school attendance, are often viewed as early warnings of social and political insecurity.<sup>49</sup>

Low educational attainment of girls reduces expected earning as adults, depresses labor force participation and leads to lower standards of living.<sup>50</sup> In contrast, educated girls and women play greater roles in their communities, contributing to a reduction of conflict and increased stability. A study of African countries found that gender equality is associated with a reduction in electoral violence, underscoring the importance of achieving gender equality and women empowerment in Africa.<sup>51</sup> Advocacy campaigns designed by young people targeting education authorities in the Democratic Republic of Congo highlighted poor governance and unequal access to quality education for boys and girls, as the young people recognized education as a pathway to employment.<sup>52</sup>

Studies have also shown how the promotion of positive masculinity through school and community dialogues have generated striking changes of attitudes and relations between men and women, resulting in men's support for girls' education and greater awareness of the role they can play in countering violence against women and girls in conflict settings.<sup>53</sup>

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Cover photo:

16-year-old student Sumaya Abdel Rahman Mahmoud Mohamad walks home at Djabal refugee camp, Eastern Chad where she still continues to access education. Sumaya's family fled Sudan during the War in Darfur.

GPE/Michael Knief

## CONTACT

[information@globalpartnership.org](mailto:information@globalpartnership.org)

## OFFICES

### Washington

701 18<sup>th</sup> St NW  
2<sup>nd</sup> Floor  
Washington, DC 20006  
USA

### Paris

66 Avenue d'Iéna  
75116 Paris  
France

### Brussels

Avenue Marnix 17, 2<sup>nd</sup> floor  
B-1000, Brussels  
Belgium

### Chennai

Global Infocity Park, Block C  
11<sup>th</sup> floor  
40 MGR Salai, Perungudi  
Chennai, Tamil Nadu 600096  
India