# Response to the Education Financing Commission report The Learning Generation: Investing in Education for a Changing World

Global Campaign for Education
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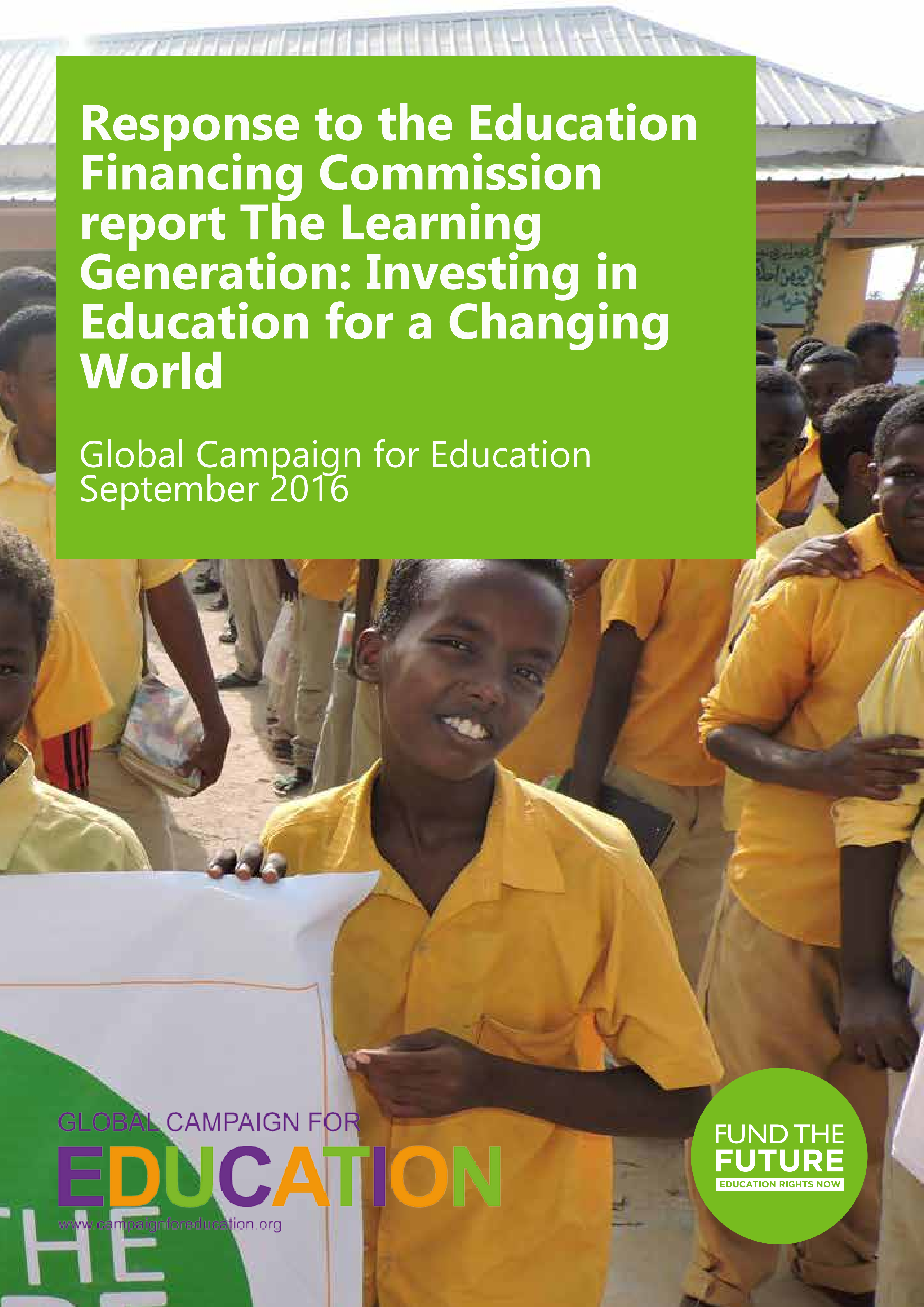

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The International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity launches its report The *Learning Generation: Investing in Education for a Changing World* on Sunday 18th September at the UN General Assembly (UNGA). Chaired by former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, the Commission is co-convened by Prime Minister Erna Solberg of Norway, President Michelle Bachelet of Chile, President Joko Widodo of Indonesia, President Peter Mutharika of Malawi and the Director-General of UNESCO Irina Bukova.

The Global Campaign for Education is a civil society coalition that calls on governments to deliver the right of everyone to a free, quality, public education. Operating in over 90 countries and dozens more across our regional and international networks, GCE members include grassroots organisations, teachers' unions, child rights groups and international NGOs.

Last month GCE produced a Policy Brief, ***What the Education Financing Commission Should Recommend***, identifying key areas where the Commission should make recommendations - and this initial response is based on the extent to which the Commission has delivered on these. You can also view the GCE membership's collective response to the Commission's consultation here.

## 1. HARMONISATION

GCE called for harmonisation with the Sustainable Development Goal on Education (SDG4) and related targets that were universally agreed last year – as well as with human rights frameworks and with the existing internationally agreed architecture. The report quotes SDG4 but focuses attention mostly on pre-primary, primary and secondary education - paying no serious attention to some other targets for example around adult literacy or lifelong learning. It refers to human rights frameworks and "reaffirms education's status as a human right, a civil right" but does not reinforce the human rights reporting architecture or the work of the UN Special Rapporteur. It calls for an "independent high level body" and a UN Special Representative for Education that will report annually to the UNGA, the Human Rights Council and the Security Council - without acknowledging or commenting on the role of the existing architecture of the Education 2030 Steering Committee which was adopted last year as part of the framework for action by UN member states. Equally there is a call for a global movement for the right to education – with no analysis of existing initiatives or mention of the Global Campaign for Education or other existing actors.

## 2. FREE EDUCATION

The report stresses the importance of education that is "free from pre-primary to secondary levels" – but falls short of making an explicit call for the end of all fee-charging. It calls for "private financing and cost recovery" in higher education, in tension with the human rights commitment to progressive realisation of free education at other levels. The commitment to free pre-primary is particularly welcome (the report notes that at present only 0.3% of education budgets are spent on pre-primary in Sub-Saharan Africa). The Commission is excellent in arguing "free education should include public finances covering all in-school incidental fees" (including textbooks, learning materials and even eye-glasses).

## 3. PUBLIC/PRIVATE

The report focuses on "system strengthening" and the central role of governments. However, it equally makes a strong case for diverse non-state actors to be involved - though always "regulated effectively by governments". Here it focuses on "civil society partners, NGOs, community and faith based organisations" but it also talks about the private sector without any explicit distinction or opposition to commercial for-profit providers – which is presently such a controversial issue. Side-stepping the issue of for-profit low-fee private schools is a missed opportunity to offer clarity on the priorities going forward. Where public resources are scarce it makes no sense to use them to subsidise or support for-profit providers. The Commission fails to emphasise clearly the importance of reserving public funds for the strengthening of public systems. There is the broad statement that governments should ensure that the involvement of non-state actors "always enhances learning and equity and upholds children's rights" but without an acknowledgment that charging fees is almost always a direct contravention of rights. Likewise governments are urged to ensure non-state provision "does not lead to any form of discrimination or segregation or create on increase inequality" but there is no recognition that the ability to pay even low-cost fees is almost inherently a form of segregation that exacerbates inequality.

The focus of the report is very much on strengthening and improving regulation without a clear acknowledgment that there are few if any credible examples of enforceable regulation in developing countries. It is a shame that more is not made of the point that "most countries with high levels of non-State involvement as school level, such as Australia, Belgium and the Netherlands do not permit [for-profit private schools]". Public-private partnerships (PPPs) are also given significant profile in the call for "cross-sector investment to get every school online and establish the broader digital infrastructure necessary for learning" – but with the warning that in PPPs with telecommunication companies "care is taken to ensure citizens' rights are not compromised".

## 4. PREDICTABILITY

The report is uneven, at one moment stressing the importance of sustainable predictable financing but then making some recommendations for new modes of mobilising finance which do not look like mechanisms that can guarantee predictable or sustainable financing. There is little reference to the tension between results-based financing and predictability. In the section on international finance it says "wherever possible financing should be predictable, sustainable and coordinated to allow for effective planning and efficient spending" but there is little analysis of which instruments really facilitate this. In respect of domestic finance the report could have done more to stress the importance of national legislation to establish legally-binding earmarked and protected resources for education.

## 5. INCLUSIVE PROCESSES

There is an insistence that the Commission recommendations do not offer a "prescriptive roadmap" and that "Education investment and reform must be led by national governments with the engagement of their citizens through the democratic process". However, there are few details of how to effectively engage civil society or the importance of parliamentary processes and legislation. There is a welcome call for teachers to be "at the heart or designing and leading the changes as empowered and valued partners in reform" – but no attention to the practical realities of shrinking space for teacher unions and student organisations in many countries. Some of the recommendations around international accountability risk being in tension with strengthening the accountability of governments to their own citizens.

## 6. BREADTH OF OUTCOMES

There are some positive statements about the importance of breadth of learning - about education for tolerance and sustainability, "higher order thinking skills", "soft or non-cognitive skills" and about the need to support the "full development of the human personality" but this is in tension with the "laser-like focus on results" and the promotion of a single "lead global learning indicator". There is a clear preference for a globally comparable indicator on literacy and numeracy, probably measured at age ten, without recognising the full challenges and dangers of standardising comparison across different languages, scripts, cultures and contexts. Reassuringly the report does however stress that such an indicator should "complement broader actions to measure learning and the quality of education systems by national governments" and says that "care should be taken to ensure that such assessments do not contribute to a narrowing of learning to focus only on these skills".

## 7. BUDGET SHARE

The Commission reinforces the idea that governments should increase the share of their budgets and GDP going to education and sets some ambitious goals for this, calling for investment to rise from 4% to 5.8% of GDP and for developing countries to increase public spending from 15% to 19% (though it is not clear why the Commission fails to reinforce the upper ends of the established benchmarks - of 20% of budgets and 6% of GDP). It does not address the importance of renewed debt relief and some of its proposals risk increasing debt by shifting the focus of future investments onto loans (even if concessional) rather than grants. The Commission has a strong commitment to a global compact to better track spending. It also sets a target for aid to education (proposing 15% rather than the 20% recommended by GCE) – noting that the total international finance for education needs to rise by an average 11% per year (from $16bn to $89bn by 2030). In per-student terms the suggestion is that countries will need to double their spending on education by 2030, for example with low-income countries spending $212 per pupil at primary level and $368 at secondary.

## 8. BUDGET SIZE

The Commission calls for a massive increase of overall spending from $1.2 trillion to $3 trillion by 2030 and these dizzying figures may unintentionally make the challenge appear unachievable – though it argues this is not the case. The report rightly places a fair amount of focus on domestic financing to increase the size of government budgets including through: raising tax to GDP ratios (by an average of 9% in low-income countries); strengthening tax authorities; increasing tax revenues from multinational companies (from 6% to 13%) and reducing tax avoidance (through which developing countries are estimated lose $800 billion a year). There is a call for more national reporting and transparency by multinationals but an unfortunate reluctance to call for serious global reforms in setting and enforcing fairer tax rules. There is support for progressive tax reforms (especially on incomes, profits and property) and a call for making indirect taxes less regressive by targeting them on goods and services consumed by the better-off. Reducing subsidies on fossil fuels and exploring earmarked taxes are also supported but with an emphasis on ensuring "accountability arrangement to monitor both additionality and use". There is no reference to the importance of ending harmful tax incentives (despite the compelling case for this) or the case for counter-cyclical investments in education. Sadly the Commission fails to call on companies in the Global Business Coalition for Education to set a positive example in their own tax affairs.

In terms of international support there is a renewal of the Dakar pledge that "no country committed to invest and reform should be prevented from achieving its objectives for lack of resources". This requires turning around the shocking decline in aid to education and addressing the failure to target aid to where it is most needed. There is a welcome call for a scaling up of the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) - up to $2 billion a year by 2020 and $4 billion a year by 2030. It also calls for more aid to education in humanitarian contexts (up to 4-6%) but pays no analysis of the need to harmonise these two funds which remains a critical issue. Some references are made to innovative financing mechanisms, including Education Bonds, Disaster Insurance, Impact Investing and Solidarity Levies without much analysis of these being provided – but most attention of all is placed on a Multilateral Development Bank for investing in education (which is it claimed could raise $20bn a year, up from the present $3.5bn raised for education by existing banks). This is not spelt out in sufficient detail to be convincing as a source of harmonised and predictable resources – and there is no analysis of the potential impact of increasing debt (which is already a significant obstacle for countries wanting to invest more in education).

## 9. BUDGET SENSITIVITY

The Commission does a good job in highlighting the crucial importance of investing for equity with a strong focus on the most marginalised children and the most vulnerable countries. It underlines "poverty as a determinant both of non-completion and non-learning" and stresses that "successful education systems must reach everyone, including the most disadvantaged and marginalised" adding "this means targeting public resources at the areas of greatest need". A core message is that countries should pursue "progressive universalism", calling for the allocation of public budgets to the lower levels of the education budget and within that to those left behind because of poverty, disability and social disadvantage". It also captures the importance of equitable financing meaning "higher investment is needed to reach those children who are disadvantaged dues to poverty, disability or other factors" - and to those affected by multiple disadvantages.

In terms of how budgets are spent the Commission is also positive on promoting the central role of quality trained teachers – the importance of teachers being "paid a liveable wage" and making teaching "an attractive career option". It calls for "strengthening initial and ongoing training" - though recognising that the role of teachers is changing. In the context of technology the report insists digital learning must become "fully integrated into teacher training and development strategies" and must facilitate "high quality, demand-driven content, tailored to local curricula, standards and needs" - rather than standardised one-size fits all solutions. The Commission calls on governments to "significantly increase their investment in the recruitment, training and retention of teachers and in their effective deployment and utilisation". Part of this means having better trained non-teaching personnel so teachers can focus on teaching. It calls for a year-long task force – a "high level expert group on the expansion and re-design of the education workforce".

On targeting spending there is a strong case made for investing across sectors and for coordinated action - including in health (especially malaria prevention, deworming and school sanitation), disability, early childhood development, school safety, child labour and child marriage. Within education there is strong support for interventions such as mother-tongue teaching, incentivising enrolment (e.g. school meals), maximising contact hours and using child-focused teaching methods. However, one serious gap in respect of equity is that the report overlooks the importance of youth and adult literacy, which are crucial for ending cross-generational disadvantage.

## 10. BUDGET SCRUTINY

The Commission calls for much greater transparency and accountability across the board – ensuring money reaches where it should and is spent effectively, calling for countries to "prioritise tracking expenditure from system to school level and publish national education accounts" and highlighting the importance of "community-based accountability". It is less explicit about the crucial role of independent/coordinated civil society action in this transparency and accountability work. It properly highlights corruption but at times over-exaggerates the level of "waste" (suggesting "half of the entire education budget" does not lead to learning in low-income countries – which is a twisted way of presenting the evidence). This risks having the unintended consequence of undermining the case for further investment. A new "Global Education Data Initiative" is called for which would include data on budgets and spending.

The International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity has picked up on some important issues and is a positive contribution in showing that the education goals are achievable. It could have been sharper and bolder in some areas and there are some missed opportunities in ensuring the future financing of education is truly long term and predictable. In some cases it wants to have its cake and eat it, side-stepping sensitive or difficult issues rather than providing a clear direction. This could leave too much scope for different interpretations of its recommendations. The Commission should have been much more explicit in calling for public money to be spent only on the central challenge and obligation of adequately funding free, quality public education – rather than in subsidising for-profit providers. Whilst there is a need to maintain political momentum there are concerns about the creation of new architecture to do this - rather than reinforcing what was agreed just last year (following a long consultation process). However there is clearly much to be welcomed overall, not least the positive tone that emphasises that dramatic progress on education is achievable if leaders are held to account and if adequate financing is raised and effectively used.