

# The Nordic-African Conference on Quality Education

Copenhagen, 24 May 2024

## Communiqué

The African Union (AU) has declared 2024 the Year of Education - [Educate and Skill Africa for the 21st Century](#). In support of this, the AU's Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA) aims directly at ensuring all African children receive a quality education relevant to the needs of the continent that promotes sustainable development at all levels, and many [African countries](#) are already leading the way.

Nordic government and non-governmental actors are among the top donors to global education, with a focus on the most marginalized, thereby upholding the fundamental right to education.

Together, we represent a coalition that has come together in Copenhagen to highlight education on the international agenda, demonstrate political leadership in support of education, and reaffirm our joint commitment to achieving quality education for all.

Education is central to achieving a sustainable future. As stated by the United Nations Secretary General, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4: Quality Education is [fundamental to the achievement of all 17 SDGs](#). Conversely, if we fail to deliver quality education for all, many of the other SDGs cannot be fulfilled.

The rapid expansion of access to education in the new millennium is at risk of reversing. In 2022, emergencies affected the education of about [224 million](#) school-aged children, more than half of whom live in Africa. Crises, whether conflict or climate-related, directly threaten the safety of school children and deprive them of education, undermining their potential to contribute to sustainable development. On top of this, there is a global teacher shortage, and in sub-Saharan Africa alone [15 million additional teachers](#) are needed to achieve universal education.

Moreover, the quality of education for those in school has not recovered from the Covid-19 pandemic. The [learning crisis](#) is particularly severe in sub-Saharan Africa where nine out of ten children at age 10 cannot read with comprehension, representing millions of years of lost learning. The pandemic also inflicted a large toll on the psychosocial well-being on children and families.

Finally, inequities in education spending remain stark. The majority of the world's children live in low- and middle-income countries, but they only benefit from [8% of global education spending](#), representing an imbalance that imperils future joint prosperity.

The global community has committed to achieving quality education for all, including at the Transforming Education Summit (TES) in 2022 where two out of three United Nations member states issued [national statements of commitment](#) to education.

This communiqué highlights the consensus among the co-hosts on the main themes of the 2024 Nordic-African Education Conference held in Copenhagen. It builds on existing commitments and calls for action on four core levers to deliver on the right to quality education for all, leaving no one behind:

1. The Pact for the Future must Recognize the Need to Invest in Education, so that Young People can Reach their Full Potential, in line with the Statement made by the United Nations Secretary General

Failing to deliver on children's rights – including to education – undermines the global community's goal of building a sustainable, peaceful and prosperous future for all. The persistent inequalities within and between countries, when it comes to access to quality inclusive education, and the slow pace of progress, is deeply concerning.

The children deprived of education today, whether due to poverty, conflict, or climate change, will soon be the young people who lack the necessary skills to build sustainable, cohesive and creative societies. An educated workforce is a pre-condition for equitable social and economic growth; young people who acquire foundational skills, including literacy and numeracy, have [higher rates of employment, earn more, and enjoy better job security](#). Education is also a catalytic investment in health, peace, gender equality and climate action.

Africa is already home to half a billion children; by 2055, Africa will be home to a [billion children of school age](#), the largest child population of any continent. A rapidly increasing population constitutes an opportunity to reap a demographic dividend, which has been a central factor in the development of many nations.

However, without access to quality learning and education, many African nations risk forfeiting this unique moment. To have the capacity to solve future challenges, *all* children must first have their basic rights - to be safe, healthy and educated – met.

Further, we recognize that the foundation for cognitive development and overall well-being is laid in the first 1000 days of a child's life. Indeed, this is a crucial period for developing the essential skills that will support future growth and learning and enable children to thrive beyond the classroom. Hence, investing in education includes investing in early childhood.

2. Continued Push for the Promotion of Gender Equality in and through Education, Leveraging Gender-Disaggregated Data on Education Access and Attainment

Girls are less likely to complete secondary education than boys in many countries – across sub-Saharan Africa [34 million adolescent girls](#) are out of school compared to 31 million adolescent boys, often owing to child marriage, early pregnancy and unevenly shared domestic responsibilities. At the same time, the evidence is clear: investing in girls' education and promoting gender equality in and through education delivers remarkable returns; returns that benefit not only the girl and her family, but the entire society. One

estimate finds that achieving full secondary school completion for girls can [raise GDP by 10%](#) in emerging economies. Moreover, if all girls complete secondary education, child marriage rates would be [more than halved](#).

The Freetown Manifesto, signed by fourteen African ministers of education, affirms the commitment to promote gender equality through education, and the CESA aims to achieve gender parity and equity in education.

We echo these ambitions and encourage countries to take a data-driven approach to achieving gender parity. By strengthening systems of data collection and processing, we can ensure that policies and programs that advance gender equality and other aspects of an equitable education system meet their mark. Here, as with all aspects of building equal, inclusive, and resilient education systems, there remains untapped potential for peer-to-peer exchanges as a method to share lessons learned from countries across the African continent who share similar challenges.

### 3. Education Systems Must be Protected and Recognized for their Contribution to Resilience and Adaptation

Crises, whether man-made or natural, directly impact education systems. At the same time, an educated population is one of the best ways to prepare societies to deal with such shocks.

Rising temperatures and increasingly volatile weather are a reality across the world. Many African nations already suffer tremendously from the impact of climate change, although they, historically, have contributed the least to greenhouse gas emissions. Higher temperatures [affect learning](#), extreme weather events destroy school infrastructure and interrupted crop cycles affect children's nutrition.

Similarly, violent conflict and hunger emergencies force schools to close and displace families. Children are forced to relocate within their countries or cross international borders, which too often becomes a permanent end to their educational journey. We therefore echo the Safe Schools Declaration as well as security council resolution 2601 condemning attacks and threats of attack against schools and emphasizing the need to continue education in situations of armed conflict.

Through quality education, learners in already poverty-stricken and fragile countries vulnerable to the consequences of climate change can be equipped with the knowledge and skills to understand the causes of climate change and how to contribute to mitigation and adaptation. To advance this agenda, it will be critical to strengthen the capacity of educators to effectively teach children on these topics alongside systematic integration of the topics into the curriculum. Further, community engagement is essential in reducing the environmental impact of climate change; we need their support to address the effects of climate change on education systems now, even as we educate the next generation to be responsible stewards of our planet.

In addition, it is recognized that for children to grow, develop and thrive in an increasingly uncertain world and become agents of change, they must access quality education that strengthens their social-emotional wellbeing. By incorporating the development of holistic skills such as resilience, emotional regulation, and positive relationship-building from the early years, children are prepared to face adversity and enhance their overall ability to benefit from and contribute to the education systems.

Moreover, the way children learn directly supports the development of these holistic skills; learning through play reflects the way children naturally engage with the world. Education should therefore go beyond rote memorization and instead incorporate joyful interactions, meaningful play experiences, and social connections. Children engaged in play-based learning are motivated to become life-long learners, regardless of the circumstances in which they find themselves.

#### 4. Support to Education must be Ambitious and New Partnerships for Increased Investment in Global Education should be Pursued

The two global education funds – Education Cannot Wait and the Global Partnership for Education – collectively provide a strong platform for investing in education across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. While these funds, along with other education actors, have mobilized new and additional funding, global disparities remain vast. A quarter of the world's children under 14 live in low-income countries, but they receive less than [one percent of global education investment](#).

UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report 2023 estimates that SDG 4 faces a [97-billion-dollar finance gap](#). The World Bank and UNHCR [estimate](#) that it is necessary to reach a total of 9 billion dollars per year to provide education to refugees and simultaneously strengthen education systems in low-and middle-income countries. This is equivalent to about 0.1 % of global GDP, a figure dwarfed by [the sums that countries readily invested](#) to mitigate the economic and health fall-out from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Echoing the United Nations Secretary General's call in his [Policy Brief on Transforming Education](#), it is imperative that the donor community is ambitious in their support to education, not least to education in emergencies.

Similarly, echoing the Heads of State Declaration on Education Financing from the 2021 Global Education Summit, it is equally imperative that countries with young populations devote the necessary national public expenditure to education. African nations need to increase investment in education by identifying additional local resources while in parallel deepening international partnerships on investment and technical cooperation.

Among the co-hosts of the Nordic-African conference on quality education, there is momentum for forging and strengthening partnerships across public and private actors on both the local and international level to unlock additional financing, including by establishing and expanding innovative financing models for education.

**The co-hosts of the Conference:**



**MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
OF DENMARK**



The global fund for education in emergencies



**Red Barnet**  
Save the Children Denmark



**OXFAM DANMARK**



**Finn Church Aid**

The **LEGO** Foundation 

**Other supporters:**



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