# Business and the Global Learning Crisis: Principles for Sustainable Engagement

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#### INTRODUCTION

Private companies' support of education in developing countries has been largely inefficient and unable to create large-scale change, especially for the world's most marginalized populations. A recent study indicates that U.S. companies contribute nearly a half billion dollars to education in developing countries each year. The same study highlights the small-scale, short-term, uncoordinated nature of these investments. When coupled with its systematic failure to reach the most marginalized, corporate support for education does not make an aggregate measureable impact on education globally.

Part of the challenge has been the education sector's inability to engage the business community in a meaningful manner. At the World Education Forum, held in Dakar, Senegal in 2000, 164 countries reached consensus on Education for All goals: six education priorities for the global community to reach by 2015.<sup>2</sup> But the vision for corporate engagement in education has been weak and has failed to collectively rally companies across industry sectors to support the Education for All agenda. However, if the business community becomes organized and makes a direct link between education and a company's core business assets and objectives, the education sector has the potential to steer corporate resources to support education in a more effective and sustainable manner. There are opportunities to

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leverage the expertise of the education community and the collective action of various stakeholders, including governments, multilateral and bilateral agencies, foundations, and communities, to improve corporate investments in support of global education. In this piece, I highlight the flaws in the narrow vision of business engagement in global education over the past decade. I also outline the core principles of a paradigm shift for corporate engagement in education that should be followed to ensure that the business community plays a sustainable and valuable role in addressing the global learning crisis and, particularly, issues of educational equity.

#### A MOMENT OF CRISIS IN THE GLOBAL EDUCATION SECTOR

The challenge is clear: tens of millions of children are out of school, those enrolled are not learning, and young people are leaving school without the skills they need for sustainable livelihoods. Despite the increased mobilization of resources for education in developing countries over the past decade, approximately 67 million children still lack access to basic education. Given current trends, the 2015 goal of enrolling all children in primary school will fall short by 56 million children.<sup>3</sup> Estimates suggest an approximate USD 16.2 billion annual financing gap for achieving the basic education goal of universal primary school enrollment, and the gap is estimated at USD 25 billion if lower secondary schooling is also included.<sup>4</sup> Emerging data exposes dismal learning levels in developing countries. Approximately 200 million children worldwide are enrolled in school but learning so little they struggle to read.<sup>5</sup> In some countries in sub-Saharan Africa, a child with five years of schooling has a 40 percent chance of being illiterate.<sup>6</sup>

The global education crisis developed through a series of good intentions and unintended consequences. In 2000, six Education for All (EFA) goals were outlined and adopted in the Dakar Framework for Action as a result of the World Education Forum. The six EFA goals stretched across all age groups, from early childhood education to adult literacy and life skills. Furthermore, not only did the framework address issues of access and parity, it also covered broader issues of education quality and relevancy. For instance, Goal Three focused on appropriate learning and life skills, while Goal Six encouraged the achievement of learning outcomes for all, particularly in regards to literacy, numeracy, and life skills. However, in 2000, the EFA agenda was overshadowed by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which quickly became the agenda of the global development community. The MDGs included only two of the six EFA goals, shifting the policy discourse and subsequent financing to focus almost

exclusively on the priorities of primary school access and gender equity. The unintended consequence of focusing only on access and gender parity

has been record levels of enrollment in primary schools without corresponding investments in the quality of education for those enrolling in school. Lagging investment in preparing children to learn through early childhood development, quality of education in the primary cycle, and transition to relevant secondary and post-primary opportunities causes millions of young people to fall through the cracks, failing to learn the basic skills needed to become productive members of society.<sup>9</sup>

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Collectively, the education sector has been unable to articulate this challenge in a way that allows a variety of stakeholders—developing country governments, donor governments, civil society, foundations, and corporations—to make collective progress. A recent Brookings Institution report called for a Global Compact on Learning<sup>10</sup> to rally all actors around a global learning agenda highlighting the need for leadership, financing, advocacy and partnerships to address the needs of the most marginalized children and youth. In heeding this rallying cry, there is much promise to learn from mistakes of the past and fully engage the business community as equal partners in addressing the global learning crisis.

# A DECADE OF WEAK POLICIES GUIDING CORPORATE INVESTMENTS IN GLOBAL EDUCATION

The 2002 Monterrey Consensus of the International Conference on Financing for Development concluded with a strong endorsement of public-private sector financing mechanisms to support the international development agenda. However, this vision has not been realized in the global education sector over the past decade. Beyond weak institutional efforts at a global level, the vast majority of corporate social investments in education have not been made in coordination with other efforts, resulting in parallel investments below the radar of governments.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to the billions of dollars mobilized by the private sector for global health initiatives during this period, the global education sector has not seen the same level of commitment. Moreover, the financing mobilized has been hindered by several insti-

tutional deficiencies and policy frameworks that have minimized its potential impact. These include the inability of coalitions to go to sustainable scale, the treatment of youth and families as consumers, the creation of parallel programs systems that do not strengthen education systems, the failure to generate incentive structures to address the needs of the marginalized, and the implementation of programs without rigorous evaluation metrics.

# Failing to Create Sustainable Coalitions and Take them to Scale

Over the past decade, following up on the recommendations by the Monterrey Consensus, the World Economic Forum (WEF) has arguably been the most vocal and active international institution facilitating corporate engagement in EFA. Starting in 2003 though its Global Education Initiative, WEF launched a series of national multi-stakeholder initiatives. The first was the Jordan Education Initiative followed by the Rajasthan Education Initiative in 2005, in which partners from governments, international organizations, the private sector, and nongovernmental organizations jointly addressed educational challenges in local contexts. Additional initiatives were launched in Egypt and the Palestinian Territories. The WEF claims that these initiatives, now no longer supported by WEF, mobilized USD 150 million in educational investments and impacted over 2 million students. However, there are no rigorous impact evaluations of these initiatives, and those that exist suggest many opportunities to improve the effectiveness and impact of the investments, as well as ways to refine the Global Education Initiative model prior to scaling up. 12 For example, despite identifying the Jordan Education Initiative as the most successful of the series, one evaluation concluded that the initiative "had not led to systemic change in the delivery of education."13

Another initiative launched to engage the business sector during this time period was developed through a WEF partnership with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Partnerships for Education aimed to create a global coalition of partnerships to achieve the EFA goals and the MDGs related to education. The partnership focused on the "development, synthesis, and dissemination of the tools, processes, and frameworks to help ensure successful multi-stake-holder partnerships in education." WEF discontinued its support for the project in 2011 and transitioned responsibility to UNESCO, where it is currently under review by a task force.

Throughout the past decade, WEF played an organizing role for the private sector to engage in EFA. When WEF concluded its flagship education initiatives, <sup>16</sup> the organization produced a retrospective report detailing its experiences forming partnerships between the private and public sector to support education<sup>17</sup> and transitioned the projects into external initiatives, primarily UNESCO and the Global Partnership for Education. However, the transition of WEF activities to external parties has yet to lead to strong institutional support for mobilizing pathways for business engagement in education. And the activities that did take place over the past decade leave no track record demonstrating the private sector's contribution to scalable, systemic change in education systems.

# Treating Marginalized Youth and Their Families as Consumers

One trend emerging from the previous decade of corporate engagement in education is leveraging public-private partnerships to market "bottom-of-the-pyramid" educational products and services. <sup>18</sup> This entails the marketing of low-cost education products—such as textbooks, computers, science and vocational training equipment, other educational and teaching aids, or even low-cost private schools which charge fees for attendance—in high volumes to low-income users. Instead of using a framework of education as a human right, many companies have engaged in education as a potential source of revenue.

During the WEF education roundtables following the Monterrey Consensus, corporate participants cited education ministry procurement offices as one potential source of revenue. This model of viewing the ministry of education as a client, would assume that bottom-of-the-pyramid product development and services would target countries or communities with enough discretionary funds in education budgets to purchase them. This phenomena has the potential to further perpetuate inequalities in education quality by providing additional learning aids only to those populations most able to afford them, failing to reach the most marginalized. Moreover, these strategies are only applicable to sectors whose products or services are directly relevant to education. Business stakeholders themselves have noted that these bottom-of-the-pyramid marketing schemes sometimes divert "public or household resources to products that are less cost-effective or bring unintended adverse consequences."19 Therefore, although marketing low-cost tools in this manner may prove to be a good business strategy, this approach is not sustainable to make large-scale progress on equitable learning opportunities.

Perhaps even more concerning is the broad assumption by many companies that business engagement in education should work in opposition to a free, high-quality public education. WEF's education roundtables perpetuated this principle in one of their outcome statements, saying: "Public schools in developing countries that cater to the economically

backward strata of society often have better facilities; however, it is the private schools that perform better." The report goes on to suggest that Ministries of Education should reduce regulatory barriers to private education and assert that learning will improve as private sector practices are integrated into the management of public schools. This position assumes that private schools provide a higher quality education than public schools. However, it inaccurately oversimplifies complex empirical data on public and private education outcomes. Moreover, it sidesteps a more important question for developing sustainable and systemic change in the provision of quality education: how can corporate assets support the improvement of public education systems in developing countries?

Several studies indicate that there is no clear winner when examining the quality of public versus private schools in developing countries. While some studies indicate that private schools have better student achievement outcomes,<sup>20</sup> other studies show the opposite, or have mixed results based on local context or subject areas.<sup>21</sup> Some studies suggest there are validity issues with claims about the positive impact of privatization on education.<sup>22</sup> As an example of the mixed bag of evidence, a study from the National Center for the Study of Privatization of Education found that the relative

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quality of public and private schools varied in sub-Saharan Africa. While private and public schools in Malawi were essentially rated equal in quality, in Zambia, private schools were consistently rated worse than public schools.<sup>23</sup> A study in the United States concluded that once the variable of socio-economic status was controlled, most of the public and private school achievement differences were eliminated.<sup>24</sup> A collection of studies examining secondary education in Colombia, the Dominican Republic, the Philippines, Tanzania, and Thailand concluded that although

private schools may be positively associated with higher learning outcomes in some instances, in others the magnitude of the effect of private schools substantially decreases with lower socioeconomic status.<sup>25</sup> Even in cases where private schools may outperform public schools, privatization is not necessarily the cause of such outcomes. Instead, other socioeconomic predictors such as parental education levels or incentives promoting teacher atten-

dance that could be implemented in public systems may be responsible. While it may be possible to argue that some privatization schemes can serve as short-term solutions in regions where government capacity cannot yet provide education, as an across-the-board solution, privatization would most likely fail to resolve the disparities in equitable learning. A pathway of corporate engagement in education that encourages the most marginalized families to pay to send a child to school should be questioned as the most appropriate solution for productive engagement of companies in education.

# Creating Parallel Programs Instead of Strengthening Systems

Corporate engagement in global education has largely been characterized by uncoordinated and duplicative investments. Companies rarely direct resources to governments due to laws on foreign corruption. Instead, the vast majority of investments and contributions—more than 70 percent—are directed to international non-profits or local non-profits based in developing countries. Rearly three-fourths of U.S. companies engaging in global education do not coordinate their education investments with host governments at any level. Only 27 percent coordinate with host governments and 20 percent coordinate with donor governments.

This leads to the duplicative implementation of projects aside other companies, foundations, and aid agencies, with no coordination with national education plans and full assumption of risk of the investment in education. All of these disjointed education efforts do not maximize or leverage the resources of governments or other donors, creating siloed, parallel efforts that do not build off the larger community of actors or reinforce government plans. This leads to inefficiencies, overlapping programs, and support gaps for different parts of the education system based on donor preferences. Further hindering the streamlining of efforts, the international mechanism responsible for promoting collective financing for vetted national education plans, the Global Partnership for Education, has yet to develop strategic processes to channel private sector resources to support national education plans.

# Lacking Incentives to Support Marginalized Populations

During the past decade, actors within the education sector have not leveraged corporate assets to advance education in areas of the greatest need. The Global Partnership for Education, the closet entity approaching a global fund, has not established mechanisms to attract large-scale corporate investment in education in developing countries. And unlike the Gates Foundation in global health, there is no equivalent private actor of the

same scale focused on catalyzing and incentivizing cross-sector partner-ships or research and development to address critical education challenges in the poorest regions of the world. The lack of collaborative networks that promote both social and business value has led many companies to operate independently, driven by the desire to use the social cause of education to advance business interests. In this model, business interests have shaped educational investments, with the main drivers of geographic focus being the communities where employees live and work, countries with current or emerging consumer bases, potential growth markets projected to be important sources of production or sales in future years and communities in the company's supply chain. The main driver of how companies engage has been potential market value in terms of product development, potential sales or public relations.

Within countries, there are vast inequities in education resources, and unfortunately, there is no available data of corporate education investments at the community level. Many countries suffer extreme levels of education poverty, measured by the share of the population between the ages of seventeen and twenty-two with fewer than four years of education. Although these countries are arguably in greatest need of investment in education, most often corporate philanthropy does not reach them. Twenty-five percent of developing countries identified by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development received no contribution to education whatsoever. Less than one-fifth of U.S.-based companies make contributions to education in countries with the highest levels of education poverty, with the exception of Pakistan. This demonstrates why corporate philanthropy cannot be relied upon as the sole solution for education challenges in developing countries: it systematically does not reach areas with the greatest needs.

# Operating without Rigorous Education Outcomes Metrics

In contrast to business decisions, which guide companies to invest where they anticipate a high rate of return, social investments in education do not have the same level of rigor. Despite over a decade of the EFA agenda, we still do not have rigorous evidence of the efficacy of models for corporate engagement in education. The need for short-term business metrics depicting success reinforces an inherent contradiction between private sector engagement in education and the nature of educational investments, which tend to have longer-term outcomes. Though some companies do strongly emphasize monitoring and evaluation, metrics do not provide strong indicators of educational outcomes. Instead, companies tend to focus on educational

outputs such as enrollment rates or measures of corporate public perception (e.g., employee satisfaction or community perceptions of the company).<sup>29</sup> In very few instances do companies actually measure learning or other outcomes linking education investments to improvements in competencies, knowledge, and skills.<sup>30</sup>

In part, this may be due to the staffing of companies' philanthropy and marketing departments, which tend to not have in-house education expertise or a clear understanding of the connection between educational outcomes and a company's core business objectives. Research has found that the offices directing education contributions are small, with limited staff capacity or expertise in education in developing countries.<sup>31</sup> Many companies are isolated from the global education agenda and research, particularly on best practices. Moreover, with the business case for global educational investments not strongly articulated for the corporate community, there is little incentive to develop sound metrics for measuring the impact of investments on learning outcomes. If companies understood that higher levels of education in developing countries would facilitate access to skilled workers, increase corporate growth and profit potential, improve worker productivity, and ease the conduct of business, they would be more likely to develop and track the impact of their investments.

#### THE PATH FORWARD

The previous decade was characterized by the limited participation of the corporate sector in supporting public education in a meaningful and sustainable way. The corporate agenda has been fueled by principles that fail to demonstrate a comprehensive vision for how the corporate sector—across all industries—can support Education for All. However, past corporate involvement, although problematic, provides us with the opportunity to reflect on how to structure private sector engagement in education at a time when a policy window may support a movement for wider-scale corporate social investments in education.

Three indicators that a policy window is opening signal a critical opportunity to transition to a new agenda for corporate engagement in education. First, the activities of the WEF have come to a natural close and, with the expiring MDG and EFA frameworks, there is a renewed focus on reenergizing the education sector in a post-2015 strategy. Coalitions are developing to advance the global education sector's post-2015 agenda and broadening the conversations to include corporate actors. Organizations such as the Global Partnership for Education and UNESCO have an opportunity

to develop concrete and specific opportunities for the business community to support national education plans. Second, for the first time there is empirical evidence surfacing about the corporate sector's engagement in education in developing countries, including data about the magnitude, scope, and motivations, as well as best practices and critiques. And third, high-level polit-

There are three indicators that a policy window is opening and signal a critical opportunity to transition to a new agenda for corporate engagement in education. ical leadership is focused on the business community and its involvement in education. For instance, in September 2011, former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and Queen Rania of Jordan convened CEOs of major companies and high-level education leaders to establish a business coalition focused on improved social investments in education. The UN Secretary General will make education the cornerstone of his

second term in office, which will creat an opportunity to engage the business community as a strong champion of education. This window provides an opportunity to turn away from the operating framework of the past and focus on practices that can make the business community a long-term, sustainable partner in improving global learning outcomes. There are several principles that should be adopted in order to gain broad-based and meaningful corporate support for improved public education.

# Principle 1: Make a Direct Link between Investing in Learning and Core Business

The education sector must make a direct link between investments in learning and companies' core business objectives. A broader business case for investment in education—and a realization of the cost of not doing so—is needed to convince companies of the importance of rallying collectively behind a broad global learning agenda. The business case for education should outline the direct bottom-line cost of low learning levels for companies. This includes the lack of skilled workforces in some developing countries, the perpetuation of a global talent gap, low levels of consumer income, the health of employees and their children, the competitive community context in which the company operates, and the social cohesiveness and political stability in the countries where the company does business. Investing in education is not solely an issue of workforce training, however. Investing collectively in the education of societies, from early childhood through post-primary, can drive down long-term costs to the company and promote the health and well-being of its employees

and consumers. This broader vision will allow companies from across sectors to see how a collective investment in the level of learning in developing countries benefits society and all industries.

# Principle 2: Evaluate Impact using Outcomes-Based Learning Metrics

The business community must adopt outcome-based metrics and evaluate the impact of investments against them. Too often, companies have focused on metrics such as school enrollment or lives impacted by corporate social investments — with the term "impact" simply indicating coming into contact with a program. This provides little evidence that corporate social investments in education are effective and makes it difficult to establish a business case for continuing them. If companies use outcome-based metrics, evaluations of investments can strengthen the case for what works and how businesses can most successfully engage in education. Building the research base with these success stories can serve as a catalyst for additional investments and improve the quality of current investments.

# Principle 3: Promote Meaningful Collaboration

The corporate sector must strengthen its direct collaboration with other key stakeholders in the education sector, as previously discussed, including developing-country governments, civil society, donor governments, and multilateral organizations, as well as other companies and private foundation donors. This will allow corporate social investments to leverage investments by other actors, leading to more effective investmentspractices. Only through a direct understanding of how corporate social investments fit with national education plans and priorities can corporate contributions begin to advance learning in a scalable and meaningful way. Broader coordination also allows for an understanding of how private investments complement government investments and the identification of populations that may be missing out, given that private financing often gravitates towards certain populations at the expense of the most marginalized.<sup>32</sup> By linking business engagement with broader initiatives, the corporate community can join a network of stakeholders and promote the key messages and values of the broader education sector.33

### Principle 4: Support Government Capacity to Provide Quality Education

For innovation from the corporate sector to reach scale, and have an impact on the bottom line of the business community, investments in education, when feasible, should be conducted in harmony with national education plans and aim to enhance government capacity. While businesses can make significant contributions to global education, government coordination is important if initiatives are to come to scale in meaningful ways and promote systemic, generational change. Governments are the largest source of education financing in developing countries and, in many contexts, governments have the ability to expand upon proven models developed by business through their national education plan strategies and external financing mechanisms. Other times, coordination with the government can improve the government capacity to implement a program and makes corporate engagement more sustainable.

# Principle 5: Play an Advocacy Role to Promote the Importance of Education and Learning

Corporations benefit from healthy education systems and as consumers of talented individuals for the workforce, thrive in peaceful and stable societies. Additionally, the higher earning potential associated with quality education outcomes stands to better expand corporate markets. Because of this intimate connection between education and business, business must play a leadership and advocacy role by engaging in dialogue with governments and donors at the highest levels of political leadership. By articulating the importance of education and learning to national governments, business can help persuade government leaders to keep education and learning high on the national and international agendas.

#### CONCLUSION

While not the only actor in global education policy, the business community can play a role to help achieve Education for All. The issues of access and quality of education are complex. For conversations between the education and private sectors to move forward in a fruitful manner, all parties must recognize that many of the failures to date are not due to a lack of interest or intent, but a lack of vision and avenues for engagement for the private sector. Corporate engagement in education must be broadbased, rallying all stakeholders in the private sector around core education needs, if it is to address the leading social and economic growth crisis of our time: a lack of equitable access to learning for all. Companies must understand how learning in developing countries has a direct impact on their bottom line and must establish learning outcomes as the measure of

successful impact. By working collaboratively across a series of stakeholders to enhance government capacity in education provision, the private sector will be able to harness the unique assets each company brings to the table

and leverage those of other stakeholders in education. The new set of principles outlined in this paper provides a framework for the business community's engagement in education. The education sector now has the opportunity to work with the business community on these principles to improve education in both children's and businesses' best interests. It is no small task, but it is one we must confront in order to harness the potential of the corporate sector to best support quality education for all of the world's children.

Corporate engagement in education must be broad-based, rallying all stakeholders in the private sector around core education needs, if it is to address the leading social and economic growth crisis of our time: a lack of equitable access to learning for all.

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