Donor funding for basic education is inadequate, uncoordinated and declining, signaling a lack of ambition to reach Millennium Development Goal 2 — universal primary education.

Increased, targeted and well-coordinated donor financing remains essential to ensuring no unfinished business in 2015 and laying a strong foundation for the post-2015 education goals.
In the year 2000, international donors made a commitment that “no countries seriously committed to education for all will be thwarted in their achievement of [universal education] by lack of resources.” Instead of scaling up financing to meet the 2015 deadline and establishing a strong foundation for success on the 2030 agenda, most donors are pulling back.

Donor resources are inconsistent, uncoordinated and declining and aid to basic education has fallen every year since 2010. Lack of adequate financing is worst in the poorest countries and in fragile or conflict states where funding for education has always been inadequate and education remains a low priority. US$22 billion is needed annually to get all children everywhere in school.

As the 2015 deadline looms, enthusiasm grows for a new set of targets — the post-2015 sustainable development goals (SDGs). These 2030 goals are an incredibly important next phase in building a just and equitable world. However, the new goals provide a 15-year extension on the current promise for universal education that is not acceptable. Commitment to the SDGs should not obscure the failure to adequately invest in reaching the 2015 deadline on which millions of children’s lives depend. Increased, targeted and well-coordinated donor financing remains essential to ensuring no unfinished business in 2015 and a laying a strong foundation for the post-2015 education goals.

The decline in funding to basic education

The following 10 countries are the largest bilateral donors to basic education. In 2010, rather than beginning to scale-up to reach the 2015 target, nearly all of these donors began scaling back their contributions and overall aid to basic education fell by 6% for the first time since 2002. In 2011 alone, 24 of the top 29 education donor countries (including 9 of the top 15) reduced their financial commitments to basic education, particularly in low-income countries in sub-Saharan Africa — home to half of the world’s out-of-school children. Reductions in some countries have been rapid and shocking. Since 2010, 13 African countries have had their basic education aid cut, bringing overall aid levels across the continent back to 2008 levels. Despite making significant progress by getting more than 3 million children into school since 2000, total donor aid to Ethiopia has declined from over US$200 million in 2007 to less than US$50 million between 2008 and 2013. More than 3 million children, the hardest to reach, remain out of school.
Multilateral financing—unpredictable and inadequate

Multilateral institutions play a significant role in financing for basic education. However, multilateral aid to basic education has been erratic and the top five multilateral contributors to basic education have reduced their share of total aid to basic education over the last decade. Current funding levels are the same as a decade ago.12

The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) has scaled-up in the poorest countries over the last decade. But spending by the GPE is unlikely to even fill the gap left by the World Bank’s declining aid to low-income countries.13

In 2011, the World Bank’s International Development (IDA) lending to basic education stood at nearly the same level as in 2002 in absolute terms.14

World Bank funds need to be better targeted to those countries with the largest numbers of out-of-school children and those populations who are hardest to reach. In 2011, the bank provided 20%—the smallest share—of its total aid to basic education to low-income countries. More than 70% of funding went to countries with less than 20% of the out-of-school population.15

To explain away reductions in aid to education, donors cite shrinking aid budgets, the financial crisis and a shift to greater country financing. This is not the whole story. Since 2008 donor investments in health have risen 58% while investments in education, critical for sustaining health outcomes, dropped 19%.16 Health investments should continue to rise and education investments must begin to reflect the same level of ambition.

A clear picture of the disparity between health and education donor financing is evident by comparing the recent Global Partnership for Education (GPE) replenishment to the most recent financial replenishments of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria and GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance. Following a successful Global Fund replenishment in December 2013—where donors pledged an unprecedented US$12 billion, in June 2014, 6 months later, GPE was underfunded by more than US$1 billion, receiving a mere US$2.1 billion—just 60% of what GPE leadership and civil society called for. Just over 6 months later, GAVI called for US$7.5 billion and was able to mobilize a total of US$9.6 billion. The resources exist; donors just do not feel compelled to invest them in basic education.
Greater ambition and more resources urgently needed

The decline in overall aid to basic education reflects apathy for achieving universal education that must be corrected. Donor aid remains a critical part of getting all children everywhere in school and learning. While the post-2015 agenda is seen as a major opportunity for new financial commitments, the time is now for a dramatic increase in the level of ambition and financial commitment by donors to achieving universal primary education.

Four things we call on leaders to do right now

- Increase overall ambition and resources to reflect the scale and urgency of the challenge of out-of-school children
- Agree to a stronger framework for coordinating bilateral education aid to eliminate unpredictability in financing and support countries working hard to achieve universal primary education
- Create a humanitarian fund for financing education in emergencies so that children have the education necessary to protect themselves and rebuild their communities
- Reverse the shift of multilateral agencies away from basic education and increase aid targeted towards those children living in poverty and conflict and emergency situations.

Oslo Summit

The July 2015 Oslo Summit is a critical opportunity to convene donor countries to make commitments, discuss how to increase and coordinate donor aid and eliminate financing unpredictability within countries. The Oslo Summit will be immediately followed by the International Conference on Financing for Development, a second opportunity to turn rhetoric on education into reality. These opportunities and others must be captured to save the lives and futures of millions of out-of-school children, their families and their communities. The time to work harder to get all children in school must start now.

A World at School is a unique global coalition of young people, NGOs, civil society, teachers, faith-based organisations and more than 100 of the world’s leading businesses demanding action on education.

For sources see www.aworldatschool.org/scorecard_references