

***Dakar, Senegal, February 1 (Infosplusgabon) - The slow growth of free secondary education for all is jeopardizing the futures of millions of children globally, Human Rights Watch has said, in advance of the Global Partnership for Education's (GPE) 2018 Replenishment Conference which opens in Dakar, Senegal, on Thursday.***

Globally, more than 264 million children are out of primary and secondary school, including 62 million children of lower-secondary school age and 141 million of upper-secondary school age.

The human rights group said in a statement that close to 80 percent of the world's out-of-school children of primary and secondary school age live in the 65 countries associated with the Global Partnership for Education.

All governments attending the conference should make a commitment to support free secondary education, by law and in practice, it said.

“Low-income countries have made meaningful progress in ensuring primary education, but

secondary education still remains out of reach for millions of children,” said Elin Martínez, children’s rights researcher at Human Rights Watch. “Countries that have pledged to provide free secondary education should make good on these promises and those that have not should follow suit.”

The Global Partnership for Education, a multilateral funding organization made up of governments, foundations, and private donors, is one of the largest global education donors and provides funding to strengthen primary and lower-secondary education in low-income and conflict-affected countries, including Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Senegal, and Tanzania.

More than 43 million children of primary-school age and 35 million children of lower-secondary age are out of school in these countries.

On 1-2 February, 2018, heads of state, ministers, and senior government officials from over 50 low-income and 15 donor countries will meet in Dakar to pledge financial commitments to fund primary and lower-secondary education for over 870 million children who live in low and low-middle income countries. The Global Partnership for Education aims to be on track to allocate US\$2 billion per year from 2020.

Human Rights Watch noted that in 2015, all United Nations member countries pledged to provide free primary and secondary education by 2030.

The nearly universally ratified Convention on the Rights of the Child and various regional and other international treaties set out detailed requirements to protect the right to education. They include a core obligation to remove primary school fees and indirect or associated costs, and to make secondary education available and accessible to every child.

Countries associated with the Global Partnership for Education have carried out these core obligations to varying degrees.

Human Rights Watch noted that the government of Senegal, which is co-hosting the conference with France, does not fully guarantee free secondary education.

Although Senegalese law provides for free education for children ages 6 to 16, Human Rights Watch research found that government secondary schools charge fees and indirect costs each school year upwards of 50,000 Francs CFA (US\$93) per student, forcing many children to drop out.

In an open letter, Human Rights Watch urged Senegal's President Macky Sall, a global education advocate, to pledge to make good-quality secondary education fully free for all students in Senegal.

Mariama, 17, from Kolda, in southern Senegal, told Human Rights Watch: "There are young girls [in my school] who want to learn but don't have the resources to learn... I have not yet paid my school fees. It's hard for my parents to pay. My mom sells peanuts [in the market] and my dad sells milk. Last year... my mom couldn't buy the books I needed."

Zimbabwe, a GPE partner country since 2013, still charges primary as well as secondary school fees, Human Rights Watch found. While Zimbabwe's 2013 Constitution requires the government to promote "free and compulsory basic education for children," many families are faced with prohibitively expensive fees, particularly for secondary school, that can cost close to US\$200 per year.

Human Rights Watch said most countries also impose indirect costs, including for compulsory uniforms, exam fees, compulsory after-school tuition, and parent-teacher association fees. Students with disabilities are often charged additional fees to be accommodated in mainstream schools.

Countries that currently provide free primary and secondary education should adopt policies aimed at enrolling and retaining students from low-income backgrounds who otherwise would

drop out of secondary schools due to indirect costs, Human Rights Watch said. Governments should also factor in costs in national budgets to reasonably accommodate children with disabilities.

Tuition fees and associated costs at the primary and secondary level have a harmful impact on government efforts to increase adolescent girls' enrollment in secondary school. In Afghanistan, where laws state that education is tuition-free through higher secondary education, Human Rights Watch found that families have significant costs to send children to government schools.

These indirect costs – for uniforms, textbooks, and basic school material – keep many children from poor families out of school. This is particularly the case for girls, as families that can afford to send only some of their children often give preference to boys.

In recent years, Ghana and Tanzania, longstanding GPE countries, have taken important steps to provide free primary and secondary education. In 2015, the government of Tanzania adopted an important policy to remove tuition fees and prohibit any indirect costs up to lower-secondary education, while in 2017, Ghana guaranteed fully free education up to higher secondary education.

All countries involved in the GPE pledge to advance the partnership's charter, including its guiding principle to focus "resources on securing learning, equity and inclusion for the most marginalized children and youth". GPE partner countries are expected to increase their

education spending to 20 percent of their national budgets.

The Global Partnership for Education should encourage all of its member countries to provide free primary and secondary education for all children in countries involved in the partnership, Human Rights Watch said.

Donor countries, as well as the World Bank and other multilateral financial institutions, should provide bilateral and multilateral financial and technical assistance, including through the partnership's fund, to support countries in their secondary education commitments.

“All GPE partner and donor countries should aim high to guarantee an education for over 78 million children who remain out of school,” Martínez said. “Governments serious about meeting their education commitments for all children will need to show how they plan to make fully free primary and secondary education a reality.”

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