

By Mohamed Sidibay

My family was murdered before I could tie my shoes. As a young boy in Sierra Leone, years that should have been playful and carefree were spent fighting in someone else's war. For me, childhood was a nightmare; escape always seemed impossible. But when the war officially ended, in 2002, I began finding ways to recover. One of the most important has been an opportunity I couldn't have imagined as an angry, illiterate, nine-year-old soldier: school.

I am living proof of the transformative power of education. Thanks to hard work and lots of good fortune, I managed to graduate from high school and then university. Now, in just a few months, I will begin graduate classes at the Fordham University School of Law, an unimaginable destination for most of the former child soldiers in my country.

And yet, throughout my brief educational journey, one question has always nagged me: why did luck play such a crucial role? After all, education is supposed to be a universal human right. If only it were that simple.

Today, more than 260 million children are out of school, and over 500 million boys and girls who do attend are not receiving a quality education, as the International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity discovered. By 2030, more than half of the world's school-age children - some 800 million kids - will lack the basic skills needed to thrive or secure a job in the workplace of the future.

Addressing this requires money. But while education may be the best investment a government can make to ensure a better future for its people, education financing worldwide is far too low. In fact, education accounts for just 10% of total international development aid, down from 13% a decade ago. To put this in perspective, developing countries receive just \$10 per child annually in global education support, barely enough to cover the cost of a single textbook. In an age of self-driving cars and smart refrigerators, this dearth of funding is simply unacceptable.

Over the past few years, I have advocated on behalf of three global education initiatives - the International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity (Education Commission), the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), and the Education Cannot Wait fund (ECW). I have done so eagerly, because these organizations are working collectively toward the same goal: to raise funds to make

quality education for every child, everywhere, more than a matter of luck.

One of the best ways to do this is by supporting the International Finance Facility for Education, an initiative spearheaded by the Education Commission that could unlock the greatest global investment in education ever recorded. Young people around the world understand what's at stake. Earlier this month, Global Youth Ambassadors presented a petition, signed by more than 1.5 million children in some 80 countries, to United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, calling for the UN to support the finance facility.

By leveraging roughly \$2 billion in donor guarantees, the finance facility aims to make \$8 billion in new funding available to countries that need it most. If adopted widely, the program could make it possible for developing countries to provide quality education to millions more children, including refugees, young girls, and former child soldiers like me.

Politicians often say that young people are the leaders of tomorrow. That's true; we are. But platitudes not backed by financial support are meaningless. Simply put, the world must unite to fund quality education for everyone. The International Finance Facility for Education – which is already backed by the World Bank, regional development banks, GPE, ECW, and numerous UN agencies – is among the best ways to make that happen.

Twenty years ago, law school was an impossible dream for me. Today, thanks to hard work, global support, and much good fortune, my future is brighter than it has ever been. But my story should not be an exception. To ensure that others can gain a quality education and follow the path that has opened up to me, we must remove luck from the equation.

Mohamed Sidibay is a youth representative to the International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity, a peace activist at the Global Partnership for Education, and a former peace ambassador with the My Hero Project.

Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2018.
www.project-syndicate.org