

A Call to Expand the International Right to Education

Education is a fundamental human right and one of the most powerful tools for improving children’s lives. Education improves children’s health, their standard of living, protects them from exploitation and abuse, and expands their future opportunities and participation in civic life. It lifts children out of poverty, reduces inequality, and helps build strong, sustainable societies.

Existing international law guarantees the right to education for all but does not explicitly guarantee children’s right to free pre-primary or free secondary education. While an estimated 85 per cent of children worldwide complete primary school, only half of the world’s children are enrolled in pre-primary education or complete secondary school.¹ Children from families living in poverty are the least likely to attend, with cost remaining a significant barrier for many.

We believe it is time to update the right to education under international law, and explicitly guarantee children’s right to free pre-primary and free secondary education. It is no longer acceptable that children’s development and future prospects are determined by their families’ ability to pay for education.

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought additional urgency to this goal, creating some of the most disastrous consequences for children’s right to education in history. Efforts to build back better education systems should not only remediate this devastation but also ensure that children’s right to education is sufficient for them to thrive in today’s world.

As part of the Sustainable Development Goals, all governments have committed to ensure that by 2030, all girls and boys have access to quality pre-primary education, and free, equitable and quality secondary education. This commitment should be cemented in binding international law.

We support a new optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child that would explicitly guarantees the right to free secondary education and at least one year of free and compulsory pre-primary education. Establishing and fulfilling this right will benefit children and societies for generations to come.

Initial signers (as of May 31, 2022):

Vihaan Agarwal (India), International Children's Peace Prize laureate (2021)

Amal al-Dossari (Bahrain), former member, Committee on the Rights of the Child

Philip Alston (Australia), former Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights

Louise Arbour (Canada), former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

Chernor Bah (Sierra Leone), co-founder, A World At School and Purposeful; former youth advisory group chair, Global Education First Initiative

Carol Bellamy (US), former executive director, UNICEF

Irina Bukova (Bulgaria), former director general, UNESCO

Olivier De Schutter (Belgium), UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights

Solomon Dersso (Ethiopia), African Commission on Human and People's Rights

Jaap Doek (Netherlands), former chairperson, Committee on the Rights of the Child

Marc Dullaert (Netherlands), former chair, European ombudspersons and commissioners for children

Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein (Jordan), former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

Tawakkol Karman (Yemen), Nobel Peace Prize Laureate (2011)

Theoni Koufonikolakou (Greece), deputy ombuds for children's rights, Greece

Anthony Lake (United States), former executive director, UNICEF

Yanghee Lee (Republic of Korea), former chairperson, Committee on the Rights of the Child

Moushira Khattab (Egypt), African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, former member, Committee on the Rights of the Child

Lothar Krappmann (Germany), former member, Committee on the Rights of the Child

Koichiro Matsuura (Japan), former director general, UNESCO

Vernor Munoz Villalobos (Costa Rica), former Special Rapporteur on the right to education

Faith Mwangi-Powell (Uganda), CEO, Girls not Brides

Chaeli Mycroft (South Africa), International Children's Peace Prize laureate (2011)

Salima Namusobya (Uganda), working group on economic, social, and cultural rights, African Commission on Human and People's Rights; executive director, Initiative for Social and Economic Rights

Joseph Ndayisenga (Burundi), chairperson, African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child

Christina Nomdo (South Africa), Western Cape Commissioner for Children, South Africa

Rosa Maria Ortiz (Paraguay), former commissioner on children's rights, InterAmerican Commission on Human Rights

Marta Santos Pais (Portugal), former Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence against Children

Elina Pekkarinen (Finland), Ombudsman for Children in Finland

Paulo Sergio Pinheiro (Brazil), former Independent Expert of the UN Secretary- General for the World Report on Violence Against Children

Sadat Rahman (Bangladesh), International Children's Peace Prize laureate (2020)

Kailash Satyarthi (India), Nobel Peace Prize Laureate (2014)

Nevena Vuckovic Sahovic (Serbia), former member, Committee on the Rights of the Child

Yasmine Sherif (Sweden), director, Education Cannot Wait

Jody Williams (United States), Nobel Peace Prize Laureate (1997)

Jean Zermatten (Switzerland), former chairperson, Committee on the Rights of the Child

¹ UNESCO, *Global Education Monitoring Report Summary 2020: Inclusion and Education: All Means All*, p 27.
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373721>