

## Challenge Overview Sheet

# Equalising Education

To almost every child in the developed world, education has an unquestionable presence in their lives. The thought of reaching adulthood and not having a degree of basic literacy and numeracy that will enable them to work and provide for themselves at some level is inconceivable. Yet despite significant improvements in the numbers of children who are attending and completing primary and secondary to many children who come from poor and developing nations, education becomes far less of a right and far more of a privilege. School fees remain the number one barrier to a world where every child attends primary school up to the age of eleven, if not beyond to complete their education with a high school qualification. Some children never begin any form of education, while others leave their classrooms prematurely as other economic and social pressures are found in their families. Nowhere is this truer than in the education of girls and a clear divide is frequently witnessed in the literacy rates of boys and girls. Equalising education is not just about closing the education and skills gap between developed and developing countries but also about ensuring that regardless of gender, everyone has the right to a good education.

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### **Louise Tickle (Education and Social Affairs Journalist)**

Any study of worldwide education standards since 2000 has at some point looked towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and our global progress towards change in these sectors. Two of the broad targets relate to an idea of equal education:

**MDG 2:** Achieve universal primary education

**MDG 3:** Promote gender equality and empower women

At the time of writing, it appears unlikely that these targets will be met in 2015 as the UNESCO Education for All Global Monitoring Report (2014) on gender inequality highlights fifty seven million children globally not in any form of education simply because there is no school for them to attend. At the current rate of change it may be another seventy years before this issue is addressed. When analysed by gender and nationality, this fifty seven million is overwhelmingly populated by African girls.

It can be disheartening to see that the same barriers that removed girls from education in Africa in 2000 are for the most part, still in place today. Some analysts suggest that the MDGs would have been met were it not for the disinvestment seen by many nations over the course of the MDG time frame. Many countries started with good intentions and good levels of economic support for the wider provision of education, but funding cuts and subsequent budget removal have greatly hampered their initial efforts.

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## **Ann Cotton OBE (Founder and President of Camfed International)**

Camfed International (the Campaign for Female Education) is a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to reducing the levels of female illiteracy in Africa. It targets its efforts at the most marginalised girls and encourages successful young women of the programme to become leaders and motivators for the next generation of girls in education. Camfed was founded in 1993 after a trip to a Zimbabwe village where girls' enrolment in school was especially low: in most classrooms there was only one girl for every seven boys. This was not due to cultural reasons as was thought to be the case. Poverty meant that few families could afford to send all their children to school and invariably sons were selected over their sisters as the former stood a much greater chance of getting paid work once his education was complete.

Beginning as a simple grassroots campaign, with small scale fundraising providing the means for a handful of girls to attend, Camfed grew to become a model for other development initiatives. The young women who 'graduated' from the programme were encouraged to work for the organisation, running the in-country operations of much of the charity's work and becoming mentors and advocates as they moved on in their careers. This allowed for the expansion of Camfed's work beyond single localities and the movement quickly spread to Zimbabwe's neighbouring countries and indeed those further afield.

Camfed also made some simple tenets central to the model of their campaign. Firstly, there was an early recognition of the need for social capital as well as economic means. Gaining the trust and approval for girls' education by village chiefs, mothers' collectives and religious groups made the delivery of funding for girls education that much smoother and Camfed were able to educate adults in the virtues of girls education and how it can benefit entire communities and just one family directly.

Secondly, the dignity of the girl who received education was central to the way Camfed responded to need, as Camfed thought of girls as clients and responded to them in a more personal and individual manner.

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## **Professor Elaine Unterhalter (Professor of Education and International Development at the Institute of Education)**

The issue of girls having access to education has had a changing rhetoric over time. It has very much moved away from its eighteenth century roots as a woman's rights issue and more towards a key part of discussions regarding development and the MDGs at the turn of the twenty-first century. However as we look beyond the MDGs and onto their successors, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) our thoughts go beyond physical access and financial barriers and more towards

changing viewpoints on girls education too; a more holistic approach that rethinks and normalises other views. For example, one should no longer frame girls' education projects as purely top-down, bottom-up or horizontal in movement, but instead advocate policy making that looks in all perspectives simultaneously. One might hope that with this type of approach that the speed of change is that much faster.

While the number of children out of school generally has gone down, not enough attention has been paid to the quality of the education itself, nor what life chances it opens up for girls. It is not impossible to conceive of a rural school which boasts one hundred percent attendance by the children of the village. Yet beyond school there are few life chances for those children and so their education has not bought the freedom of choices for which one might hope, something that for girls relates all too clearly back to the eighteenth century suppression of women in public spheres. One has to therefore listen to the voices of girls and make efforts to tackle social misalignments and sexism as well as provide the financial means to ensure girls have access to schools.

If successful, girls' education can have far wide ranging impacts. Not only do the girls themselves have more life choices open to them as they mature, but their sexual and maternal health improves, they marry later, they experience greater equality in the home, they are financially less dependent on husbands and show far higher levels of resilience to change outside of their control. This empowerment of young women can be threatening to those with a fundamentalist agenda and kidnappings of school girls as well as violent acts of terrorism in the name of female suppression have been seen internationally in the first part of the twenty-first century.

Despite this, education remains at the top of the 'most-wanted' list in the World We Want 2015 survey. Overwhelmingly, no matter their nationality, age or socio-economic background people said 'a good education' was their number one priority.

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