



Global Campaign for Education Briefing Paper

Window of Opportunity

Why Fast Track funds must be released now

The Fast Track compact has created a window for radical change in some of the poorest countries in the world -- change that would bring millions of children into schools and permanently transform the structure of human capital in these countries. To keep that window open, it is vital that donors release funds to get the seven first FTI plans off the ground, and agree a timetable for action on the remaining Fast Track partner countries.

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Brazilian
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In November 2002 the Education For All (EFA) donor consortium took an important step forward by approving seven fast track plans, and promising to close the gap between domestic spending capacity and total education resource requirements. The press communiqué issued after the meeting referred to a financing gap of \$400 million in these countries over the next three years, but so far no additional funding has actually been agreed with any of the fast track countries. We are gravely concerned that continuing procrastination on the implementation of the FTI will jeopardise the credibility of the EFA movement as a whole.

Although we are approaching the three year anniversary of the World Education Forum, aid levels are only about one-quarter of what is needed to achieve the universal primary education and gender parity goals. Aid's impact is further weakened by a collective failure to get resources to the countries most in need. A seven-fold increase in aid to education in Africa will be required to attain the UPE goal.

Individual donor agencies have announced increases in their own aid to education commitments. These unilateral increases are an important starting point -- but disjointed actions, one donor at a time, will never add up to the dramatic increase needed in the overall volume, coordination and effectiveness of external financing. The FTI partnership is a practical vehicle that will allow donors to scale up disbursements in a coordinated and rationally targeted manner, yet without creating a global "fund" or new layers of bureaucracy. The FTI enables donors to reach agreement on where aid will have the biggest impact and be used most effectively, and to agree what external resources those countries need. It provides early warning of discrepancies between agreed priorities and actual aid flows; and makes it easier to shift resources into high-priority countries (for example, through so-called 'sleeping partner' agreements). Stronger consensus on shared goals at the international level should augment, not displace, coordination and dialogue at the country level -- and despite some early hitches, agency staff and ministry officials say that the FTI is doing exactly that.

Recent discussions with senior Finance and Education ministry officials in Fast Track countries underline the strength of the expectations that have been created. These governments are ready to implement ambitious programmes to universalise primary education; and they have staked a great deal on donors' commitment to co-finance these programmes, in line with the terms of the Fast Track compact. This shows that the FTI has already succeeded in one of its principal aims, i.e. generating positive incentives for reform (see Niger box, below).

If the March donor consortium meeting fails to produce even the limited funds promised in November, the positive incentives created by the launch of the Fast Track initiative could quickly turn sour. An overwhelmingly negative message would be sent not only in the 18 Fast Track countries, but in all of the other low-income countries that are watching and waiting to see whether the international community intends to honour its financing promises.

Niger: A reformer in need of champions

Niger is one of the poorest countries in the world. It ranks second to last on the Human Development Index, and in 2000 only 26% of girls in Niger were enrolled in primary school. The government is strongly committed to changing this. Over the past five years it has managed to increase enrolment rates by nearly 10 percentage points.

Last June, Niger was invited along with 17 other countries to join the Education For All (EFA) Fast Track initiative. Niger responded enthusiastically to this invitation and prepared a comprehensive education reform plan. Key features of the plan include:

- Making education relevant to the daily lives of Niger's children, and introducing life skills and HIV-AIDS into the curriculum
- Recruiting 9000 new teachers and building or upgrading 25,000 classrooms
- Specific interventions to reach girls, the disabled and nomadic groups
- Decentralising the education system and involving communities in managing schools
- A significant increase in Niger's own spending on education (including setting aside 40% of debt relief funds for education).

Donor representatives in the country have praised the Fast Track plan as bold but realistic. All donors have committed to deliver their future aid to the education sector in a way that directly supports Niger's Fast Track strategy. This will reduce competition amongst donors in certain areas, enhance their joint capacity to monitor resource use, and free up capacity in the Ministry by replacing multiple reporting procedures with a single report against a shared set of targets that goes to the entire donor community.

Fast Track support is vital to Niger's education reform effort precisely because Niger has been chronically neglected by the donor community. Niger has few donors, and even for most of those donors that are represented in the country, Niger is not a priority.

Existing resources already committed for basic education for the period 2003-2005 are 73,453 million CFA from the government of Niger and 31,725 million CFA from the international community. In order to move ahead on implementing its plans for education reform and expansion, Niger needs an additional 41,730 million CFA (US\$67 million). But although the donor consortium meeting in November 2002 promised to find these additional funds, there is still no specific agreement about which donor will provide how much financing and when. The French and Belgian Governments may provide some further funding, but a major gap seems likely to remain, condemning hundreds of thousands of children to a life of illiteracy and poverty.

Source: Oxfam International, "Education for All in Niger", March 2002.

The March meeting must also address the concerns of developing countries by taking steps to make the initiative more inclusive. Issues that we have identified through our contacts and discussions with colleagues in fast track countries from the government and the NGO sector, indicate that there is still a great lack of clarity around the fast track guidelines/ eligibility criteria, that Ministries of Finance and civil society actors have not always been sufficiently involved and that bilateral donors have been very unclear as to whether and to what extent they are prepared to support fast track plans.

In addition, we are concerned that an overly narrow interpretation of the Fast Track framework may lead to further budgetary marginalisation of adult literacy, early childhood and non-formal interventions – subsectors that are already grossly neglected in many countries.

Finally, while we are pleased that the FTI ‘indicative framework’ emphasises manageable class sizes, adequate investment in books and learning materials, and other aspects of quality education, we question its approach to teacher issues. Recent research by GCE members underlines that teachers are not just another ‘cost’ to be factored into education budgets. They are the pivot around which a school functions. Many countries have witnessed a drastic erosion in the status, motivation, pay and working conditions of teachers, and this must be tackled before sustainable improvements in education outcomes can be achieved. Adjusting teachers’ salaries to a seemingly arbitrary ratio of per capita GDP, as the indicative framework recommends, is a wholly inadequate response to the complex crisis in the teaching profession, and, in some countries, may even make it worse. We would welcome a more nuanced and thoughtful approach to teacher issues as a key determinant of quality.

Recommendations

The March donor consortium meeting must send a strong, collective signal that credible plans, rooted in sound fiscal and budgetary policies, *will* be funded. Donors must:

- Immediately release the first year of funding for the seven plans that were approved in November, and give a specific guarantee of financing for the following two years with details of how much will be provided by which donor and when.
- Agree financing for any other plans that have now been finalised.
- Agree a detailed timetable for expansion of the FTI, including full financial and technical partnerships with the 'Plus 5' high population countries.
- Agree coordinated strategies for assisting countries that demonstrate a clear commitment to achieving education for all, but cannot meet all of the institutional criteria for inclusion in the FTI (such as completion of a full PRSP).
- Affirm that the FTI seeks to safeguard and improve the status, motivation and training of teachers; and encourage countries to include complementary strategies for adult literacy, early childhood education and non-formal education in their FTI proposals.