DISRUPT TO DELIVER

Financing the Future of Foundational Learning

Association for the Development of Education in Africa

vvob education for development

Bill & Melinda Gates foundation

Hempel Foundation

unicef for every child

Human Capital Africa

TaRL Africa Teaching at the Right Level Africa

JOINT COMMUNIQUE

#UNGA80 2025

African Leaders Unite to Transform Financing for Foundational Learning - A Solvable Crisis

Global cooperation, domestic investment, and targeted innovative financing and African technical assistance emerge as solutions to achieve high returns on Africa's learning crisis

New York, 23 September 2025 – In a milestone response to global education aid cuts and mounting debt burdens, African and global education leaders today made a commitment to a bold, African-led shift in financing for the future of foundational learning.

Speaking at the foundational learning event on the sidelines of the 80th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA 80) "*Disrupt to Deliver: Financing the Future of Foundational Learning,*"*African ministers and global partners issued a clarion call for smart, sustainable, targeted aid and innovative financing that leverages domestic budgets, harnesses African technical talent, and supports conditions for growth and domestic resource mobilisation to reduce aid dependency.* This urgency is reflected by the current learning crisis affecting up to 89% of African children who are unable to read and understand simple text and do simple math operations by age 10.

Education Financing Crisis Spurs Home-Grown African Solutions with Foundational Learning Focus

Seismic declines in Official Development Assistance (ODA), increasing cost of lending, and debt burdens are accelerating a transition to African leadership to improve learning outcomes.

- According to the European Training Foundation, USAID programme suspensions have affected 153 education initiatives across sub-Saharan Africa, with countries like Ethiopia, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo facing aid reductions of $33 million, $35 million, and $51 million, respectively.
- As Dr. Pia Rebello Britto from UNICEF highlighted figures from a recent report: "*a $3.2 billion cut in education aid projected by UNICEF for 2026, with $856 million of that for climate education. This puts at risk $164 billion in lifetime earnings and will leave millions of children out of school.*"
- Governments could face a staggering US$1.1 trillion loss each year due to early school leavers and an additional US$3.3 trillion forfeited because children lack basic skills.

Ministers stressed that the crisis presented an undeniable opportunity. Recent studies have shown that improving **literacy and numeracy scores can generate 2% growth in annual gross domestic product (GDP) per capita,** while high-quality reading programmes deliver a **30:1 return on investment.** New cost analysis also shows that with as little as $6 per student—spent on things like skill-based teacher training and well-designed learning materials—governments can make a real difference in learning outcomes. Equally, short-term foreign aid, when invested well, **reduces long-term dependency on aid** in the future—a high-level goal of developing and developed countries alike.

Dr. Ben Piper from The Gates Foundation emphasised the need for smarter resource allocation: "*Really, it's about being smarter with what we have. We are seeing* ***learning outcomes that are three times as big, at 10 times the scale, at 1/100th of the cost.*** *There are so many examples of good programs we can point to.*"

Rather than wait for external aid to rebound, African governments are stepping forward with bold reforms and new policy and financing models for foundational learning to enable their demography to transform the continent:

- **Zambia** is implementing cost-effective catch-up programs to improve the quality of learning and help children re-engage with schooling by providing them with targeted instruction in literacy and numeracy skills.
- Several countries, including Sierra Leone, Kenya, and Rwanda, are **digitizing tax collection** and reforming procurement systems to increase efficiency in education spending. Hon. Conrad Sackey, Minister of Basic and Senior Secondary Education of Sierra Leone, called for bold action: "To sustain our momentum, governments must be bold—strengthening financing, taking calculated risks, and forging partnerships. This is an investment in the future."
- **Senegal** is sustaining its Harmonised Model of Bilingual Education (MOHEBS) programme through domestic financing after USAID and IMF funding challenges. The programme's success in mother-tongue instruction has removed colonial-era learning barriers that students faced when learning exclusively in French. As Moustapha Mamba Guirassy, Minister of Education stated: "MOHEBS is at the heart of the sovereignty of our country, so we ensured it didn't stop."
- **South Africa's** FLOAT initiative **(Foundational Learning Outcomes at Scale)**, presented by Minister of Basic Education, Ms. Siviwe Gwarube demonstrated government-led coordination that transforms fragmented donor funding into system-wide change. The initiative uses evidence-based interventions for early-grade literacy and numeracy. The Minister called for the scaling of this model continent-wide, and embedding African expertise directly into national education systems.

Ministers further emphasised that financing models for education must be sustainable to ensure long-term impact. Whilst highlighting the need for investment frameworks to be designed to attract and leverage philanthropic funding effectively.

Other Global South Experiences Catalysing Reforms with Domestic Philanthropy

While domestic resources must lead, international partners and philanthropy remain vital over the medium to long term. African leaders drew insights from other global South exemplars. India's foundational learning reforms demonstrated the power of political leadership and domestic philanthropy. It highlights how the Prime Minister led with a Mission called NIPUN Bharat to transform literacy and numeracy outcomes in India, and African leaders needed to be equally 'Mission' minded, and laser-focused on getting all their young children literate and numerate early. Fixing the pipeline towards employment: you need to start now to make sure kids are on track in 5-10years for employment and to be contributing citizens.

Indian philanthropy also played a catalytic role in the education system reform to improve literacy and numeracy. By investing strategically in evidence-based interventions, Indian philanthropy helped embed reforms at scale and strengthen government program design, delivery, and systems.

Ministers urged more African philanthropists to acknowledge that, without fixing the foundations, meeting labour market needs will continue to be a challenge. Calls were also made for African philanthropy to evolve beyond traditional charitable giving and embrace the same strategic approach: making targeted, high-return, evidence-based investments that transform entire systems and prepare Africa's youth for the workforce of tomorrow.

Bridging Continental Vision with Action

Albert Nsengiyumva, ADEA Executive Secretary, emphasised that "*the time for inefficient spending has ended. Whether from domestic budgets, African philanthropy, or international financing, every dollar must demonstrably improve children's ability to read and calculate.*"

African leaders also underscored that the continent's unified approach through various initiatives, including the African Union's End Learning Poverty for All in Africa (ELPAf) Campaign, Mauritania Declaration on a Decade of Education, and new Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA), represents, for the first time, a comprehensive and coordinated continental push to transform learning outcomes. Ministers stressed that remaining aid must be used strategically and smartly on evidence-backed interventions to strengthen children's foundational skills in reading and math. They noted that despite major multilateral investments, learning outcomes remain low. They urged multilateral funds such as the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and the World Bank to align with Africa's priorities by making foundational learning a core priority and focus. *"We absolutely need to ensure this money is working harder to support what our panellists have been talking about. This money needs to support and incentivise how domestic finance can back what countries are saying they would like to see. We need to pick up the pace on driving that money much harder," said Beth Arthy, Director of Education, Gender and Equality at FCDO.*

Dr. Obiageli "Oby" Ezeikwesi reinforced: "*Governments and donors must measure impact by learning results, not dollars spent or percentages allocated. This principle must extend to multilateral partnerships, where grant accountability for reading and mathematics outcomes must become non-negotiable. Africa needs smart, efficient, and strategic spending, not just increased spending. Financing must bridge the gap between vision and declarations of intent with execution. We must harness this disruption to deliver and lead action on Africa's terms.*"

Siviwe Gwarube, Minister of Basic Education of South Africa, stressed the critical importance of evidence-based approaches: "*Our government has been making aspirational policy choices, but we can't afford the luxury of aspirations. Research and evidence are not peripheral to what we are doing; they are integral.*"
Partners, including the Gates Foundation, TaRL Africa, VVOB, UNICEF, the Hempel Foundation, and members of the Global Coalition for Foundational Learning, reaffirmed their support for Africa's leadership. Each is committed to using catalytic funding models that boost, rather than replace domestic spending, whilst grounding investments in evidence—based approaches.

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IMMEDIATE ACTION REQUIRED

To African Governments:

- Mobilise political will at the highest levels, linking the system, financing, data, and evidence use to the classroom to take 'what works' to scale.
- Dedicate domestic budgets to proven cost-effective, evidence-based interventions such as teacher training, coaching, and learning materials.
- Close procurement inefficiencies and strengthen budget execution on costs that make a meaningful difference to improving foundational learning outcomes.
- Support South Africa's G20 Presidency and leadership in driving African priorities by calling for the establishment of a G20 Foundational Learning Leaders Network to advance an African-led, globally relevant agenda to catalyse change in the global south.

To International Partners:

- Transition from traditional aid models to catalytic investment approaches that leverage African domestic budgets.
- Support multilateral foundational learning partnerships to integrate learning outcome measurements into all grant frameworks and reporting mechanisms..
- Prioritise foundational learning in remaining development assistance to education by embedding African technical talent into government systems to strengthen program design, delivery, and improve learning outcomes, thereby contributing to boosting economic growth, spurring domestic resource mobilisation, and reducing long-term aid dependency.
- Invest in responsible AI to create sustainable, locally-owned education systems, channelling venture and sovereign capital to grow Africa's AI ecosystem whilst strengthening evidence on EdTech's impact on learning outcomes.

To African Philanthropists and Corporations:

- Move beyond charitable giving to strategic investments in education system reform that support improvements in foundational learning.
- Deepen local ownership of education system reform by funding evidence-based interventions that strengthen African-led solutions.

To Civil Society and Private Sector:

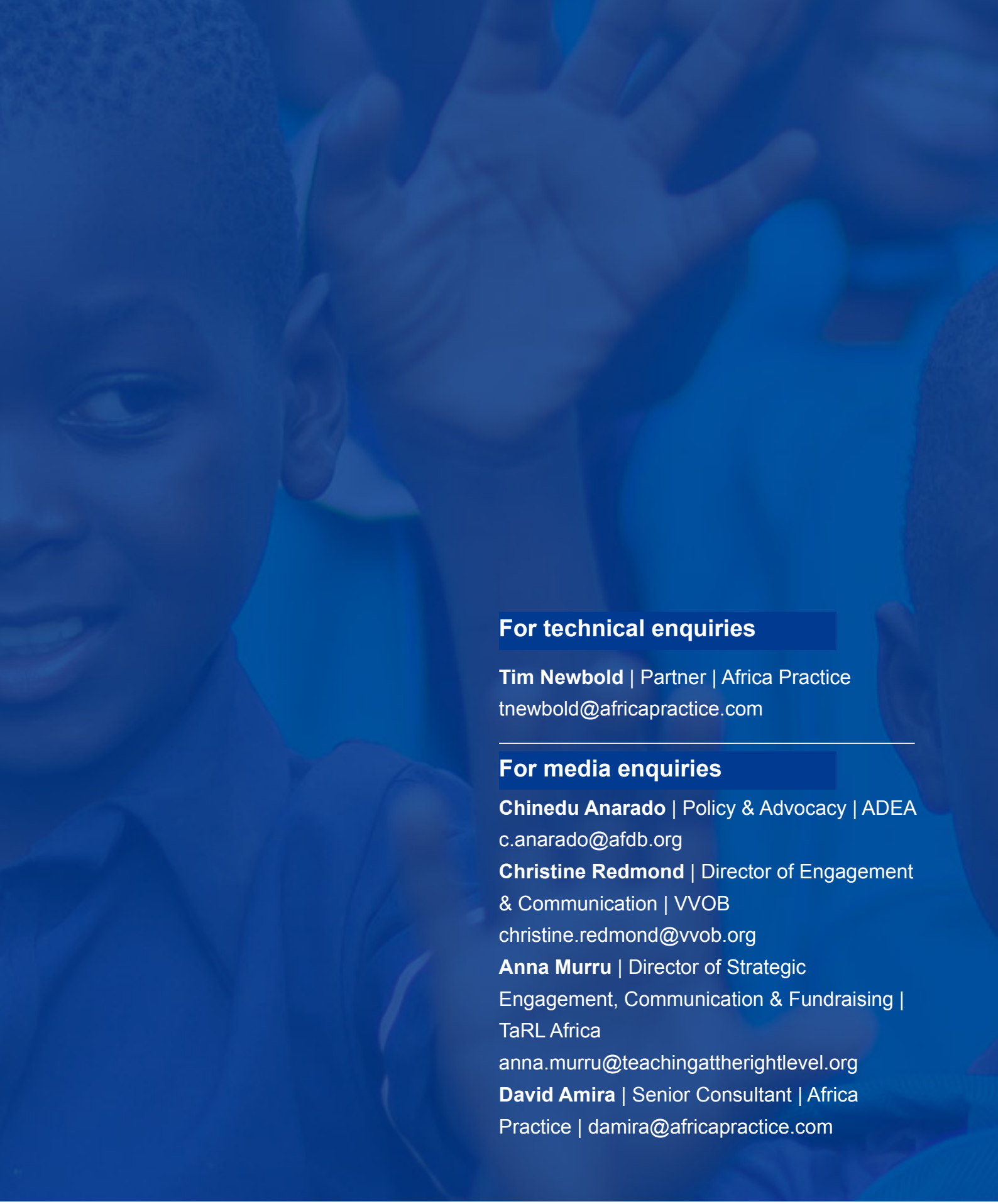
- Partner with governments in foundational learning program design, delivery, and embed innovation and implementation research to expand reach.
- Advocate for accountable, data and evidence-driven spending on foundational learning in domestic budgets and external financing.
- Contribute data and evidence to improve program design, delivery, and outcomes.
- Advocate for data and evidence use to improve the quality and accountability of government program design, delivery, implementation, and spending for system reform and strengthening.
- Deepen local ownership and domestic demand for better foundational learning outcomes.

Looking Forward

The momentum from this dialogue will carry forward to the ADEA 2025 Triennale in Accra, Ghana (29–31 October 2025), under the theme "Strengthening the Resilience of Africa's Educational Systems."Ministers will assess progress since the Africa Foundational Learning Exchange (FLEX 2024) commitment to end learning poverty within a decade, alongside the declarations from last year's Continental Conference on Education in Mauritania. This gathering will prove crucial in defining implementation frameworks for scaling foundational learning across the continent.

The gathering concluded with a united call: despite declining aid and fiscal challenges, Africa is seizing this moment to lead on the financing agenda. Improving learning isn't just urgent—it's possible and affordable. Governments can still do more with less. And by making foundational learning the foundation of education financing, the continent is setting the terms for future development cooperation.

Event Details: Disrupt to Deliver: Financing the Future of Foundational Learning
Organisers: Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA), VVOB, Human Capital Africa (HCA), The Gates Foundation, TaRL Africa, UNICEF, Hempel Foundation, Global Coalition for Foundational Learning



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Note to Editors:

Select ministers and development partners are available for interviews on continental education financing strategies and the End Learning Poverty Campaign implementation.