

Testimony of

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Thank you, Chair Bass, Ranking Member Smith, and distinguished members of the committee, for an opportunity to testify at this hearing. Your leadership on education and development in Africa, global health and global human rights shows a strong commitment to improving access to quality public education in Africa.

The story of Abaarso School

It's 2009 in the Horn of Africa. Imagine a war-torn country, where 100% of schools were destroyed. Where only 26% of primary school-age children were able to get back into school, and less than 10% went on to secondary education (HALI, Education Fact Sheet – Somaliland). Where students typically start high school with only 3rd grade level of Math and 1st grade English. All inside a society with incredibly limited interaction with foreigners and a distrust of the outside world. Imagine an American social entrepreneur with a profound commitment to make a difference, who sets out to create a rigorous, inclusive high school from scratch that would transform the country. Now imagine four years later, when Nimco Ahmed Ismael graduates from this new school, becoming what is believed to be the first in three decades from this war-torn country to be admitted to a US college on full scholarship. Several of Nimco's classmates were close behind, earning scholarships to American colleges the same year, including Mubarik Mohamoud, who was accepted by MIT, where he went on to major in computer science and engineering.

Fast forward 12 years later and over 200 alumni from Abaarso School have earned more than \$37M worth of scholarships to study abroad, attending such prestigious institutions

as Harvard, Yale and Brown, among other Ivy League Schools. Many Abaarso graduates have now returned home to help rebuild their country. The success of the first school has been replicated to create four more schools, including three primary schools and an all-female, residential university.

This is the story of the Abaarso Network, an innovative and growing education ecosystem that enables transformation at scale by offering extraordinary education opportunities at the primary, secondary and post-secondary level in Somaliland, an area largely neglected by international donors and lenders.

For this testimony, I will draw on nearly 30 years of work as an educator and director of organizations and programs providing opportunity and hope to those who need it most, often in the world's most challenging places. I began my career in 1993 studying strategies to resolve conflict across context in Benin, West Africa. In 2001, I co-founded McAuliffe Regional Charter Public School in Framingham, Massachusetts and served as its Executive Director for six years. More recently, I spent four-plus years as the Deputy Director of sub-Saharan Africa for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, supporting communities to respond to humanitarian and development crises. Today, I am the Executive Director of the Abaarso Network, and I am here to share with you an extraordinary story of success, from which I will draw recommendations about how we can restore hope and opportunity through education in the most fragile, low-resource settings in the world.

In poor communities throughout the world, in remote areas with marginalized populations, in refugee camps and urban slums, I have seen children excluded from education or grossly underserved by their schools. At nearly every stop, I met people who were fighting to keep hope and opportunity alive. When I spoke with parents and children about their challenges and their future, I knew that I could be talking to someone with the moral courage of Nelson Mandela, the intellect of Albert Einstein, the craftsmanship of Chinua Achebe, or the athletic skill of Michael Jordan. If only they had the chance.

That's the problem; millions of children do not have an opportunity to learn, let alone to meet their full potential.

The problem in Africa

Rye Barcott, a Marine and a Harvard graduate coined the phrase, "Talent is universal; opportunity is not" in his 2011 book describing his experience working in the Kibera slum of Nairobi, Kenya. UNICEF estimates 105 million children in Africa were not in school before the pandemic. That's 41% of the school age population in Africa, without an opportunity to learn, and that number has grown dramatically in the past two years. In sub-Saharan Africa, less than half of all schools have access to safe drinking water, electricity, computers or the internet. We are not even close to gender parity; young women in Africa are over 1.5 times less likely than young men to be employed or to receive an education (<https://blogs.worldbank.org/african/minding-gender-gap-training-sub-saharan-africa-five-things-know>).

According to a recent UNICEF report, of those who do have access to school, only 35% will leave primary school with the minimum level of reading proficiency, and 22% in mathematics. A 2017 research paper by the American Economic Association called, "Enrollment without learning: Teacher Effort, Knowledge, and Skill in Primary Schools in Africa" found that teacher absenteeism cut intended classroom time in half. In many cases, teachers lack sufficient competency in their subject area.

Of those who do graduate, many are not prepared for the workforce. The Global Business Coalition for Education estimates that by 2030, over 800 million school-age children in low- and middle-income countries will lack the basic skills to succeed after graduation.

The lack of coordination and communication between those that hire and those that prepare youth for work is making matters worse. A 2013 study by McKinsey on "Education-to-employment" noted the paradox: while 75 million youth are unemployed globally, nearly 40% of employers say they can't fill entry-level vacancies. This disconnect means that schools are not

graduating young adults with the skills and competencies that employers need, which contributes to extraordinary levels of youth unemployment.

The problem in Somaliland

All of these challenges are greatly exacerbated in Somaliland, where the Abaarso Network works. The most recent data assembled by the Ministry of Education and Science estimates that today, 32% of school age children in Somaliland are enrolled in primary school. Most of these will drop out before the fifth grade; enrollment in secondary school is still an abysmal 18% of the school age population, and even lower for girls. (Ministry of Education and Science, Education Sector Analysis, 2021). Nearly half of the young female population was illiterate in 2012 (45%), while literacy was 74% among boys (HALI, 2015).

Educational facilities are insufficient, and the workforce is largely unprepared. Fewer than 40% of all schools in Somaliland have drinking water, and there are 15 students for every one textbook. Teacher-student ratios are typically around 50 to one. There is little chance that a young girl in Somaliland will have a female role model at school. According to the Ministry of Education and Science, the percentage of secondary female teachers was just 4% in 2020/21. The President of Somaliland himself estimated his people need another 6,000 female teachers. Youth unemployment is even worse. More than 80% of female youth are unemployed and only 25% of youth overall have any sort of active, productive employment.

Why did Abaarso School work?

None of these challenges has prevented Abaarso Network scholars from realizing extraordinary success. Our students are not just getting better access to education, they are learning at astonishing rates.

Quality standards, inspiration & support

From the beginning, Abaarso set extremely high expectations for its students and its staff.

Academic standards were strictly enforced. Because most students enter so far behind grade level, the school devotes 7th, 8th and 9th grades to closing large learning gaps in all subjects. Students at Abaarso are in class five and a half days each week, for approximately thirty hours total, focusing on intensive mathematics, science, English, creative and critical thinking. Students receive two to three times the math hours of a typical U.S. boarding school. Once the work ethic, language skills and fundamentals are in place, the upper school years focus on advanced studies, including the introduction of leadership classes and STEM vs. Humanities paths in grades 11-12.

This rigor and professionalism were affirmed and recognized when in 2017, Abaarso became one of few schools in sub-Saharan Africa to obtain a New England Association of Schools and Colleges accreditation, a status often reserved for the most elite and high-performing secondary schools in the United States.

The Abaarso School was, however, always about more than just grades and academic success. It's mission, to transform Somaliland, whose graduates become the leaders of tomorrow, is reinforced nearly every day. Community service is compulsory, and housekeeping at the school depends on student participation. Graduates learn that the privilege of an Abaarso education comes with the expectation that they will return home to become leaders in their communities, country, or on the world stage.

In the early years, the majority of our teachers came from the United States. They were young, highly educated and dedicated to the mission. Most importantly, they were focused on convincing students of the benefit of investing in their own education - they set high standards and provided the support, tough love and celebration of accomplishments that motivated students to meet those standards. By the time someone graduates from Abaarso, they know what's at stake – opportunities for scholarships, self-improvement and a career - and they have the skills and confidence to achieve them.

Results-driven demand

The success of our Abaarso scholars proved that students from Somaliland could compete on the world stage for some of the most coveted spots in the world's best academic institutions. Graduates went on to obtain post-secondary degrees in virtually every discipline, including engineering, computer science, politics, public health, economics, law and philosophy. Many have returned to Somaliland to start businesses and work with local companies, or have taken jobs in various ministries. A good number of graduates now work as teachers and administrators in Abaarso Network. Still others, have gone on to pursue master's and doctoral degrees.

Mubarik Mohamoud

Mubarik grew up in a nomadic family and only learned of school when he visited a refugee camp near where his family was living. There he met his grandmother who explained to a skeptical Mubarik, that the truck in the distance was not from nature, but something made by people who went to school. Mubarik only spent a week at the camp, but it piqued his interest in school. For years after Mubarik left the camp, he was hopeful to find an opportunity to go to school. Three years later he found it at Abaarso. When Mubarik entered Abaarso as a 9th grader, he knew virtually no English. Still, he thrived. After a couple of years at Abaarso School, he earned a scholarship to attend his junior year at Worcester Academy in Massachusetts, where he continued to excel. Upon his graduation from Abaarso, Mubarik received a full scholarship to attend MIT. At MIT, he worked on autonomous vehicles, only a few years after learning from his grandmother where cars came from! Mubarik graduated from MIT in 2017 with a degree in computer science and electrical engineering, and is now finishing a Master's degree at MIT.

The stories of Abaarso graduates have spread throughout Somaliland, inspiring others to go to school. Thousands of parents who had once been skeptical or worried if Abaarso presented a risk to local culture, have since been convinced and become some of our strongest and most vocal advocates. More families are sending their girls to school, and many throughout Somaliland have become more accepting of the role and potential of women as high-achievers and leaders in society. For example, Nadira Abdilahi's father did not support girl's education at first. Nadira's

older sister went on a hunger strike to convince her father to support her enrollment at Abaarso. When her father relented, a path opened up for Nadira to attend soon after. When she was accepted to Yale in 2016 as the first Somali female ever to go to an Ivy League school, it made news and drove pride throughout the country.

Inspired by these and so many other stories, the number of families and aspiring young scholars who want an Abaarso education skyrocketed. In the last three years, 5,087 people have applied for enrollment at Abaarso School. Unfortunately, we were only able to take 143 new students, or 2.8% of the applicant pool. Importantly, nearly 50% of our school population is female.

In the coming decades, we fully expect graduates from Abaarso to be leaders at the highest levels of public service and commercial enterprise, driving development, innovation, and inclusion throughout the country.

Local knowledge and cultural understanding.

From the beginning, Abaarso's founders and staff who came from outside Somaliland knew they must honor and respect local culture and build support from within the community. Abaarso teams worked closely with local religious and community leaders to adapt the curriculum and schedule for daily life to ensure that we honored local customs and preferences. Context-specific adaptations included a mosque on campus, strict gender separation in dorms and classrooms, required Islamic and Somali classes, and the establishment of a local Abaarso School board.

School leadership also recognized the additional challenge of clans and regions across Somali culture and made it a policy to proactively seek out diverse groups, and then include, accept and provide scholarships to Somalis of all types. Tutoring classes taught by Abaarso students and scholarships were offered to local primary school students and orphans, several of whom have gone on to have the same extraordinary success as other Abaarso graduates.

Scaling leadership and opportunity

In order to meet the huge demand and broad range of needs within the community, our flagship secondary school was spun off into two other institutions, Barwaaqo University and Kaabe Schools. These institutions were designed to meet two specific needs: better access to an affordable world-class primary education; and a dramatic increase in well-trained female teachers.

Fortunately, after years preparing the next generation of leaders, our growth was supported by our own graduates. After graduation from Oberlin College on a full scholarship, Nimco Ahmed Ismael returned to Somaliland and took a leadership role in Abaarso Network, helping to found Barwaaqo University.

Barwaaqo was launched in the fall of 2017 as the only all-female boarding university in Somaliland. The university was founded to empower Somali women to become professionals who will drive development throughout their society. Currently, the university, which enrolls over 130 women, includes a School of Education with a focus on the Montessori approach to primary schools. The Government of Somaliland has recognized that Barwaaqo will help fill an urgent skills gap in the education employment sector, and create positive ripples for many years to come.

While still young, our track record of education-to-employment from Barwaaqo University is 100%! We've had one graduating class to date, and we hired 15 out of 16 graduates to work as primary school teachers in our Kaabe system. The other graduate went on to work with her family. Thus, the Network is serving to both educate young students and sustain young professionals. This combined effect is sending a positive signal to our Somali community and the momentum is building.

Kaabe opened in 2019 as the first and only Montessori-inspired primary school system in Somaliland. Again, the Abaarso Network was supported by alumni who returned from study abroad play major professional roles. Qadan Mohamed and Warsan Mohamed were founding teachers at Kaabe and now serve as teachers, administrators and a source of inspiration for students and staff. Today, Kaabe schools serve kindergarten through grade 3, and will expand into secondary grades in the coming years. Kaabe schools are staffed by graduates of Barwaaqo University, who are specifically prepared to teach the Montessori curriculum. Today, three Kaabe Schools serve nearly 240 students and we expect to open new schools later this year. If local interest from families and even young students continues, we'll have trouble keeping up with demand.

Ido Ibrahim

In the summer of 2019, Ido Ibrahim was 10 years old, and her family had no intention of sending her to school. Despite both her brothers being given the opportunity to pursue education, Ido's parents planned for her to stay home to cook, clean, and help care for younger children in the family. When we started construction of the first Kaabe School near her home, Ido made it her personal mission to enroll herself. She stopped by every day to petition with her limited English: "Ido me. School?" Again, and again she visited. Because we were so close to her house, her family finally agreed to let her attend. Ido was well outside our intended age bracket, but the idea of her not having access to any education was unthinkable. Two years later, Ido is one of the top Kaabe students and has rapidly learned English in our immersion environment. She leads vocally and by example, always helping the younger students find their way. The teaching team could not imagine Kaabe without Ido, and Ido cannot imagine life without school.

By continuing to grow our Barwaaqo class of local teachers, the Kaabe system is scalable, sustainable, and operated predominantly by homegrown Somali talent.

Recommendations for improving access to quality education in Africa

If the Abaarso Network can create successful school systems at the primary, secondary and post-secondary levels in one of the world's most fragile, low-resource and internationally neglected regions, surely it is possible to replicate this success elsewhere.

First, we must understand that improving education in Africa is about more than increasing the number of schools and teachers. Expanding and improving quality education in Africa requires ***better quality*** in what is being offered, ***greater demand*** for education, and ***more access*** to better schools.

1. Improve quality – Better teachers and classes

It is cliché to say, but teachers really do shape the future of millions of children; and, in-turn impact entire generations of society. Numerous studies show that when a poor teacher becomes a great teacher student learning increases exponentially. Indeed, it has been clearly demonstrated that, more than computers or other resources, the teacher is the single biggest factor in predicting the educational success of the child (Jennifer King Rice, 2003). Several national programs, such as those in Finland, Japan and Singapore, have demonstrated that putting a premium value on teachers can elevate entire systems and millions of students. More schools and partnerships for greater opportunity after school won't change learning if the teachers are not prepared.

A prepared teacher is one that is deeply committed to student success, competent in the content, and proficient in contemporary pedagogy, including digital media. Change this one factor, and you can change the entire trajectory of child's life.

Making teaching more competitive and better remunerated in Africa will help elevate the status and professionalism of teachers. Through electronic media and high-frequency reporting from

teachers, we can make them more accountable and provide feedback on progress. Subsidized, continuous and paid time for professional development can make teachers more proficient in both content and pedagogy.

2. Greater demand – More local buy-in and greater incentives for success

We take it for granted that parents want to send their children to school, but this is often not the case in poor and remote communities. In many communities throughout Africa, sending a child to school may jeopardize a family farm or business that depends on the child's help. If the child does go to school, there is often little sense that it will lead to genuine opportunity. Families and the children themselves are performing a simple cost-benefit analysis, and determining that the education available to them is not worth the time and money.

Increasing access to quality education requires that we generate demand for quality education. We have to give children and their families a reason to believe; we have to change their cost-benefit analysis. Relevant learning and relationships that make the next step in the learning life-cycle, such as a scholarship or a job, possible are essential to motivating kids to go to school.

Curricula that are context specific, and partnerships with local employers can give students the skills and networks to be competitive job seekers. Secondary and post-secondary programs should be developed with specific sectors in mind and even co-designed with local, private sector partners. Local governments should provide economic incentives for partners to offer internships and apprenticeships to high-performing students. Local telecom companies should invest in their communities by ensuring free wifi access for students.

There are also cultural factors at play. Culturally specific gender roles have impacted the implementation of girl child education in some areas for decades (Lee, 1999. CETA Girl Child Education Project. The Foundation for International Training). Schools that are governed by outsiders and disconnected from the local community may not inspire participation. Innovative

governance models that prioritize performance accountability and ensure local ownership can help bridge cultural gaps and encourage new behavior, like sending girls to school and increasing local investment in schools. Local governance helps ensure education programs and policies that reflect local interest and customs, and can inspire a sense of pride in the opportunity that schools provide.

While these adaptations would generate more demand for school, students will still need support to make use of the opportunity they've been given. Counselors who assist with next-level applications and job-placement are essential to supporting students and families to manage those steps. These things are routine in the United States not because it is a luxury we can afford, but because such support is critical to ensuring learners move on to the next stage of their lives.

3. *More access - Redefine "public education" to invest models that work*

Government alone will never be able to finance or manage the supply-side of education alone. We must leverage the interest among impact investors, social entrepreneurs, faith-based organizations and others to mobilize resources and take responsibility for establishing more schools and more teacher training programs.

Non-state schools are already ubiquitous in sub-Saharan Africa and currently serve millions of children. In some areas, like Nairobi, Lagos, Accra and Kampala, non-State schools serve the vast majority of students, including some of the poorest and most vulnerable (James Tooley, *The extraordinary grassroots movement of low-cost private education*). Given the supplemental fees that most "free" public schools charge throughout Africa for books and uniforms, among other things, many non-State schools are only marginally more expensive than public schools. Furthermore, a study titled, "The Impact of Non-State Schools in Developing Countries" by Laura Day Ashley from University of Birmingham and Joseph Wales of the Overseas Development Institute confirmed what many of us in international education have suspected, that non-State schools are often more inclusive and have better learning outcomes.

These non-State schools don't have to be in competition with the public sector; they can supplement the public system, and work in tandem with local authorities or as public-private partnerships. The best education today features experiences for students (including internships with businesses and other organizations) that take place in the community and beyond the walls of the school. Encouragement from influential partners like the US Government, multilateral facilities like the World Bank's Human Capital Project, and improved local regulations can energize and finance public systems that support more choice and options to establish schools in underserved communities.

Conclusion – When we find things that work, we must make them ubiquitous!

Improving access to quality public education in Africa may seem like a daunting challenge, but we have examples of success to follow. The Abaarso Network is one of a few positive deviants; a solution in a fragile setting, with evidence of success in raising learning outcomes, creating gender equity, and increasing productive employment among men and women. We have a chance to leverage this success and others like it; to replicate, grow, nurture and understand them so that these systems may evolve, branch out throughout the continent and meet needs of specific communities.

Support for innovation should reward success, and Abaarso was no different. Abaarso's founding team had to fight and scrap to make this school work. The years and effort of bootstrapping our way to success were essential to securing local buy-in and demonstrating proof of concept. Only then could we attract outside investment. In 2015, USAID/ASHA (Association for Schools and Hospitals Abroad) began to fund expansion at both our Abaarso School and Barwaaqo University campuses. While this support will not be enough to scale the network of schools across Somaliland and in other fragile settings, we can be sure that the world has answers to dramatically improve access to quality education in Africa.

Replicating this success is in the best interest of the US Government, not just families in at-risk settings. The lack of education suppresses employment, and exacerbates gender inequality and poverty. Poverty breeds insecurity. Youth and at-risk communities need alternatives to violence; they need an opportunity for self-improvement, and a dynamic population that can create jobs and solutions to their own development challenges. Failure to improve access to quality education will drive violent extremism. When there are clear successes, when a people have tasted a great offering and are hungry for more, the United States should put its weight behind these great ideas, and give more youth and their families a reason to hope. Doing so can transform entire communities.