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**Chairwoman Bass, Vice Chairwoman Omar, Ranking Member Smith, and other distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify today on the importance of and path forward for helping all of Africa’s children and youth get the 21<sup>st</sup> century education they deserve.** This topic is one that I am deeply committed to advancing however I can, and today I will share my insights both as a former practitioner working on education initiatives across sub-Saharan Africa and as a current scholar at the Brookings Institution working on global education issues. My colleague, Emiliana Vegas, and I co-direct the Center for Universal Education at Brookings where our team currently focuses on addressing education inequality in countries around the world, including through working closely with 35 African partners from national governments to nonprofit organizations across 21 countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Our work is also heavily informed by our team of Echidna Global Scholars who are girls’ education leaders around the globe, including 12 scholars leading work on gender equality in education in six countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

**As the committee is already well aware, ensuring *all* Africa’s children and youth have high-quality education opportunities that prepare them for the 21<sup>st</sup> century world we live in is not only the right thing to do—children everywhere have a right to a quality education—but is also the smart thing to. It falls squarely within four overarching buckets central to the U.S. government’s (USG) strategic interests.**

- ***Economic.*** The growth in the world’s labor market is in Africa. As other parts of the world begin to age, Africa will grow its population and today’s children will be the talent tomorrow’s global companies will be recruiting. In the next 30 years, it is projected that [sub-Saharan Africa’s working-age population will increase more than twofold—accounting for 68% of the world’s total growth](#). Economists have shown that controlling for other factors, increasing girls’ and boys’ years of schooling (and the skills they learn while there) has a [positive effect](#) on economic growth. Ensuring girls’ secondary education is particularly impactful. Providing high-quality education today will help build the skills for the world’s future workforce, increase incomes, grow economies, and expand U.S. markets and trading partners.

- **Security.** Providing education equitably across a country’s population can [reduce the risk](#) of violent conflict. Especially in countries with large youth populations, equitable education provision can support political stability by sending the signal that the government is attending to people’s needs and giving people more tools to resolve disputes peacefully. This “pacifying effect” of education, as conflict researchers often refer to it, can help reduce the risk of civil war and the growth of ungovernable territories and safe havens for violent extremism. Ultimately, it helps promote the safety and security of the U.S.
- **Global health.** Educated girls and women can better [seek and negotiate](#) life-saving health care for themselves and their children. Global studies have shown increased education—particularly for girls—leads to less infant deaths, less maternal mortality, and less infection from viruses (HIV/AIDs). The evidence is so strong for girls’ education that some health researchers call it a “social vaccine.” Healthier communities mean less strains on health systems, a particularly timely interest of the U.S. given the global COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Climate change.** Increased levels of education support communities’ resilience in the face of climate change and can help reduce communities’ carbon footprints by leading to smaller, more sustainable families. Educating and empowering women can [decrease death rates and displacement](#) due to weather-related disasters, and could result in an estimated [85 gigaton reduction of carbon dioxide](#) by 2050, which is not only in the U.S.’s interest but the world’s.

Given the importance of educating Africa’s children and youth, I would urge the committee to bolster USG attention, funding, and support to increase access to quality education. I offer the below four recommendations for the committee to consider as possible ways to do this.

***Recommendation 1: Harness the innovative capacity of African communities***

Across the continent, African communities are innovating to solve their problems, often with very little resources. With limited access to physical banks, in Kenya a cellphone company started a global revolution in personal finance (and financial inclusion) in 2007 by inventing [mobile money](#). This idea of “a bank in your pocket” accessed through personal cell phones has spread rapidly across the world. In 2021, Nollywood—Africa’s Hollywood—was the second most [prolific](#) film industry in the world. Started less than two decades ago by Kenneth Nnebue with frugal, straight to VHS films, Africa’s film industry is now giving America’s century-old film industry a run for its money. In South Africa, farmers are optimizing their agriculture practices with the help of a platform that combines satellite, drone, and artificial intelligence technology. Today’s innovators are standing on the shoulders of a long line of cutting-edge creatives as Africa’s history demonstrates.

All too often in the U.S., the dire news headlines about Africa obscure the ingenuity and innovative capacity of African communities. Focusing solely on the great needs of communities,

without simultaneously recognizing their tremendous assets to solve problems, can create a hard-to-see but nonetheless dangerous mindset that Africans cannot be true partners in the identification and design of solutions to problems the USG is interested in addressing.

The U.S. [Government Strategy on International and Basic Education](#) established in 2019 provides a welcome shift in focusing on partnerships and local ownership. This is one important part of the strategy that should be continued and strengthened. For example, USAID funding has traditionally gone mainly to U.S.-based organizations that have deep technical expertise, excellent administrative capabilities, and sophisticated know-how on navigating USG procurement processes. Often these U.S. organizations will sub-grant to local nonprofits, universities, or networks once a grant is awarded to help implement a specific set of activities. Recently however, especially with the guidance of the Government Strategy on International and Basic Education, USAID is awarding more grants directly to local organizations, beginning to involve local organizations in discussions about the design of programs, and—in a handful of cases—the usual relationship between U.S. and local organizations has been flipped (the local organization is the lead or “prime” and the U.S. organization is its subgrantee).

This increased participation of local actors is not only important to enhance local “ownership” and “sustainability” of USG -funded projects, which is the main rationale in the strategy, but also to harness the creative ideas local organizations and communities can bring to solving some of their most pressing problems. At the Center for Universal Education at Brookings, one of my areas of focus has been on bottom-up innovation and examining the potential it has to help accelerate, or leapfrog, the pace at which education is improving. Having conducted a review of over 3,000 education innovations across 160 countries in my study—[Leapfrogging Inequality: Remaking Education to Help Young People Thrive](#)—we found a dynamic innovation sector in every corner of the globe. Of the countries with the most innovations, one in four were in Africa. Many innovations have the potential to radically bend the curve and close the “100-year-gap,” which is what we estimated prior to COVID-19 was the time it will take given the current pace of change for the most marginalized African children to catch up in terms of education outcomes with their more enfranchised peers. However, most innovations occurred on the margins of education systems and are hampered by limited attention, funding, and organizational support.

Across its education work in Africa, the USG policy directives, agency strategies and operations would do well to not only tap into this innovative capacity within African communities but understand and support the conditions that would help unleash its potential. This is both a mindset and an implementation approach that should be embraced across whatever thematic priorities the USG is investing in. Below are two specific examples of actions the USG could take to support this direction:

- **Bilateral.** In its ongoing bilateral support for education in Africa, the USG should continue the work of increasingly co-designing and directly supporting local organizations. The many U.S.-based organizations working on education in Africa have many talented and thoughtful team members who should be tapped for their expertise,

but they should not be the only ones at the table helping design USG programs nor the only ones leading implementation. As a neutral convenor of global education policy debates, we frequently get requests from our African partners, including government officials, to help brainstorm ideas on how to tackle a particular problem “free from the difficulties of managing the priorities of multiple donors” as one partner put it. One concrete way for the USG to advance this is to invest in a design thinking process with African partners at the center and multiple actors from across a range of disciplines assisting in brainstorming how to “leapfrog” or rapidly accelerate progress in addressing a particular problem (e.g. low literacy levels, high youth unemployment). Systematically supporting “[leapfrog labs](#)”, a virtual space to conduct this process, could be one way to deepen USG’s work in this area.

- **Multilateral.** The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) is the largest global fund dedicated to improving education primarily in low-income countries. With work in over 40 African partner countries, the USG could increase its support to GPE which puts country voices at the center of its model by supporting ministries of education to develop strong policies building on inclusive consultation with local and international organizations. [Ministers of Education](#) in Africa and countries around the world have called on GPE to “shift from business as usual” and are keenly interested in strategies that can accelerate the pace of change and ensure “our collective efforts transform the teaching and learning experience.” Supporting this call to action through increased funding to GPE is another concrete way to move this work forward. Currently, the USG gives \$125 million annually to GPE, a far cry from the over \$1.5 billion annual contribution the USG gives to the global fund for health.

***Recommendation 2: Support enriched teaching and learning experiences to improve foundational literacy and numeracy***

Africa’s young children are failing to master basic literacy and numeracy skills, which is crucial if they hope to have any longevity in their educational journeys. It is very difficult to explore and master the diverse curricular subjects from history to science that are required as children progress through school without strong reading abilities and foundational understanding of mathematics. According to UNESCO’s recent [Global Education Monitoring Report](#), only 18% of all primary-school age children in sub-Saharan Africa achieve minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics, many of whom are enrolled in school. The World Bank and UNESCO Institute of Statistics are tracking this crisis through their work on “[learning poverty](#)” which is defined as those children in school who cannot read by age 10 together with those children out of school whom they assume cannot read. They argue that if children do not master reading by age 10, they are unlikely to do so later in life.

The USG has over the last decade invested heavily in addressing this “learning crisis”, including in developing internal staff capacity and international partner collaboration. The needs in this area are so great that the USG should continue to support partners to address foundational literacy and numeracy. A mix of approaches will be needed to address this challenge given that

approaches for stable contexts will not be the same needed for situations of instability. With the COVID-19 pandemic, rising levels of conflict, and increasing climate related disasters, a nimble approach to adapting strategies should be fostered across all USG agencies working on education.

In contexts where children are regularly attending school, the focus should be on the classroom-based teaching and learning strategies that have been shown to be effective and able to [scale](#). For example, one [cost-effective](#) approach is [Teaching at the Right Level](#) which uses differentiated instruction (grouping students by level rather than grade) and interactive pedagogical methods to improve student learning outcomes. Pioneered in India by the non-profit Pratham, this has also been shown to be effective in Africa. One rigorous study in Kenya demonstrated that dividing classrooms into [groups based on students' learning level increased test scores for all students](#).

There are many children however who need different approaches largely because they are not able to access stable schooling provision either because they are out of school or live in contexts of conflict, instability, which is a situation only exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report, only two of three children in sub-Saharan Africa who enter primary school complete it. [UNICEF](#) estimates that in the region nearly 250 million children were affected by pandemic related school closures, on top of the approximately 100 million children out of school before the pandemic, approximately 40 million of whom are of primary-school age. Additionally, 14 African countries are on the [World Bank's](#) most recent list of fragile and conflict affected situations as experiencing at least medium intensity conflict.

In these contexts, it is important to consider flexible approaches to improving foundational literacy and numeracy. One approach is to use accelerated learning programs that help children who have missed several years of schooling catch-up and re-enter school. One example of this type of program is the Luminos Fund's [Second Chance](#) program focused on out-of-school children ages 8-14 in Ethiopia and Liberia. Young adults from the students' communities are recruited and trained to lead a program where students learning literacy and numeracy through interactive, activity-based approaches. The program covers the first three years of school in 10-months after which time students enter primary school. A longitudinal evaluation found that that this form of "catch-up" learning is far from being a handicap for students but rather an asset. Students in the Second Chance program complete primary school at a rate that is nearly double that of government students, they outperform their peers in English and Math, are happier and more confident, and have higher aspiration to continue their education beyond the primary years.

Some flexible learning approaches also have the potential to support children's literacy and numeracy learning in diverse situations from in and to out of school. The teacher shortage in sub-Saharan Africa is acute with an estimated [15 million](#) more teachers needed. Unwieldy class sizes and limited teaching time due to teacher absenteeism, which remains [high](#), requires innovative learning approaches in the short to medium-term while systems strengthen their

human resources recruitment, training, support and deployment. One promising example of a foundational learning strategy that could “face both ways” for in and out-of-school children is technology-enabled, child-directed personalized learning. Most technology-based learning programs require students to have a certain level of basic literacy. One exception are the X-prize winners [onebillion](#) and [KitKit School](#) that have helped young children build literacy and numeracy skills starting from zero via solar powered tablets. In a collaboration with the government of Malawi and their partner VSO, the scaling non-profit Imagine Worldwide is testing the effectiveness of supporting foundational learning in schools with severely overcrowded classrooms. With 40 minutes a day of learning on the tablet, an initial randomized control trial found [significant positive effects](#) on overall gains in literacy and numeracy translating to 5.3 months of additional literacy learning.

Across all these contexts, whether children are in or out of school, the global education community has been increasingly paying attention to the important role of families in children’s educational success. In our recent work [Collaborating to improve and transform education systems: A playbook for family school engagement](#) we found a number of creative family engagement strategies with strong evidence showing the positive effects on children’s learning. From building community literacy skills and habits that support children’s learning outside of school to SMS messages to caregivers for math practice with their children at home, there are many innovative approaches deployed in African communities. Some approaches, such as improve family-school communication on the benefits of education are highly cost-effective in helping improve student learning outcomes due to their ability to be implemented at wide scale. The COVID-19 pandemic and the likely growing instability facing many African communities makes strengthening family-school engagement no longer a nice to have but a crucial component of supporting children’s learning.

***Recommendation 3: Increase investments in improved models of learning that prepare African youth for the future of work***

Africa is the youngest continent in the world and for many young people a quality, traditional secondary education can be difficult to come by. In sub-Saharan Africa before the pandemic, of the 98 percent of children who enroll in primary school, only [9 percent](#) make it to tertiary education and only 6 percent graduate. University preparation is important but the main focus should be on flexible secondary education pathways that prepares young people for work. The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the struggle of young people continuing their education.

Demands for secondary education has grown in the region following the large push with the Millennium Development Goals for universal primary completion. This is a particular concern for the countries housing the largest numbers of young people. In 2020, [almost half of poor people in Sub-Saharan Africa lived in just five economies](#): Nigeria (79 million), the Democratic Republic of Congo (60 million), Tanzania (28 million), Ethiopia (26 million), and Madagascar (20 million). Serious investments must be made to deliver on these demands. According to the

Education Commission, sub-Saharan Africa needs to invest \$175 billion per year through 2050 to support secondary education for all. This is a far cry from the \$25 billion that was invested in secondary education in 2015.

Crucially, these investments must not come at the expense of continuing to support and strengthen primary education. Inclusive and equitable education systems must be built on a strong early learning foundation, otherwise it will be the most well-off young people who continue to access secondary education and leave their most marginalized peers behind.

This is an area that needs significant attention and it is a gap in the USG's education work globally. Currently, initiatives on workforce training for out-of-school youth reach only small numbers, and frequently are [costly](#), and would not be sufficient for responding to the demand for secondary education. Instead what is needed is a reinvention of secondary education itself. Multiple, flexible pathways so that young people who drop out may have on roads to reenter will be crucial. Many Africans are already experimenting with reinventing secondary education. For example, the Ministry of Education in [Ghana](#) is deploying a year-round, two-shift schooling approach to accommodate the large numbers of secondary school students interested in the limited seats in physical school buildings. A [South Africa](#) program is partnering secondary schools in marginalized communities with companies struggling to hire employees. A Nigerian early stage venture capital firm is betting on African education innovation and has started a [Future of Learning Fund](#) to seed the private sector education entrepreneurs.

Crowding in investment, innovative ideas, new actors, and robust partnerships to helping African youth choose from multiple secondary education learning models could be an important role the USG could play. This is an area that is particularly well suited to public-private partnerships. The whole of government Strategy on International and Basic Education lends itself well to this work given the wide range of agencies with diverse expertise, tools, networks that could be deployed to work on this topic. Mobilizing U.S. private sector actors could be one way of greatly expand the existing USG work on this topic.

#### ***Recommendation 4: Lead on system transformation in the face of climate change***

Globally the education sector is just beginning to grapple with what a resilient, climate smart education system looks like. Finding ways to support [flexible, adaptive education ecosystems](#) that are resilient in the face of climate impacts and help spur climate action is something countries around the world will increasingly struggle with.

Already communities across sub-Saharan Africa are facing the climate related impacts on education. Climate change and its associated impact on weather and climate patterns [widens inequality gaps in Sub-Saharan Africa](#). Floods, droughts, fires and heat spells, and heavy rain can lead to destruction of school buildings, roads, and bridges, reduce access to sanitation and food supplies, and contribute to the spread of vector borne diseases, [all of which can impact school attendance rates, performance outcomes, and dropout rates](#). Disruptive weather events disproportionately affect girls and young women around the globe, particularly in low-income

countries, who are often forced out of school due to damaged infrastructure or other reasons. According to estimates from the Malala Fund, [by 2025 more than 12 million girls are at risk of not completing their education every year as a result of climate change.](#)

The USG has done some initial [work](#) in this area, particularly on disaster risk reduction. But it could play a much bigger role and exert real leadership in this area. Developing climate smart education systems is a cross-cutting endeavor. For example, supporting foundational literacy and numeracy materials that speak to topics in environmental education and youth post-primary education focused on green economy jobs. There is increasing demand from students, teachers, and communities to incorporate climate change education and political windows of opportunity with the first international agreement between [Ministers of Education and Ministers of the Environment](#) to collaborate to prioritize climate change education coming out of COP26.

High quality climate change education has the power to spur climate action but to date the education sector has not been at the table as a partner in climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts. Globally, less than 25% of countries' [national plans](#) to address climate change mention the education of children and youth. There are however effective approaches to build on to advance this work. In [Unleashing the creativity of teachers and students to combat climate change](#), my coauthor Christina Kwauk and I highlight a range of practices including climate action projects at schools that both help build community resilience, deepen students science learning, and allow them to practice applying academic knowledge to solve problems in the real world.

In conclusion, I urge the USG to renew the whole of government Strategy on International and Basic Education when it expires in 2023 with attention to the above four recommendations. In 2010, I published a report titled [Punching Below Its Weight: The U.S. Government Approach to Education in the Developing World](#). The title was in part in reference to the 13 USG agencies I found working on education in the developing world with very little coordination and collaboration. The Strategy on International and Basic Education has finally help address this by providing the policy support needed for agencies to collaborate and there are good examples of the synergies that result (e.g. CDC being brought in to train developing country ministries of education on COVID-19 information). A renewed whole of government strategy that brings additional funding, expertise, and networks to supporting education in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly on the areas above, would be one that truly punches above its weight.