

Opening statement and broad SDG commitment

Thank you for inviting me to speak today at this important event. In these challenging times, it is especially crucial that we maintain and strengthen our efforts on the Sustainable Development Goals. I look forward to hearing the new Accelerated Actions that will be presented today by others.

This time last year, the UK presented our first Voluntary National Review outlining our progress across all the SDGs, areas of further work, and next steps. Two months later, at the SDG Summit at UNGA, we underscored our commitment by submitting eleven SDG Accelerated Actions that covered both our domestic and international efforts. These ranged from our commitment to legislate to bring all greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050 to launching a £600 million programme to provide reproductive health supplies for 20 million women until 2025.

Today, I wanted, in my role as the UK's Special Envoy for Girls' Education, to focus in on the education commitments we made, and to update this group on some of the work the UK has been leading in this critical area over the last year. Now more than ever, if we are to achieve the SDGs and recover better from the COVID-19 pandemic, standing up for the right of every girl in the world to 12 years of quality education is more important than ever. If we are to truly Build Back Better then we must see real progress on SDG 4 – so the children of the world have hope for the future and the opportunity to fulfil their potential.

Education commitments and progress

At UNGA last year, the UK Prime Minister, underlining his personal commitment, announced £515 million of UK aid to support over 12 million children – half of them girls – in school. This package included:

- a) setting up a new £215 million education quality programme in Africa, including analysing which measures increase the proportion of girls making the transition from primary school to secondary school; and
- b) investing £300 million in the new International Finance Facility for Education - helping to unlock an additional \$5 billion of financial support to education projects in lower-middle income countries, with girls and the most marginalised children at the heart of the facility's work and investments.

I am delighted to say the mobilisation of this first programme is on track, and it is expected to launch in early next year. The programme will work with communities to ensure girls remain in school and successfully transition to secondary education.

Similarly, firm progress has been made on the International Finance Facility for Education - IFFEd - which I am pleased to say will be hosted in London. We strongly encourage others to join us and the Netherlands in supporting this innovative and cost-effective new financing instrument. Prior to COVID-19, 60% of the world's out-of-school girls lived in the countries eligible for IFFEd's support; by multiplying the impact of donor contributions, IFFEd can make a real difference to the lives of many more girls than would otherwise be possible.

More broadly, girls' education has been placed even more at the forefront of the UK's global development offer over the last year, recognising both the power of educating girls in its own right and its potential for unlocking progress against all the SDGs.

COVID-19

We were already facing a global learning crisis when, as we know all too well, the COVID-19 pandemic hit with devastating effects. 1.3 billion children – 650 million girls – have been out of primary and secondary education at the peak of school closures. The impact, both short and long-term, risks being hardest felt by the most marginalised, and by women and girls, including the potential for what has been called a 'shadow pandemic' of gender-based violence. Across the board, we risk losing recent hard-won progress made towards achieving the SDGs by 2030.

Now more than ever it is not only right but essential that we collectively champion and accelerate our efforts on education, recognising it is one of the best investments for reducing poverty and achieving all the SDGs. The intergenerational impact of educating girls can lead to healthier, fairer and safer societies, build prosperity and tackle climate change.

Our education response

To this end, in the last three months, the UK have adapted and reprioritised our education programmes in 18 countries to support education systems and keep pupils safe during the pandemic. We have also provided an uplift in funding to the DFID/World Bank Education Technology hub to expand its help-desk facility for education ministries at this crucial time.

At a global level we have committed additional funding of £20 million to UNICEF for child protection, and an additional £5 million grant to Education Cannot Wait, to keep the most vulnerable children in 26 countries safe and learning.

Collective effort is essential. This is why the UK is strongly supporting efforts, including the UNICEF Opening Up Better campaign, to ensure all children - including 650 million girls - get back to school when it is safe to do so. The needs of the most vulnerable children must be at the heart of this process. We encourage others, at all levels, to join these efforts.

Longer-term recovery

We are also thinking about the longer term. We need both to build our education systems back better and to place girls' education, and gender equality, at the heart of the global recovery after COVID-19.

As Governments all around the world face budgetary pressure, we must all work to ensure that education spend continues to be a priority. We need more financing for education, not less. Institutions like the International Finance Facility for Education can help, and I encourage all to support it.

We will not achieve the SDGs and leave no one behind if we don't get SDG 4 back on track and address the wider impacts of school closures - we know from the West Africa Ebola epidemic these can include sexual exploitation, child marriage and increased poverty.

The UK commits to continue being at the vanguard of these efforts.

Closing

I hope I have provided a snapshot of UK activity and commitment, and set out the case for accelerate action on SDG 4 and girls' education. I ask that you share this prioritisation and passion, including by supporting the UNICEF-led Opening Up Better campaign, IFFEd and other initiatives and by putting education front and centre of your own COVID-19 and recovery efforts.

Of course, we need to make sustained and enhanced progress against all the SDGs, and I am proud of the work the UK is doing across the spectrum - on an agenda which we championed so strongly when the goals and principle of leave no one behind were agreed five years ago. I look forward to hearing your plans and commitments, and understanding where the UK can support and learn from these endeavours.

