Everyone knows how important it is to educate the world’s children. But is the world really doing enough to educate its youth, or are we letting young people down by failing to provide opportunities to learn?

On the plus side, it seems that access to education is better than it was. In 2008, UNESCO, the United Nations organization that focuses on education, carried out research which was largely encouraging. They published figures to show that, overall, since the 1970s, there has been a considerable rise in school attendance in both primary and secondary schools across the world and the amount of time young people spend being schooled has lengthened, too. (1) This is very good news, as rising literacy rates suggest that both access to and quality of education are getting better around the world.
Unfortunately, these generally positive statistics can’t hide the fact that a worrying number of young people are still not getting the educational opportunities they should. Recent UNESCO figures show that almost 60 million children of primary school age don’t attend school at all, which is about ten per cent of the world’s population. In parts of sub-Saharan Africa and south and west Asia, the young children who are privileged enough to receive any schooling at all are in a minority.

There are a lot of factors that stop children from getting an education. For example, if a country is at war or going through a period of political problems, school attendance will inevitably drop. Currently, about 300,000 children in the world are child soldiers. Economic factors are also a key reason why children don’t go to school. According to UNESCO figures, 215 million children are already working and their incomes are often essential for their families. In the developing world, it’s much more likely that girls are denied a good education. Sometimes, cultural and religious factors may prohibit girls from getting a good education, but, more often than not, the reasons are economic. Adult males have more opportunities to earn if they have an education. Thirty-nine thousand girls under the age of eighteen get married every day, so one reason why many teenage girls don’t go to school is that they already have children of their own.
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It is reasonable to ask what relevance education has for children and their families in poverty-stricken countries. For people living in remote communities, bringing up children in harsh conditions and often relying on subsistence farming to survive, education may not seem important.

Education is vital to people who live in countries in the developing world, where incomes and opportunities are low. In the next few decades, jobs in technology and communications, which require literacy and numeracy skills, will replace manual jobs more and more. Experts estimate that every additional year of education will increase the income of a person in a poor country by ten per cent. And educated people don’t just make money for themselves – they are the entrepreneurs and the inventors who, in the future, are going to create jobs and wealth for other people.

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In the developed world, children are fortunate to have access to a good education. This should be available for everyone. It is important that governments around the world take action and there are a lot of things they can do. For example, rich countries can relieve poor countries from debt. By cancelling or reducing these debts, wealthy countries allow poorer countries to spend more money on education. Policy makers in developing countries can also make a difference by investing resources in education, in the knowledge that having a well-educated population is a way of improving a country’s economy. Well-educated people set up businesses, create jobs and are able to take on the responsibilities of professional careers, such as medicine, teaching and the law, which improve the lives of everybody in their country.