

Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

4.1 free, equitable quality education

Goal 17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

17.4 debt relief

About a month ago, it was the beginning of a new school semester in Uganda, and I saw many children in town who couldn't return to school or were 'chased' out of school because their parents couldn't afford their school fees. In Uganda, education is not free. Other than Universal Primary Education (UPE) government schools (which offer low/no school fees but are usually viewed as being low quality), most schools cost an average of \$50 - \$150 USD. While this is not a huge amount of money, it becomes a barrier to accessing education when credit/loans are inaccessible, salaries are often delayed or low, as school fees fall down a family's priority list.

Coming from Canada, where most children benefit from good quality public education, my parents never questioned if they should pay to put me in private school. Similarly, most developed countries (except maybe the United States), have invested heavily in education. This begs several questions, including how, globally, we created a system whereby people living in some of the poorest countries have to pay for their children's education? Quality education does exist here (although there are differences here that we don't experience back home - like one friend who told me that every girl at her school was forced to take a pregnancy test before going home for the holidays), but it's not free. PhDs have been written on education in sub-Saharan Africa, but one important aspect is the role of structural adjustment and debt relief programs in Uganda by international financial institutions run by Western countries, which sets parameters in how money within Uganda can be spent. While education has been deemed a priority area, the fee for service model introduced for both education and health care with these programs make it increasingly inaccessible to those living in rural areas or in poverty. This follows the neoliberal trend to privatize services, and places the "freedom" upon individuals to pay for what they want. These programs have been created and repeated in many countries (the name of them might change, but they're essentially the same thing). The goal of universal primary education cannot be achieved (let alone looking at equity or quality), if students and their families end up the duty bearers. In Uganda, you see people who are in the 20s who are finishing high school or in their 30s finishing their undergraduate degrees because they have had to take breaks to raise money to go to school.

The use of the term 'post-colonialism' can lead one to believe that we have moved beyond colonialism and that it no longer impacts the world today. But nothing is further from the truth. The world still exists within structures created through colonialism. Again, people study this for a living, but debt and structural adjustment programs, put in place by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, rose out of the ashes of colonialism, as a giant neo-colonial disciplining mechanism for developing countries. 'Debt' is often seen to be at unsustainable levels across sub-Saharan Africa. At the end of the 1990s, Uganda was the first countries to receive debt relief, under the IMF's Highly Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) IMP program, having met stringent conditions. \$650 million USD of multilateral debt was forgiven,

but not before the process was delayed for a year. Relief, however, was delayed by one year, costing the Ugandan government \$193 million USD, double the amount that was spent on education that year. The cost of servicing debt and paying interests year after year is a crippling burden for countries, and a huge loss of revenue that could be better dedicated to social infrastructure. It's a sad day when there are projections that more revenue leaves Africa to pay interest on multilateral debt than goes into the country in the form of foreign aid and loans.

For me, focusing on SDG #17 is crucial if we want national governments to be able to uphold the right to education for its citizens. We need to heavily invest in education: providing free, equitable, quality education means making schools free. An apology for colonialism is far off, as is any type of repayment or settlement money for the damage it caused. Let's start by forgiving debt (with no strings attached) that was accrued as a result of colonialism and neo-colonialism. We need to ensure that the government has the means to invest in education.