The SDGs require doubled spending and closer monitoring

The new hunger-related SDGs go way beyond the current targets: they commit not only to ending hunger everywhere by 2030, but also to improving nutrition and promoting sustainable agriculture. Against a backdrop of several interlocking crises – including changing climate, increasing resource constraints and population growth – reaching zero hunger levels, sustainably, will require much higher spending on nutrition and sustainable farming. Additional public spending needs are estimated at US$61 billion a year (US$46 billion for zero hunger and US$15 billion for sustainable agriculture).

They will also entail reinforced commitment to track spending more closely: by separating out programmes which address hunger and nutrition and by analysing whether agriculture spending is promoting sustainability. The Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement is leading efforts to improve the tracking of spending on nutrition, and GSW will work closely with them in future.

MDG target 2.A commits that, by 2015, children everywhere will complete a full course of primary schooling. In 2000, the Dakar Framework for Education For All (EFA) also set out six goals, and a broad commitment to ensuring quality education for all. Progress has been patchy. There have been huge strides in getting children into primary school; some improvements in youth literacy; a narrowing of gender gaps; and more children than ever completing basic education. But 58 million children are still missing out on primary school, expansion of access to primary education has been slowing, the global early school primary leaving rate (25%) is the same as in 2000 and (due to insufficient focus on quality) many children end basic education without basic literacy and numeracy.

Are countries meeting their education spending targets?

There are two international benchmarks for spending on education: governments should spend 6% of gross national product (GNP) and 20% of their overall budgets on education. Hence, GSW tracks total education spending as a percentage of both overall spending and gross domestic product (GDP). The 2014 data show that only 11 of 59 countries with data available for 2014 met the percentage of GDP target: Cape Verde, Kiribati, Lesotho, Malawi, Moldova, Mozambique, Niger, Samoa, Senegal, Solomon Islands and Zimbabwe. A similar number, 13, met the percentage of spending target: Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Dominican Republic, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Honduras, Madagascar, Mali, Nicaragua, Senegal, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Zimbabwe – although the two groups contain different countries due to different government spending/GDP levels. Across both targets, spending is nowhere near the levels needed for the MDGs.
What are the recent trends in education spending?

Overall, governments have increased spending on education by 0.6% of GDP since 2008. However, after a sharp rise in 2009–10, spending fell in 2011 and has broadly stagnated thereafter at 16.8% of government spending and 5% of GDP.¹⁰

¹⁹. Financing the Sustainable Development Goals: Lessons from Government Spending on the MDGs
The country-level position is slightly better, as shown in Figures 2.15 and 2.16: between 2012 and 2014, 59% of countries increased spending as a percentage of GDP, and 54% as a percentage of total spending.

Implications for the post-2015 education agenda

The draft SDGs set out a far broader agenda for education than the MDGs: the new agenda commits to lifelong learning, going beyond pre-primary/primary/junior secondary education and including upper secondary, vocational, technical and tertiary education and full access for youth and adults. Alongside the drafting of the SDGs, there has been a process to create an ‘EFA 2’ agenda (known as the ‘Muscat agreement’). Both of these agendas have a far greater focus on learning and quality than the MDGs/EFA, and aim to ensure access to education for the most marginalised children. This will be far more expensive than existing achievements and requires new, ambitious commitments. However, the Muscat agreement commits governments only to spending 4–6% of GNP, and 15–20% of total government spending – lower levels than contained in the current targets discussed above. As a result, the current targets contained in the Muscat agreement fall well short of what is required to fund the SDG-related expansion.

In March 2015, UNESCO estimated that the annual total cost of achieving universal pre-primary, primary and lower secondary education in low- and lower-middle-income countries is projected to increase from US$100 billion in 2012 to US$239 billion between 2015 and 2030. The projected increase reflects a combination of greater numbers of students and higher per student expenditure to improve quality and address marginalisation, and is broadly consistent with the Muscat targets, though it is unclear how this relates to reduced percentages of GNP or total spending.

In addition, it is clear that even these UNESCO costings fall well short of the SDG ambitions, notably in aiming to finance only pre-primary, primary and lower secondary education and thereby omitting all the other levels of education covered by the SDGs. As a result, no reliable costings exist for meeting the new post-2015 education targets, and it is urgent that these be established as a top priority.