

RECOMMENDATION 12 OF 20

NATIONAL, WITH CONTINENTAL COMPARISON

Act within 1 year · by 2027/28 budgets

Write a legal minimum for school spending into every national debt plan

Related briefings: [Education](#), [Development cooperation](#)

IN BRIEF

- Governments in sub-Saharan Africa spend 3.6 times more on debt payments than on education.
- Each government should write a minimum for education spending into its budget law and its plan for managing debt. The minimum should be measured after inflation, and the African Union should report every two years on who meets it.
- Sierra Leone should go first, because its budget already measures education against debt payments.

Why this matters

UNESCO, the UN education agency, has looked at the years since 2017. Each extra dollar paid on debt came with about 28 cents less for education, after inflation. Debt payments are 12.2 times education spending in Angola and 8.4 times in Sierra Leone. Across the region, 62% of these payments go to lenders at home, so governments can act without waiting for foreign creditors.

Sierra Leone shows the squeeze. Its 2026 education budget rose 9.4% in cash terms and fell about 1% after inflation. When debt payments are counted in total spending, education takes 13.5% of the budget and about 2.2% of national income. Debt payments of 8.6 billion leones are more than double the education budget of 4.0 billion leones.

The targets already exist. The global Education 2030 Framework asks governments to spend 4% to 6% of national income, or 15% to 20% of public spending, on education. Governments in sub-Saharan Africa average 3.5% and 15.5%. In December 2024 African education ministers signed the Nouakchott Declaration, which sets 4% to 7% of national income and 15% to 25% of the budget. It asks the AU Commission to report on progress every two years.

Outside lenders give little protection. Of 39 programmes agreed with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) between 2020 and 2023, 33 had a minimum for social spending. Almost all of these were targets with no penalty if missed. A floor set in national law is harder to set aside.

Sources for this section (5)

- [Ecofin Agency, reporting UNESCO debt payments and education spending](#)
- [UNICEF: Sierra Leone's 2026 education budget brief](#)
- [GEM Report: education finance targets and regional averages](#)
- [African Union: the Nouakchott Declaration, December 2024](#)
- [Human Rights Watch: minimums for social spending in IMF programmes](#)

Four levels of action

1 What Africa asks of the world

The IMF should treat a national minimum for education spending, once written into law, as protected spending when it designs a programme. It should measure that minimum after inflation.

WHO	IMF management and its country teams
WHEN	Spring meetings of the IMF and the World Bank, 12 to 17 April 2027

2 What the African Union does

The AU Commission's education department publishes the report promised at Nouakchott every two years. It includes a table of education spending against debt payments for every member state. The African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), through which African governments review each other, adds a check on education funding to its country reviews.

WHO	The AU Commission's education department, with the APRM
WHEN	First table before the AU summit in February 2027

3 What regional groups do

Finance officials in ECOWAS, the East African Community and SADC agree one definition of spending per pupil after inflation, including whether debt payments count. National minimums can then be

compared. Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger are suspended from AU bodies and have left ECOWAS. The continental table still includes them, using UNESCO data where it exists.

WHO

Finance officials of ECOWAS, the East African Community and SADC

WHEN

By June 2027



Which country goes first, and why

Sierra Leone goes first. Its 2026 education budget brief, prepared with UNICEF, already sets education against debt payments and the international targets. It also recommends protecting education from cuts during the year. Sierra Leone only needs to turn that measure into a legal minimum.

WHO

Sierra Leone's Ministry of Finance and its Parliament

WHEN

Minimum raised at the IMF spring meetings in April 2027 and written into the 2028 budget law

Before another country can do this

- ☒ Published data on education spending after inflation and on debt payments.
- ☒ A medium-term plan for managing debt that parliament reviews.
- ☒ No IMF programme, or a programme at a stage that allows a protected spending item.
- ☒ A parliament with power to amend the budget law.

What does not carry over from the first country

- Sierra Leone's Free Quality School Education programme, which gives schools high political priority.
- Its level. At about 2% of national income, Sierra Leone's minimum would be too low for Senegal or South Africa, which spend about 6%.

Who else is ready

COUNTRY	WHY	SOURCE
Senegal	It spends 6.2% of national income (2023) and 20.9% of public spending (2025) on education, so it already meets both targets.	Source
Kenya	Education takes 28.5% of public spending (2025) and 4.0% of national income (2024).	Source
Zambia	It rescheduled its debts under the G20 Common Framework and spends 4.1% of national income on education (2023).	Source
Angola	It is furthest from the targets, at 6.5% of public spending (2025) and 2.5% of national income (2023).	Source

Has this worked before?

Brazil's 1988 Constitution requires the federal government to spend at least 18% of tax revenue on education, and states and towns at least 25%. In 1996 a national fund called FUNDEF ring-fenced this money. The share of children aged 7 to 14 out of school fell from 9.8% in 1995 to 2.6% in 2005. The quality of learning changed little, so a floor protects places in school more than it improves teaching. [Source](#)

ERIC: study of education funding rules in Brazil

First steps

- 1

AFRICAN UNION

the AU Commission's education department publishes a table of education spending against debt payments, from UNESCO data, before the February 2027 summit.
- 2

REGIONAL GROUPS

finance officials in ECOWAS, the East African Community and SADC agree a common definition of spending per pupil after inflation by June 2027.
- 3

SIERRA LEONE

the Ministry of Finance sets a minimum for spending per pupil in its debt plan, raises it at the IMF spring meetings in April 2027 and asks Parliament to write it into the 2028 budget law.

Who acts, and with what

WHO LEADS	National finance ministries decide; the AU Commission's education department and the APRM compare results; Sierra Leone goes first
INSTRUMENT	National budget law and debt plan, the AU's two-yearly Nouakchott report and APRM reviews
HOW PROGRESS IS CHECKED	Spending per pupil after inflation held or raised wherever a minimum is adopted, and the continental table published before February 2027
SIGNAL TO CHANGE COURSE	Spending per pupil after inflation falls where a minimum exists, or a debt rescheduling ignores it
WHAT STANDS IN THE WAY	Finance ministries like to keep room to move money. Inflation can wear away a minimum set in cash terms.
COST AND MONEY	A minimum adds no new spending line. It moves money within budgets and away from debt payments. The cost of meeting it differs by country and has not been estimated.

Who else contributes

WHO	CONTRIBUTION
Sierra Leone's Ministry of Finance	Sets the first minimum
Parliaments	Write the minimum into budget law
IMF country teams	Treat the minimum as protected spending
Banks and pension funds that hold government debt	Agree new repayment terms that respect it
UNESCO and the GEM Report	Supply data that can be compared across countries

What each audience can do

Governments

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Write the minimum into law and report against it

WHAT YOU GAIN

School budgets protected from debt

AU and regional bodies

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Publish the continental table

WHAT YOU GAIN

Pressure from peers that shows the trade-off

NGOs and civil society

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Track education budgets against spending

WHAT YOU GAIN

School funding that can be checked

Researchers and media

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Show how debt payments affect schools

WHAT YOU GAIN

Evidence for decision makers

Young people and citizens

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Ask candidates to commit to the minimum

WHAT YOU GAIN

Classrooms that stay open

The briefings behind this

Sector · Observed

Education

Governments in sub-Saharan Africa spend 3.6 times more on debt payments than on schools, so budgets now decide how far African children learn.

[Open the briefing](#)

Sector · Observed

Development cooperation

Grants for Africa are shrinking fast, and the money that replaces them asks for data, a share of the budget or market interest.

[Open the briefing](#)

Words used on this page

African Union (AU)

The organisation of 55 African states, based in Addis Ababa. Its heads of state meet each February. It can suspend members after a coup. [Glossary](#) · [Source: au.int](#)

UNESCO

The UN agency for education, science and culture. Its statistics office publishes the main figures on schooling and research in every country. [Education briefing](#) · [Glossary](#) · [Source: uis.unesco.org](#)

Education spending targets

Targets agreed by governments worldwide for 2030: spend at least 4% to 6% of national income, or 15% to 20% of public spending, on education. [Education briefing](#) · [Glossary](#) · [Source: education-progress.org](#)

Nouakchott Declaration

A statement signed by African Union education ministers in Mauritania in December 2024. It commits governments to spend 4% to 7% of national income and 15% to 25% of the budget on education, and asks the AU Commission to report on progress every two years. [Education briefing](#) · [Glossary](#) · [Source: au.int](#)

African Union Commission

The African Union's secretariat. It prepares decisions for heads of state and carries them out. [Glossary](#)

African Peer Review Mechanism

A voluntary African Union process in which member states review each other's governance and publish the results. [Politics and governance briefing](#) · [Glossary](#)

ECOWAS

The Economic Community of West African States. Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger left it in January 2025. [Politics and governance briefing](#) · [Glossary](#)

East African Community

A bloc of eastern and central African states, including Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. [Glossary](#)

SADC

The Southern African Development Community, 16 states from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to South Africa. [Glossary](#) · [Source: sadc.int](#)

UNICEF

The UN's agency for children. It works on child health, nutrition, schooling, water and protection, and is funded by voluntary donations. [Education briefing](#) · [Glossary](#) · [Source: unicef.org](#)

IMF programme

A loan from the International Monetary Fund that comes with conditions on a government's budget, such as limits on the public wage bill. [Development cooperation briefing](#) · [Glossary](#)

The G20

A group of 19 large economies plus the European Union and the African Union, whose leaders meet once a year. South Africa held the chair in 2025, and the United States holds it in 2026. [Development cooperation briefing](#) · [Glossary](#)

The G20 Common Framework

A process agreed by the G20 group of large economies in 2020 to restructure the debts of poor countries. It has been slow: Zambia, Ghana and Ethiopia each waited years. Development cooperation briefing · Glossary