

# Big Change Unlocked

How Theirworld campaigns  
have impacted the lives of  
children across the world





**Right:** Sabari goes to a Blooming Buds early childhood centre supported by Theirworld and run by Indian organisation Jeeva Jyothi.



# **Big Change Unlocked:**

## **How Theirworld campaigns have impacted the lives of children across the world**

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## Who we are

**Theirworld is a global children's charity dedicated to ending the global education crisis and unleashing the potential of future generations.**

For more than two decades our diverse and active network of youth, social entrepreneurs, campaigners, businesses and researchers have worked in more than 140 countries to ensure all young people have the best start in life, a safe place to learn and skills for the future.

We deliver life-changing projects and run powerful campaigns to unlock big change.

Established in 2002 and headquartered in London, United Kingdom – with projects and campaigns reaching more than 100 countries around the globe – Theirworld is a UK-registered charity (1092312).



**Above:** Global Youth Ambassadors with Theirworld President, Justin van Fleet and Theirworld staff at a training event in Amsterdam, Netherlands in February 2024.

**We deliver**

**life-changing projects**

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Theirworld USA is an assumed name of the Global Business Coalition for Education, Inc. (GBC-Education), a registered 501(c)(3) organisation in the United States established in 2012 by Theirworld. Theirworld USA creates awareness, raises financial resources, and takes action to end the education crisis in the US and around the world.

Our supporters have included major foundations and philanthropies – including the Postcode Lottery Group, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, the LEGO Foundation – and our leadership has received numerous awards for their contributions to global education.

# Foreword



**"Theirworld has a mission, a leadership and a strategy that I profoundly trust and truly believe in."**

**The kidnapping of 270 schoolgirls from Chibok in Nigeria captured global headlines in 2014. But while the rest of the world wondered how to respond, Theirworld acted quickly and practically.**

That's when it became clear to me this was an organisation that really knew how to make a difference.

We began working together in the immediate aftermath of the Chibok horror, along with a growing number of attacks on other schools. I was Finance Minister for Nigeria when we were visited by Theirworld Chair Sarah Brown, UN Special Envoy for Global Education Gordon Brown and Theirworld President Justin van Fleet.

They understood that schools in the troubled northern regions of the country had to be made much safer – and quickly. Less than two months after the kidnappings, the Safe Schools Initiative

was launched by a Nigerian coalition working with Theirworld.

It reached more than 500 schools, making them safer through enhanced security and community policing. The initiative also delivered education programmes to displaced people.

The qualities I saw from Theirworld then have shone like a beacon ever since. The ability to combine a big vision with the small details needed to make it work. The skills to bring a diverse set of people and organisations together to focus on a desired outcome.

When children get the best start in life, a quality education and the skills needed to succeed, so many good things happen. To them, their family and their country's economy. Theirworld not only understands this but has the



**Above:** Theirworld has worked with The Creative Kids Zone to give Nigerian students the digital skills they need to succeed. TCKZone was a winner of our Education Innovation Awards.

ideas, determination and connections to make it happen – from community-level initiatives to globally-agreed commitments to invest billions in education.

Theirworld has a mission, a leadership and a strategy that I profoundly trust and truly believe in. It is remarkable how much it has accomplished in a relatively short time – and how it has been able to unlock big change for so many children in so many ways. But there is more to do and Theirworld needs the best partners, the most willing allies and the strongest supporters.

I am proud to count myself as a friend of Theirworld. I urge you to do whatever you can to become the same.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which reads 'Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala'.

**Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala**  
Director-General, World Trade Organization and inaugural winner of the Theirworld Unlock Big Change award.

# Introduction

**Theirworld’s mission is to give every child in the world the best start in life, a safe place to learn and the skills to succeed in the future – no matter where they are.**

It’s a simple vision. But the challenges are enormous – from conflicts and natural disasters disrupting education to poverty and discrimination preventing children going to school – and the scale of the problems can seem overwhelming.

Theirworld was striving to get every child into school even before that target was enshrined in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals in 2015. Over the years, significant progress was made – then the Covid-19 pandemic put paid to those positive trends.

Today more than 250 million children do not go to school. Millions more are in classrooms but do not receive a quality education. Girls continue to lag behind boys and 85 million children are out of school because of humanitarian emergencies.

So how do we fit into that big picture and what are we doing to get progress back on track? From the start, Theirworld was one of the first organisations dedicated to making the case for global education by placing young campaigners at the heart of our activities, alongside a broad change network of stakeholders ranging from business, civil society and international organisations to researchers, policymakers, delivery partners and entrepreneurs. We know what we do well and how to leverage our assets to unlock change.

**Theirworld has helped  
to reshape the global  
mindset on the  
importance of education.**



**Above:** Theirworld’s mission includes giving every child the best start in life. This means early learning for children like these in Tanzania, who we supported through the Tuwaandae Pamoja initiative, a winner of our 2023 Education Innovation Awards.



**Above:** Theirworld visits the Early Childhood Development Centre Matuga in Kenya, 2025.

We spot the opportunities and use expert research and evidence to make the case for change. We run pilot projects to demonstrate how innovative ideas can be scaled up to make a big difference. Then we use our connections and know-how to bring together coalitions of people and organisations to rally behind unified campaigns and solutions that leaders cannot ignore.

That approach has led to several major global education success stories. This report presents six case studies that demonstrate how we have worked with partners and made a real difference in the lives of children across the world.

Theirworld has been around for just over 20 years. In that time, we have helped to reshape the global mindset on the importance of education for every child. There is a long way to go – but every step forward is crucial. Now let's take a deeper dive into some of our success stories.



Sarah Brown  
Co-Founder and  
Chair of Trustees

Justin van Fleet  
President

## 01. Double-shift schools for Syrian refugees

We pioneered a model that allowed Syrian refugee children to be educated in Lebanon's schools, with minimal investment and maximum impact.

## 02. The first education in emergencies fund

In humanitarian crises like conflicts and disasters, education is the first thing to be lost and often the last to be restored. Our campaigning led to the creation of the Education Cannot Wait fund.

## 03. Global financing of education

We campaigned relentlessly for the creation of the International Finance Facility for Education to raise billions for low- and middle-income countries.

## 04. Refugee education in Greece

We worked to improve education in refugee camps on the Greek islands and provided a blueprint for the government and the UN to ensure quality education for every refugee child.

## 05. Early childhood development and learning

We led a global movement called Act For Early Years that has put early childhood development front and centre of the education agenda.

## 06. A global network of youth advocates

Our network of nearly 10,000 past and present Global Youth Ambassadors have played pivotal roles in our campaigns.



## Chapter 1

# Double-shift schools for Syrian refugees

## Challenge

**How do you get hundreds of thousands of refugee children into school when existing classrooms aren't big enough to accommodate them and you can't afford to build new schools?**

That was the problem facing Lebanon after the outbreak of the Syria conflict in 2011. It led to a massive exodus of people seeking safety in neighbouring countries and Lebanon was soon hosting 1.5 million Syrian refugees. Half a million of them were school-aged – but very few were receiving any form of education.

**A child who is out of school for more than a year is 50% more likely never to return to education.**

Theirworld – always quick to spot a problem and ready to find a solution – understood the education of Syrian refugee children was being overlooked by the international community. Donor funding was limited and Lebanon's resources were already stretched.



**Above:** Theirworld visits Taalabaya's school in Bekaa Valley, Lebanon in 2020.

**Opposite page:** Many Syrian refugees lived in informal tented settlements in Lebanon, like these children whose family fled the conflict.

A rapid response was needed to avoid a generation of Syrian refugee children being left behind. We knew the consequences of doing nothing. A child who is out of school for more than a year is 50% more likely never to return to education.

## Solution

**Theirworld funded and commissioned a report in 2013 by renowned education expert Kevin Watkins, then executive director of the Overseas Development Institute. The report proposed the solution of “double-shift” schools in Lebanon.**

The plan was simple but hugely effective. The country’s primary school day typically ended at around 2pm. After that, schools were empty. So, for the rest of the day the classrooms could be used for a second-shift class of mostly refugee children.

Theirworld launched a collaboration with local and global partners – an approach so successful that we have followed it since. We shared the blueprint with development ministers, heads of international agencies and global education funding bodies. Our plan was backed by UN agencies and adopted by the Lebanese Ministry of Education. UNICEF help to build the operational framework, agreeing to provide a vehicle for funding and delivery. We funded a small team at the ministry to oversee the double-shift system and worked closely with the Minister of Education and his staff. As a result, the system was swiftly incorporated into Lebanon’s new education strategy, called Reaching All Children with Education.

At a cost of about \$600 per child per year, the initiative was seen as excellent value when compared to the costs of inaction.



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Reem enjoyed learning at an IT lab in a school in Lebanon, which received laptops from the Thaki Digital Skills project supported by Theirworld.

## Campaign

**Although the Lebanese government and UNICEF were on board, continued international support was needed for the programme and for Syrian refugee education in general.**

**Below:** Syrian refugee Mahdi attended a MyBestStart project supported by Theirworld in Lebanon.



In 2015, Theirworld and partners launched a petition called Hope for Syrian Children, which called on world leaders at the UN General Assembly to provide education to refugees. It gathered thousands of signatures and the international community later promised to give access to education to every Syrian refugee child.

Theirworld engaged in outreach to development ministers through meetings with young people, engagement and briefings with the ministers' teams, and through media and communications tactics.

We have always understood that an ultimate goal may not change but that the tactics might have to along the way. When it became clear world leaders were going back on their word, we launched the #YouPromised campaign in 2017.

The following year, we worked with magician Steven Frayne, previously known by the stage name Dynamo, to increase exposure for the campaign. He visited a refugee camp in Lebanon then passionately told European Commissioners in Brussels what he had seen there. That's just one example of how Theirworld and celebrity supporters have worked well together in our campaigns.



**Above:** Theirworld Chair, Sarah Brown and Steven Frayne (magician also known as Dynamo) at the 2018 Syria UN conference in Brussels.



**We launched the #YouPromised campaign to remind world leaders of their broken promises.**

## Impact

**More than 300,000 displaced Syrian and Palestinian children attended schools in Lebanon through the double-shift system, receiving a formal education that wouldn't have been possible otherwise. By 2018, 350 schools were delivering a second shift each day for students aged six to 14, providing classes in Arabic, French, Maths, Science, Civil Society and Geography.**

Elias Bou Saab, Lebanon's Minister for Education from 2014 to 2016 and a key partner for Theirworld, said: "Theirworld came to our rescue... We felt the double-shift system was the easiest, fastest and cheapest way to put these kids in schools. We made a model for the world to apply in any crisis."

**"We made a model for the world to apply in any crisis."**

**Elias Bou Saab,**  
Former Minister for Education,  
Lebanon

Creating systems and schemes that can be reproduced elsewhere is at the heart of Theirworld's vision of unlocking big change. The success of the double-shift system in Lebanon had considerable knock-on effects:

- Energised by the Lebanon achievement, Theirworld and others campaigned for the creation of Education Cannot Wait, the global fund which has reached more than 11 million children in emergency situations.
- Turkey's Education Ministry also launched a double-shift school system in 2015 to accommodate an influx of Syrian refugee children.
- Following a conference on Syrian refugee education in 2017, the European Union announced an aid package that included €100 million for access to schooling.
- Theirworld has continued to work in Lebanon, collaborating with the education ministry and local partners on several programmes.

**Right:** Singer and campaigner Shakira, with Theirworld Global Youth Ambassadors, delivers the #UpForSchool petition with 10+ million signatures.



## #UpForSchool petition

**Our work on Syrian refugee children was an inspiration for the #UpForSchool campaign. Launched in September 2014, it urged world leaders to keep their Millennium Development Goals pledge to provide a place in primary school for every child.**

The campaign worked with organisations such as Muslim Aid and the Salvation Army, as well as the Angry Birds gaming characters, to spread the word. Social media and digital platforms were vital tools in collecting names online. But one million people in rural Bangladesh physically signed the petition, coordinated by Theirworld partner BRAC, along with more than 100,000 names collected door-to-door in Pakistan.

The final total was a staggering 11 million signatures, making #UpForSchool the largest-ever education petition. In 2015, pop star Shakira delivered the petition to Gordon Brown, UN Special Envoy for Global Education, who then presented it officially to the United Nations.

**The final total was a staggering 11 million signatures, making #UpForSchool the largest ever education petition.**

## Chapter 2

# The first education in emergencies fund



## Challenge

**In the mid-2010s the world faced the biggest refugee crisis since the Second World War. The Syrian war, lingering conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and climate-related catastrophes had displaced millions from their homes.**

UNICEF estimated in 2016 that 75 million children – about a quarter of the world’s school-age children – were out of school or at risk of dropping out because of emergencies.

When humanitarian crises happened, the standard response was to urgently provide food, water, shelter and protection. Education was an afterthought and there was no coordinated global response to mobilise education resources in emergency situations.

Theirworld knew that had to change. Getting children into school quickly after an emergency is vital for their wellbeing and their future. It contributes to peace-building and repairing damaged communities.

Theirworld produced a hard-hitting report which highlighted that in 2015 less than 2% of humanitarian aid went to education – and education assistance reached only 12% of crisis-hit children who needed it.

**In 2015, less than**

**2% of humanitarian**

**aid went to education.**

To make matters worse, middle-income countries like Greece and Turkey that were hosting large numbers of refugees were too wealthy to qualify for typical sources of aid aimed at lower-income countries.

**Below:** Global Youth Ambassador delegates Dima and Amira at the Education Cannot Wait High Level Financing Conference 2023 in Geneva, Switzerland.

**Opposite page:** Students who missed out on school in Nigeria catch up with learning through FastTrack lessons provided by AREAi, supported by Theirworld.



## Solution

**Theirworld knew that tackling these issues was fundamental to our mission to give every child a safe place to learn. Energised by our success with double-shift schools in Lebanon, we were committed to finding a solution.**

We decided it was time for the creation of a separate global fund, specifically designed to address the issue systematically and help children return to school quickly. This would be a key component of our safe learning commitment.

Called Education Cannot Wait, the fund would invest in countries and regions affected by emergencies and protracted crises, including armed conflicts, forced displacement, climate-induced disasters and epidemics.

Education Cannot Wait was designed as a lean organisation to pool funds from established international donors such as Germany, the United States and the United Kingdom.



**Left:** Ukrainian refugees whose families fled the war attend a school lesson in Moldova.



**Above:** Theirworld Senior Advisor on Education in Emergencies, Maysa Jalbout, with Yasmine Sherif, Director of Education Cannot Wait, meet young Ukrainian refugees in Moldova.



**We decided it was time for the creation of a separate global fund, specifically designed to help children return to school quickly.**

## Campaign

**Like the campaign for double-shift schools, the Education Cannot Wait strategy combined political lobbying and public campaigning.**

UN Special Envoy Gordon Brown made the first public call for the establishment of a global emergency education fund at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2015.

Initially, there was little enthusiasm from traditional organisations in the sector, as a new fund could have been perceived as a threat to their existing sources of finance. But having seen examples from climate and health, where specialised funds can lead to upward momentum in funding for an overall sector, Theirworld started to build consensus in the sector.

**Below:** Ban Ki-moon, the then UN Secretary-General, received the #SafeSchools petition at the first World Humanitarian Summit in 2016.



**With more than 250,000 signatures, the petition led directly to the creation of Education Cannot Wait.**

To reinforce the case and address the headwinds within the education community, Theirworld and an alliance of campaigners, youth advocates, education experts and more than 60 charities gathered evidence about the importance of education in emergencies and called for the global fund to be established. We also launched the #SafeSchools campaign.

Theirworld has always used powerful, thought-provoking videos in our campaigns. An early example of this came in 2016 with a virtual reality look at the plight of children in Nepal whose education was disrupted after a massive earthquake.

It's been viewed nearly 900,000 times on YouTube alone. That video was one factor in bringing together the coalition that presented the #SafeSchools petition at the first World Humanitarian Summit in 2016. With more than 250,000 signatures, the petition led directly to the creation of Education Cannot Wait.

The fund made a strong start, with 57 organisations expressing their support and with \$90 million committed by Dubai Cares, the European Commission, Norway, the UK, the US and the Netherlands.

The Global Business Coalition for Education, an initiative of Theirworld, soon announced the mobilisation of \$100 million in contributions to Education Cannot Wait. The business coalition has continued to work with the organisation to utilise the expertise of business leaders and companies in developing new solutions to the challenges of providing education in emergencies.

## Impact

Education Cannot Wait has had a massive impact on the lives of children caught up in crises. As of September 2024, it had reached 11.4 million children and adolescents in 48 crisis-affected countries or regions.

Of those, 26% were refugees and 14% internally displaced persons. It has trained 188,000 teachers and made 289 grants to 70 grantees.

A total of \$2.86 billion has been mobilised – \$1.17 billion for programmes, \$1.65 billion for the Education Cannot Wait trust fund and \$50 million in strategic partner contributions. It is on course to meet its target of mobilising \$4 billion by 2030.

**Right:** Emily Friedman from Theirworld's Global Business Coalition for Education announces a \$50 million pledge at an Education Cannot Wait funding conference in 2023.



## Lives changed

**Mouly loves school. So it's hard to believe that until she was 11, she had never set foot inside a classroom.**

That changed when funding from Education Cannot Wait allowed an innovation reading programme to reach marginalised children in conflict-hit Mali, where more than two million children are out of school. Now Mouly goes to school every day. She says: "I am happy. I am learning lots of new things."

**"I am happy. I am learning lots of new things."**

Mouly, 12, Mali



## Chapter 3

# Global financing of education

## Challenge

In the 1990s, there was encouraging progress around the world when it came to getting children into school and improving their educational levels. But while that was happening, there was a growing problem with education financing.

As poorer countries became a little richer, they lost access to concessional financing from multilateral development banks and donors for areas like education. That meant losing favourable terms such as lower interest rates, longer repayment periods and grants.

Some of the world's most populous countries, from India and Pakistan to Nigeria and Kenya, became caught in the "missing middle" and found that non-concessional financing was unaffordable. And yet lower-middle-income countries are home to more than 1.2 billion children and youth – nearly half of the global total – and 155 million out-of-school children.

On top of the concessional financing issue, aid donors tended to think education had been "taken care of". As a result, the proportion of aid money devoted to education had decreased to 9.7% by 2013. With total international aid for education at only around \$16 billion annually, children the world over were being let down.

**Lower-middle-income countries are home to 1.2 billion children – but many can't afford to fund education.**



**Above:** The Madrasa Early Childhood Programme in Kenya works to create high-quality community-owned preschools in marginalised communities, upskilling early years workers, government officials and parents and delivering home-based play kits.

**Opposite page:** Kidogo, supported by Theirworld, helps female entrepreneurs set up childcare centres in East Africa's low-income communities.

## Solution

Leaders who knew the funding crisis had to be addressed convened a global initiative in 2015 called the Education Commission, with former world leaders and heads of major organisations among its commissioners.

Its goal was to create a way to reform and increase investment in education through strong evidence and analysis while engaging with world leaders, policymakers and researchers.

Chaired by Gordon Brown, the commission produced the groundbreaking 2016 report *The Learning Generation*. It highlighted an urgent and worsening learning and skills crisis that would leave half of the world's children and youth out of school or failing to learn by 2030.

The report called for the creation of the International Financing Facility for Education (IFFEd) as a game-changing and powerful solution to unlock opportunities where they were most needed. IFFEd would work by multiplying the impact of donor dollars so affected countries could make critical investments in quality national education systems and skills.

**IFFEd would multiply the impact of donor dollars so countries could invest in education where it's needed most.**



**Right:** Blooming Buds is a group of early childhood development centres supported by Theirworld and run by Indian organisation Jeeva Jyothi.



## Campaign

**Theirworld’s campaigning for innovative funding and the creation of IFFEd began in 2016. We brought together a coalition of education charities, civil society organisations and education networks to call on world leaders to set up the new fund and make education financing a top priority.**

A letter to G20 leaders was signed by Camfed, Freedom United, Global Education Monitoring Report, International Rescue Committee, Islamic Relief, ONE, Save the Children, Plan International, Right to Play, VSO, World Vision and others.

Individual signatures were also collected for the letter – made possible by some remarkable door-to-door, community-based activism. Theirworld Global Youth Ambassador Kakar Hayat Hamandzai from Pakistan gathered more than 20,000 names on his own from educational institutions, centres and communities. Our partner organisation BRAC, based in Bangladesh, collected an incredible one million signatures by hand.

In 2018, Theirworld Global Youth Ambassadors presented a petition signed by 1.5 million people to the UN Secretary-General calling for the creation of IFFEd. During the UN General Assembly, the idea of IFFEd was backed by world leaders, the business community and international donors. Momentum was then slowed by the Covid-19 pandemic. But in 2021 Theirworld published the Education Finance Playbook, which illustrated how IFFEd would help to fill the global education finance gap, and urged countries to contribute to the facility. Theirworld conducted briefings on the playbook with several donor countries’ aid agencies.

We also seconded individuals to support the team helping to get IFFEd off the ground and provided a team to develop communications assets and build the brand.

IFFEd was finally launched at the UN’s Transforming Education Summit in 2022. After years of campaigning, this was an outstanding outcome for children. Once again, we had a ringing endorsement of our efforts to give children around the world the education and skills they need to succeed.



**Above:** During the UN General Assembly, Theirworld Global Youth Ambassadors present a petition to global donor governments and agencies calling for a new financing facility for education.

**A petition signed by 1.5 million people was delivered to the UN Secretary-General calling for the creation of IFFEd.**

## Impact

**In December 2022, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency provided a loan guarantee of \$200 million to IFFEd. In 2023, the UK's Secretary of State for Foreign Commonwealth and Development Affairs announced a £180 million contribution to the facility.**

In 2023, IFFEd finally became operational as a non-profit foundation based in Geneva, Switzerland. It is expected to catalyse \$1 billion in new financing through the Asian Development Bank and is set to begin financing education and skills projects in the region in 2025-26. By 2025, Canada had also joined and the World Bank announced it was in the process of joining forces with IFFEd, which will unlock the potential for new education finance in dozens more countries globally.



**Above:** UN Secretary-General António Guterres and UN Special Envoy for Global Education Gordon Brown celebrate IFFEd's \$1.5 billion commitment to global education with IFFEd Founding CEO Karthik Krishnan and Theirworld Global Youth Ambassadors Angela Zhong and Adrija Sarkar during the UN Summit of the Future.

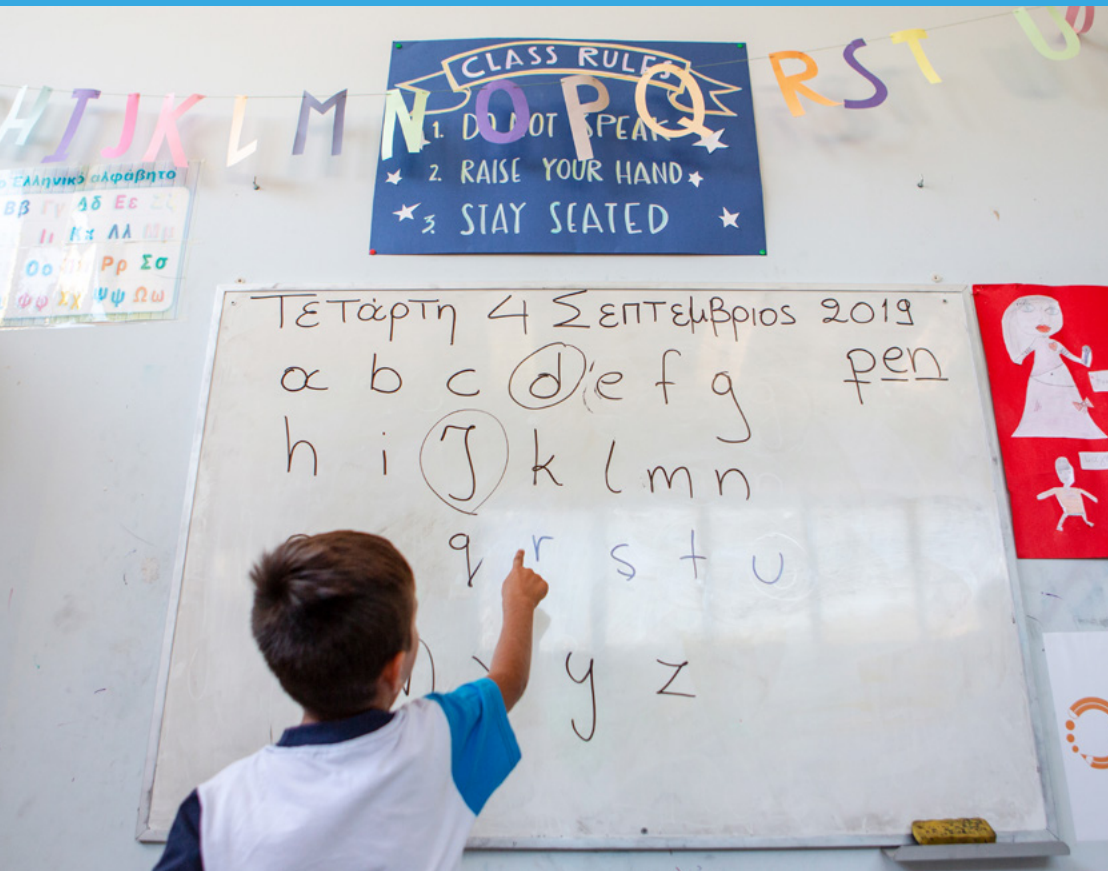
**The World Bank is now joining forces with**

**IFFEd, unlocking the potential for new**

**education finance in dozens more countries.**

## Chapter 4

# Refugee education in Greece



## Challenge

In 2015, Greece was at the centre of the European refugee crisis. More than 850,000 people arrived that year by sea, mainly from the Middle East, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Most made the short but treacherous crossing in small boats from Turkey to the Greek islands in the Aegean Sea.

Camps were set up on islands like Lesvos, Kos and Samos, which quickly became overcrowded. The Moria camp on Lesvos was intended to be a temporary shelter for 2,500 refugees – but by 2019 it was home to nearly 20,000.

Children often

arrived on the islands

having already

missed 12 to 18

months of schooling.

Most refugees wanted to move on from Greece to other European countries. But the overwhelming numbers and a lack of agreement among European Union states about accepting refugees meant



**Above:** A refugee student in a classroom on the Greek islands.

**Opposite page:** Theirworld's blueprint for educating refugee children in Greece was adopted by the Greek government and UNICEF.

thousands of migrants had no option but to stay for months or even years on the islands or mainland Greece.

The Greek authorities provided very little formal or informal education. And traditional donor countries refused to allow funding for education to Greece because it was a member of the European Union, creating barriers for getting initial emergency programming off the ground.

Even by early 2020, the refugee enrolment rate in public schools on the islands was only 6%. Children often arrived on the islands having already missed 12 to 18 months of schooling. Many had pre-existing psychosocial and mental health issues resulting from their exposure to extreme violence, life-threatening experiences, the loss of loved ones and uncertainty about their future.

## Solution

**With children comprising a quarter of the refugees on the islands, Theirworld recognised the urgent need to offer them some education. Working with international and local partners, we launched the first major education intervention on the Greek islands, with an investment of more than \$5 million.**

To circumvent the limited funding from governments for the initial response, Theirworld partnered with the Nationale Postcode Loterij, receiving an extra award at the Goed Geld Gala in Amsterdam. This funding allowed Theirworld to partner with Education Cannot Wait and fully fund its emergency response in Greece through private funding.

To ensure funding is not a “one-off” injection of resources, Theirworld has always aimed to carry out targeted research that can be used quickly and successfully to unlock big change. In 2020, we commissioned leading education expert Maysa Jalbout to write a report titled Finding Solutions to Greece’s Refugee Education Crisis.

**Right:** Oleksandr, pictured with his mother Tetyana, arrived in Greece from Ukraine. He attends a homework and activity centre as part of the All Children in Education programme.

It outlined a blueprint to reform education for refugees, with a three-point action plan for the Greek education ministry to:

- Mobilise €20 million of urgent support for 2020-22 to prevent programmes operated by UNICEF, UNHCR and local NGOs from closing.
- Cultivate international support for a comprehensive refugee education plan across Greece.
- Promote greater investment in refugee host countries to increase resources.

**We launched the  
first major education  
intervention on the  
Greek islands, with an  
investment of more  
than \$5 million.**



## Campaign

**During the migrant crisis in Greece, Turkey and the wider region, Theirworld campaigned tirelessly to reverse the entrenched mindset among the international community, where humanitarian aid for education was usually an afterthought.**

In 2019, our President Justin van Fleet and Chair Sarah Brown visited Lesbos and Kos to highlight our work on the islands and make videos to show to influential audiences at the UN General Assembly.

The campaign also used social media, articles and speeches to make a passionate case on the world stage for continued support for refugee education on the Greek islands and beyond. We delivered the powerful message that refugee children are the doctors, lawyers, scientists and artists of the future. Whether they get the opportunity to fulfil their potential depends on the support they get.

**Refugee children are the  
doctors, lawyers, scientists  
and artists of the future.**

**Right:** Theirworld President Justin van Fleet visits a school in the Greek islands in 2019, ahead of our campaign for refugee education.



# Impact

**Theirworld supported the Tapuat centre near the Moria camp on Lesbos, run by the non-profit organisation ILIAKTIDA, a partner of UNICEF.**

We reconstructed a building to add three more classrooms, a large communal space, a mother and baby corner and a female-friendly space. This gave children a place to learn and play away from the refugee camp and helped women with psychological support, gender-based violence prevention and care, and Greek lessons.

Theirworld’s report led to UNICEF and the Greek government agreeing a plan in 2021 to provide all school-age refugee children with formal and non-formal education over three years. All Children in Education, which received €34 million in funding from the European Union, created 49 homework and creative activity centres throughout Greece. These provided quality, inclusive learning to prepare children aged four to 17 to integrate into the state school system.

**Below:** The All Children in Education programme helped thousands of refugee children into school.



**Left:** Syrian refugee Omer’s mother Zakia at the Schisto refugee site in Greece.

**“The operation of Tapuat, thanks to Theirworld’s generous contribution, is really crucial for us – but mostly for all the children that are eager to visit us.”**

**Sofia Stamateri,**  
Programme Manager, ILIAKTIDA

A grant from Theirworld supported 16 of the centres on the mainland and islands with technical expertise to support the national authorities, teaching and learning materials, and monitoring and evaluation.

By the end of 2023, more than 21,000 children had benefitted from access to formal and/or non-formal education with the support of UNICEF, Theirworld and partners. Our involvement in All Children in Education ended that year, when it was handed over entirely to the Greek government.

The project’s evolution demonstrates Theirworld’s ability to unlock big change and devise a sustainable solution. Having identified the crisis that was unfolding on the Greek islands, we intervened and advanced the project to the stage where the government could take full control.



## Our partners in Greece



“During the first days I could not speak Greek with the children. Now I talk and play with them at school. If it wasn’t for the school and the teachers, I wouldn’t be able to speak like this. Greek is my favourite subject. I want to say thank you.”

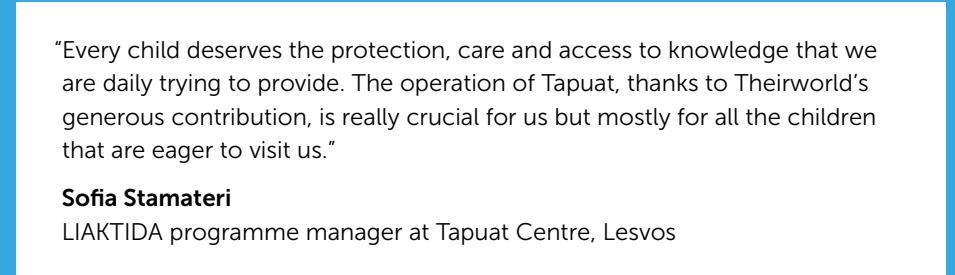
**Omer**

15-year-old refugee from Syria

“The value of investing in a child’s education cannot be calculated. Both for the life and future prospects of that boy or girl but also to the contribution that boy or girl can make to their community.”

**Luciano Calestini**

UNICEF representative in Greece



“Every child deserves the protection, care and access to knowledge that we are daily trying to provide. The operation of Tapuat, thanks to Theirworld’s generous contribution, is really crucial for us but mostly for all the children that are eager to visit us.”

**Sofia Stamateri**

LIAKTIDA programme manager at Tapuat Centre, Lesvos



“We hear the voices of the children, so we do a lot of things that interest them more. It’s the dream of a teacher to have this kind of relationship with the children.”

**Anna-Maria Kantari**

a Greek teacher at a non-formal education centre in Schisto refugee camp



## Chapter 5

# Early childhood development and learning

## Challenge

**The first five years of a child's life is when 90% of brain growth takes place – laying the foundations that will shape the rest of their life. But early childhood is also when inequality sets in. Children who go to preschool are nearly 50% more likely to finish high school, no matter their background.**

Realising that pre-primary education and early childhood development had never been a high priority for international donors, Theirworld began tracking contributions to early education in 2017. We've continued to do so with our donor scorecards every year.

Our research revealed that in 2022, the share of education aid going to the early years reached a "high" of 1.4%. That's far below the widely accepted target of 10% – a goal established after a decade of campaigning by Theirworld – despite the well-proven benefits of investing in young children. Each \$1 invested in early childhood education can yield a return as high as \$17, one of the most powerful ways of breaking cycles of poverty and inequality.

Theirworld knew that what was missing was the political will to commit more funding to the early years and transform the prospects of millions of children around the world. It was time to ramp up the advocacy.



**Above:** Theirworld has supported Škola dokorán, which runs play hubs in Slovakia, Hungary and Poland.

**Opposite page:** The Tuwaandae Pamoja initiative, supported by Theirworld, addresses the problem of limited access to quality early learning and childcare, particularly in underserved communities.

**In 2022, just 1.4% of education aid went to the early years – far below the 10% target.**

## Solution

**We launched a wide-reaching campaign to place the early years at the heart of the global education agenda. We wanted to bring together a diverse international coalition committed to ending the global early years crisis.**

We chose the name Act For Early Years for our campaign because it summed up the need for everyone in the early childhood development and education world to take decisive and innovative action.

Act For Early Years pulled together a coalition of community groups, frontline workers, experts, youth advocates, business leaders, civil society and major global organisations.

The campaign set clear objectives including:

- Mobilise at least \$1 billion in new funding commitments to the early years.
- Stage the first-ever international early years financing summit.
- Ensure the early years become a priority across domestic agendas, regional initiatives and global processes such as the G20.

We were fortunate that the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and Dubai Cares were early supporters of the campaign alongside the Postcode Lotteries, which has helped us to make early investments and attract additional funding partners.



**Above:** Young children, like these at an early childhood development centre in Kenya, need quality care and learning.

**Right:** Tennis legend and Act For Early Years champion Roger Federer with Theirworld Chair, Sarah Brown.

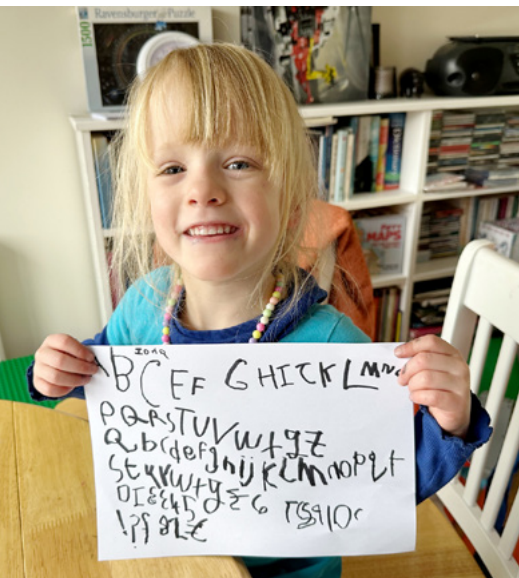


## Campaign

**Building on our track record of unlocking big change, we knew we had to combine research, advocacy and storytelling to make a compelling case.**

We launched the Act For Early Years campaign with a poll of more than 7,000 parents and carers with children of preschool age in the UK, the US, the Netherlands, India, Brazil, Turkey and Nigeria. The findings showed the spiralling cost of nursery and preschool childcare meant children were being deprived of education and care in their most formative years.

Theirworld Chair Sarah Brown was interviewed by major UK television stations and the poll's findings were featured in leading newspapers.



We felt the campaign had to reflect how children might feel about missing out on childcare and education. And so the Global Tantrum was born. Celebrities including Matt Lucas, Jacky Vike, Kimberley Wyatt, Jyoti Chand and Ben Hanlin appeared in videos dressed as toddlers having a tantrum about the state of preschool education. This “campaign within a campaign” was a hit and substantially increased our social media following.

Act For Early Years also needed a distinctive look. Theirworld worked with partners and the brand studio Saboteur to find a powerful way to involve the under-fives in this task. Children in Kenya, Mozambique, Ghana, South Africa and Scotland were asked to write the alphabet and numbers – and the result was a colourful array of characters bursting with life. A special font of childish letters and doodles was created by Saboteur and used in the Act For Early Years report, published in April 2023. We've been using it ever since to great effect.

**Left:** Iona, part of the Theirworld Edinburgh Birth Cohort research project in Scotland, was one of the children who helped us create the Act For Early Years font.

**Right:** Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva with UN Special Envoy for Global Education Gordon Brown and Theirworld team members Christianne Cavaliere and Ben Hewitt.



**Theirworld handed a letter to Brazil's**

**President signed by more than 150 early**

**childhood organisations.**

To back all this up with advocacy on the world stage, Theirworld held an Act For Early Years event at the UN General Assembly in 2023. Hosted in collaboration with the Early Childhood Development Action Network and Sesame Workshop, it featured experts discussing progress on early childhood development and pre-primary education.

Theirworld has also worked relentlessly with national governments – in particular Brazil, which held the presidency of the G20 in 2024. In late 2023, Theirworld met with President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and handed him

a letter signed by more than 150 early childhood organisations from around the world, asking him to place early childhood at the core of the G20 agenda.

In 2025, plans were put in place for an Act For Early Years open letter to President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa, the new G20 chair, supported and delivered by our Global Youth Ambassadors. At the World Bank Spring Meetings in Washington, DC, we pushed for major donor countries and funding agencies to raise \$1 billion in commitments to the early years and pledge to join the financing summit.

## Impact

**Our pre-Act For Early Years efforts paved the way for UNICEF to agree in 2019 to our target of spending 10% of education funding on the early years – and so set a new benchmark for others.**

Then during the first year of the Act For Early Years campaign, the Global Partnership for Education and Education Cannot Wait also committed to the 10% goal. The 10% target was then adopted in 2022 at the World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education in Tashkent, following years of Theirworld's evidence-based campaigning resulting from its annual donor scorecard.

In 2024, the G20 announced the launch of the Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty, with early childhood prioritised. Our advocacy and campaigning helped secure a special session at the G20 Social Summit, which included calls for the first global financing summit for early years and \$1 billion in new funding and commitments.

The campaign is in its early days. But momentum is growing, with national campaigns, regional networks and the broader Act For Early Years advisory group coming together in pursuit of a global summit and a minimum \$1 billion investment in the world's youngest children.



**Momentum is growing**

**for a global summit and**

**\$1 billion investment in the**

**world's youngest children.**



**Left:** An Act For Early Years billboard in Times Square, New York, during the United Nations General Assembly, 2024.

**Above:** Theirworld was at the launch of the Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty during the G20 Social Summit in Brazil in 2024.

## Chapter 6

# A global network of youth advocates



## Challenge

As the crisis in global education deepened early in the 2000s, Theirworld realised the case for education was missing one vital constituency: young people.

Leaders needed to hear from them to learn their perspective, hear their stories and understand their views on what needed to be done.

With 42% of the global population under 25 years old, young people had to be equipped with the tools, information and opportunities to help bring about systemic and lasting change for the next generations.

**42% of the global population is under 25, but their voices were missing from education decision-making.**

**Below:** Global Youth Ambassador Blessing Ahmodu at an Act For Early Years event.

**Opposite page:** Theirworld Global Youth Ambassadors had some fun in New York before the serious business of campaigning during the 2022 United Nations General Assembly.

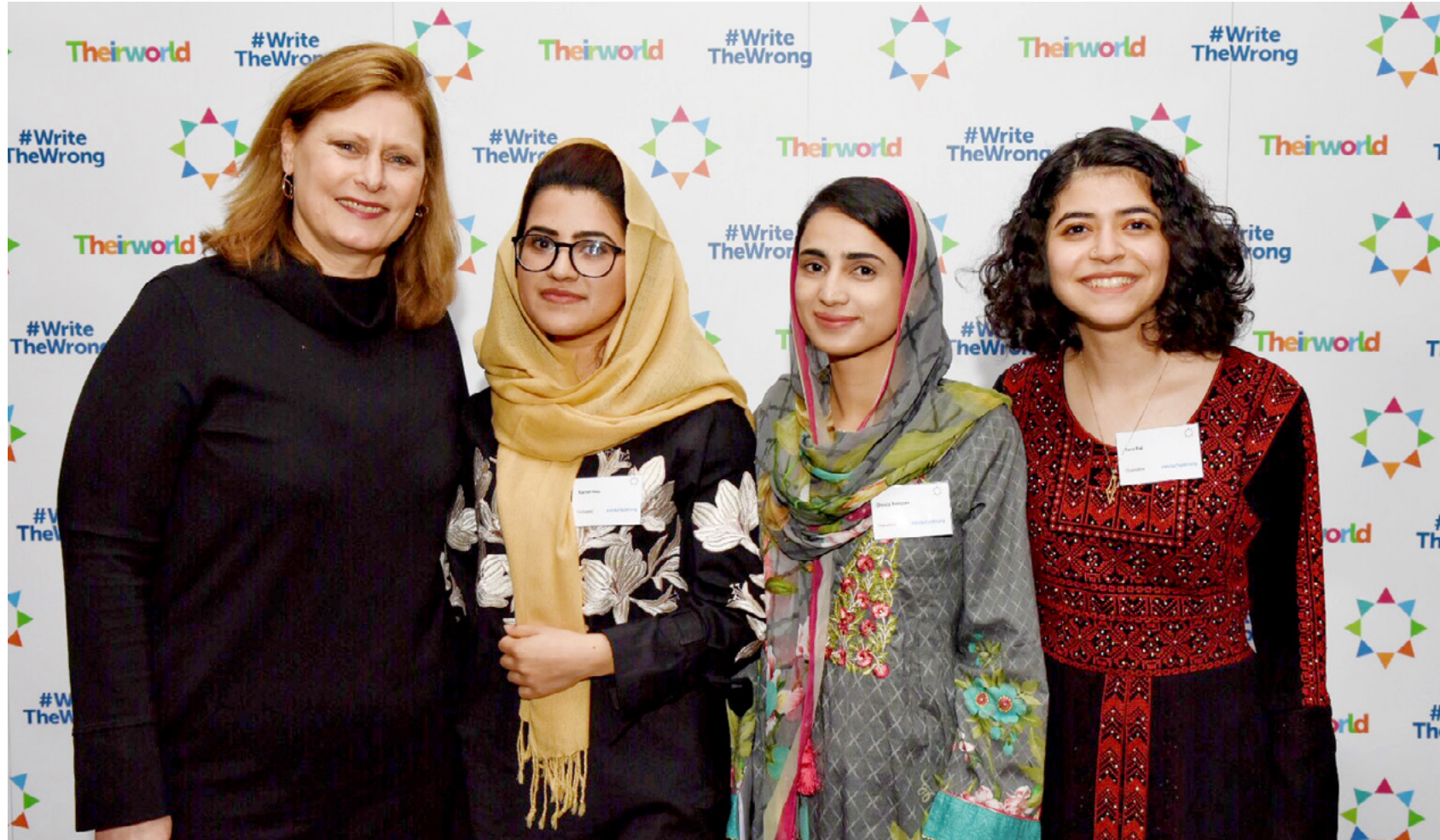


## Solution

**What was needed was a network of young people, trained and guided to help them campaign for education in their communities and beyond.**

In 2014, 500 young people from more than 80 countries were named as Global Youth Ambassadors for A World at School, a Theirworld-led alliance of education organisations. That first group included Shazia Ramzan and Kainat Riaz, school friends of Malala Yousafzai. All three had been shot and injured on their school bus in 2012 in Pakistan.

The Global Youth Ambassador programme then moved fully to Theirworld and became a two-year programme for campaigners and social entrepreneurs aged 18 to 30 who were determined to advocate for the right to education. It is designed to give them the skills, knowledge and community to unlock big change at a local and global level.



**Above:** Theirworld Global Youth Ambassadors headline one of our International Women's Day events. From left: Theirworld Chair, Sarah Brown, Kainat Riaz and Shazia Ramzan, originally from Pakistan, and Yara Eid from Gaza.

### The Global Youth Ambassador

programme gives young people the skills,

knowledge and community to unlock

big change.

## Campaign

The activism of Theirworld's Global Youth Ambassadors has taken many forms, such as writing letters, coordinating petitions, taking part in events at the UN General Assembly and speaking in front of local and national leaders.

Here are some highlights of their involvement in our major campaigns:

- In 2014, 1,000 Pakistani girls including 20 ambassadors took part in a rally to demand that Pakistan take action to deliver education for all. Theirworld has always had a strong focus on gender equality, investing in both young women and men to understand why it is important to lift girls and women up.
- The #UpforSchool petition was launched during the UN General Assembly in 2014 and was led by Global Youth Ambassadors from more than 100 countries. Youth rallies were held across the world to launch the campaign. The petition, with more than 11 million signatures, was delivered to world leaders at the UN in 2015.
- In 2016, Theirworld launched the #SafeSchools campaign to protect children and their schools from attacks or violence. Ambassadors collected signatures, wrote letters to



**Above:** Theirworld Global Youth Ambassador Yuv Sungkur (far right) joins UN Secretary-General António Guterres as part of the Transforming Education Summit Youth Day in 2022.

their governments and asked children to draw what a safe school might look like. The #SafeSchools petition gained more than 250,000 signatures and was delivered at the World Humanitarian Summit 2016.

- In 2019, three ambassadors from Pakistan and Gaza – Shazia Ramzan, Kainat Riaz and Yara Eid – headlined Theirworld's International Women's Day event, focusing on the topic of safe schools and calling on the international community to #WriteTheWrong.

**Global Youth Ambassadors from over 100**

**countries led the #UpForSchool petition**

**– signed by more than 11 million people.**

- An open letter written in 2021 by young people from Africa to President Uhuru Kenyatta of Kenya called for early childhood education to be prioritised.
- During the Transforming Education Pre-Summit in Paris in 2022, four ambassadors spoke on panels regarding education, the early years and climate change. Climate has become even more important as education delivers the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to mitigate climate change at a community level.



Above: Global Youth Ambassadors Yara Eid, Kainat Riaz and Shazia Ramzan at a Theirworld #WriteTheWrong event.

- During the UN General Assembly in 2023, five of Theirworld’s Global Youth Ambassadors took to the stage to spread the message of the Act For Early Years campaign and call for bold investment in early childhood care and education.
- At the 2024 UN General Assembly, seven ambassadors attended as delegates and were involved in meetings with high-level ministers and local and national leaders. Blessing Ahmodu and Lilia Touil attended the African First Ladies dinner and discussed the importance of the early years for young people in Africa.

**At the 2024 UNGA, seven Global Youth Ambassadors were involved in meetings with high-level ministers and local and national leaders.**



Above: Theirworld’s Global Youth Ambassadors have campaigned in their local communities and at high-profile events around the world.

- Global Youth Ambassadors have also organised localised ways of campaigning for early childhood education, with many getting news coverage in their own countries.

**The #SafeSchools petition gained more than 250,000 signatures and was delivered at the World Humanitarian Summit.**

## Impact

**Theirworld's Global Youth Ambassadors have been instrumental in the success of all our campaigns.**

They are powerful champions of the cause of education at local and global level. As programme graduates progress through their working lives, this connected community will continue to make the case for education and apply pressure on leaders to take actions.

The programme now has 2,000 young people from more than 140 countries enrolled in each two-year cycle, with an alumni network approaching 10,000. It is on course to become the largest dedicated youth activist network for education in the world.

**With nearly 10,000 alumni, the Global Youth Ambassador programme is on course to become the largest youth activist network for education in the world.**

**Below:** Global Youth Ambassadors at a Theirworld training workshop in Nairobi, Kenya.



## Global Youth Ambassadors on being part of the programme



“Being at UNGA was more than just a transformative way to empower my activism. It was a unique and powerful experience that I never imagined I would have access to at such a young age.”

**Andressa Dos Reis Ferreira**  
Brazil

“The platform gave me the inspiration and clarity to rights-led activism, especially within early childhood education and advocating for the rights of children in the refugee camp. It is a big honour. It has been nothing short of an amazing experience.”

**Taban Nuai Deng**  
South Sudan



# Conclusion

**We have enabled millions of children**

**to go to school, helped unlock**

**billions in funding for education and awarded**

**more than £1 million in small grants to**

**community initiatives.**

**We are confident we will continue to make a difference. Why?**

**Because Theirworld's influence and reach is still growing.**

Today we support projects and initiatives in more than 140 countries. Our projects have directly supported more than 100,000 children and youth over the past 10 years. We have enabled more than four million children to go to school, helped unlock billions in funding for education and awarded more than £1 million in small grants to community initiatives.



**Theirworld exists to create systemic change for millions of children. That is our mission, that is our story.**

By focusing relentlessly on our core goals – giving children the best start in life, a safe place to learn and skills for the future – we have done it time and time again.

We know that unlocking big change is not something that can be achieved by one person or organisation. It requires working in new and creative ways in partnerships with unlikely stakeholders and not being beholden to government funds.

**Because the case for education is impossible to resist.**

Governments and donors around the world now realise that investing in children is the wisest choice they can make.



**And because of our magic ingredient.**

Our growing force of young campaigners who themselves will grow up to run their own organisations, become leaders in their own countries and drive the momentum for change.

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Thank you to Education Cannot Wait and Laura Taylor for additional pictures used in this report.





**Right:** Theirworld Directors spend time together following a leadership retreat. From left to right, Abdulrahman Alhalawani, Justin van Fleet, Christianne Cavaliere, Konrad Caulkett, Sonya Smith, Mike Burnett, Wen Liao, Darika Ahrens, Emily Friedman, Anna Shakarova, and Dawn Humphreys.



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