

The Global Partnership for Education: CEO Alice Albright on opportunities and challenges

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Alice Albright, CEO of the [Global Partnership for Education \(GPE\)](#), was in Canberra last month to meet with the Australian Government ahead of its upcoming [replenishment conference](#). Ms Albright has a long and distinguished career in finance and development, having worked as a banker, then spending eight years in [GAVI](#) before taking the role of COO of [Exim Bank](#) from 2009 to 2013. While she was in Canberra, Jonathan Pryke sat down with her to talk about GPE, and their mission to Australia. You can listen to the podcast of the interview [here](#), and a full transcript [here](#) [pdf]. For a summary of the conversation, read on ...

We began by talking about GPE's goals and how they aim to achieve them. Alice explained that GPE is unique in that it is the only multilateral partnership focused solely on basic education. Working with 59 low-income countries, they do three things:

1. Help countries to better deliver education by helping them to design and put in place proper education sector plans and policy frameworks.
2. Help finance basic education through grants and by assisting recipients to better align their other resources to improve effectiveness by reducing transaction costs.
3. Provide advocacy at the global and local level for basic education.

We then discussed the rationale behind establishing a global fund (traditionally used to address trans-boundary problems) to deal with a development problem that is purely national in scope. Alice, referring to GAVI and the Global fund -- two organisations she knows well -- explained that:

... in order to understand why [vertical funds] are all structured in different ways, you've got to ask yourself, what's the nature of the problem, and how does that differentiate? And then that should inform why the funds are different.

And "education is different". Alice noted that it improves through the better delivery of a truly local service. It is also a service that is delivered at multiple levels of authority within the state. Unlike organisations such as the Global Fund or GAVI, which can operate in specific parts of the health sector, the GPE must address the entire context of basic education in each partner country. It is because of that context that GPE works

differently to vertical funds:

... we are not just about the money. What we are really about is helping governments put in place a good education sector plan ... which includes good policy, good focus on all the things that are really key drivers, a good way of really getting girls into schools, a good approach on curriculum development, on teacher training, on getting the right answers to the questions about language of instruction, a good approach on how ... you finance it in a way that's sustainable, a good sense of answers about the best way to work with the private sector.

After discussing in more detail how they work with partner governments, and why education is so important for development (see the podcast for more), we moved on to her current trip to Australia. Australia is a major contributor to the GPE, having committed the second largest contribution of \$270 million to their first replenishment in 2011. Considering the aid program's radically different fiscal environment in 2014, we discussed how GPE is making the case for an equally generous contribution this time around. Without giving away too much of their game plan, Alice noted that:

We are very, very committed to the Indo-Pacific area. We think that, in particular, will continue to make GPE a strong partner for this government.

Staying on the topic of finance we discussed their first replenishment in 2011, where they achieved close to \$2 billion in funding, towards the lower end of their \$1.75-\$2.5bn target, and why it was perhaps below expectations at the time. Alice noted:

... the feedback that I was getting early on when I got here was that we needed to try to sharpen up the results track record of GPE. One of the challenges in education is that you don't see results within an 18-month or 2-year period of time. The typical parliamentary, legislative, congressional cycle in the world is 2-ish years. And some endeavours, like GAVI and the Global Fund (particularly GAVI), are able to show results in a short period of time like that, because once you deliver the vaccines, and you know that the vaccine is cold and has been administered properly and all that, you know that the job's done.

In education, it's longer. So we have a particular challenge in education to not let that longer results cycle become a deterrent to supporting it. So we have to be ever more clever about how do we understand that, how ... we communicate that ...

Discussing what was different about GPE in this replenishment, Alice explained that (on top of now working in 59 countries):

[We have] in place our version of a results-based model that we think is well-tailored to the education space. And it takes many of the aspects of results-based finance models and other areas in the aid world and it tries to tailor it to what we think makes sense.

The centrality of education to development outcomes is also not the same. People are really beginning to realize that education is not just one of many services that a government has to deliver alongside a bunch of other ones. It's absolutely core to the efficacy of every other thing that governments need to do, because having an educated population is a night and day difference when thinking about how to best service a population and a society.

So people have come to realize that education is special in terms of the role that it plays in helping build society, build prosperity, eradicate poverty and so forth. And yes, is \$3.5 billion a reach? Of course, it's a reach. But why would we not want to reach?

Moving the conversation to more Pacific-oriented aspects of education, we discussed how civil society, faith-based groups in particular, play a huge role in the delivery of basic education, and how GPE engages with these groups:

Some of the countries we've worked with have done ... a very good job of putting in place a framework around ... where they will support the non-state actor, faith-based schools, provided that they adhere to the government's curriculum over time.

So we are agnostic about that. If governments would like to work with faith-based schools as one of the providers alongside the government, I don't think we have a problem with that.

Alice also stressed throughout the interview that governments are in the driver's seat of GPE's partnership arrangements. We discussed how GPE is able to pair this recipient-driven model -- where a lot of their work comes in the form of building government frameworks and systems -- while maintaining an exclusive focus on basic education. Alice stated that while their grant-based funding is focused solely on basic education, they are happy to provide guidance and support about how to better manage layers into upper areas of education from a policy perspective. By not spreading their funding too thin, and knowing their niche of primary education (which Alice notes is still a huge global challenge), GPE believes it can have the most impact.

Finally, an interview about the GPE in Australia would be remiss without discussion of the recently appointed Chair of their Board, former prime minister Julia Gillard:

She brings great enthusiasm and passion and policy background in education, given that she was the minister of education of Australia beforehand. She's very interested in the subject, and we're very, very happy to have her.

Alice Albright is CEO of the [Global Partnership for Education](#). Jonathan Pryke is a Research Officer at the [Development Policy Centre](#).