2020 UNESCO-KEDI Asia-Pacific Regional Policy Seminar

“Ensuring Inclusion and Equity in Education”

Concept Note

Background

Our shared commitment to inclusion and equity in education, encapsulated in the message “every learner matters and matters equally”, culminated in the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the UN General Assembly in 2015.¹ The interlinked and cross-cutting nature of SDGs aside, SDG 4 specifically calls for concerted effort to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”, shored up with its two associated targets, SDG 4.5 (“By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations”) and 4.a (“Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all”).

In its endeavors to achieve identical ends, UNESCO, on another front, organized the World Conference on Special Needs Education together with the Ministry of Education and Science of Spain in Salamanca, Spain in 1994. The resulting Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education reasserted a rights-based approach to education enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the World Declaration on Education for All and the Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs (1990), contributing to the shift in the framing of inclusive education from children with special needs to children from all backgrounds. Twenty-five years later, in commemoration of the milestone occasion, the International Forum on Inclusion and Equity in Education was held in Cali, Colombia in 2019 by UNESCO, the Ministry of Education of Colombia and the City of Cali, during which all relevant stakeholders reaffirmed their commitment to equitable and inclusive quality education for all learners.²

² For further details, please see the following link: https://en.unesco.org/themes/inclusion-in-education/international-forum-2019.
In support of the 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report “Inclusion and education: All means all” in June 2020, it is worthwhile to look back on what we have accomplished and where we fall critically short. Throughout the world, despite some encouraging progress in school enrollment, such as in Lao PDR where pre-primary enrolment increased from 38% (2011) to 67% (2018), individuals still face the inclusion-exclusion dichotomy across such different dimensions as physical, social, psychological and systematic. For instance, only 14% of the poorest youth in lower-income countries complete upper secondary school while 72% of the richest do, and Grade 4 students who did not speak the language of the test at home were at least 10 percentage points less likely than other students to reach the lowest level of proficiency in reading in nearly half the countries participated in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) assessment.

Classrooms are made up of diverse students, not only in terms of income or language, but also ability. For example, in Asia-Pacific, 80% of children with disabilities attend mainstream schools. However, schools are not necessarily equipped to provide equitable and quality education to these students; no schools in Samoa had infrastructure for students with disabilities, and while among Fiji and Tajikistan, 80% of schools had improved sanitation facilities, less than 5% of those were accessible. In addition to infrastructure, professional development in promoting equity is essential, yet lacking, as across 47 education systems globally, 15% of head teachers (up to 60% in Viet Nam) reported a need for such training. In addition to wealth, language of instruction and disability, disparities by gender and ethnicity (such as women and indigenous people continuing to be represented as introverted or less successful in textbooks), migration background (for example, teachers in China holding negative perceptions of rural migrant students), gender and sexual identity (such as LGBTI students in New Zealand being three times as likely to be bullied), etc. and the intersections between them remain significant barriers to accessing and fully participating in education globally as well as in Asia-Pacific.

Many of these barriers have been highlighted over the past ten months in the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic which has seen over 1.6 billion students experiencing education disruptions. Globally, education ministries have established distance learning initiatives to ensure continuity in learning. However, these measures often rely on available and able teachers and caregivers or require access to technology, leaving many students, especially those who already experienced education disparities, behind. Furthermore, the OECD estimates that the economic effects of this crisis could be devastating, with many predicting it could take years to make up economic losses. As such, it is vital that we understand barriers to education in order to develop inclusive solutions that benefit students today and continue to work for them in the future.
In recognition of the different contexts and challenges facing each country in the Asia-Pacific region, the 2020 UNESCO-KEDI Asia-Pacific Regional Seminar on “Ensuring Inclusion and Equity in Education” will act as a forum for ideas and discussion on next steps to be taken to provide further impetus for inclusive and equitable education. In the short and medium run, findings and policy recommendations emanating from the Seminar are expected to feed back into future regional level assemblages, in particular, the 2nd Asia-Pacific Regional Education Ministerial Conference in 2021. What’s more, participants shall be able to explore possible avenues for enhancing cooperation and alignment between policy, practice and research with a view to producing better outcomes for every learner who is entitled to equitable opportunities to access to, participate in and achieve education.

**Objectives**

The Seminar aims to:
- Take stock of progress made and challenges unmet in inclusive and equitable education in the Asia-Pacific region; and
- Identify policy options and interventions towards inclusive and equitable education in the Asia-Pacific region.

**Expected Outcomes**

The expected outcomes of the Seminar include:
- Enhanced awareness and understanding on achievements and challenges in implementing inclusive and equitable education in the Asia-Pacific region; and
- A summary report of the Seminar and accompanying communications or advocacy materials to highlight promising policy options towards inclusive and equitable education in the Asia-Pacific region.

**Format**

The Seminar is structured as a mixture of presentations and panel discussions. Participants are encouraged to share their perspectives and experiences.

**Participants**

The Seminar will bring together approximately 25-30 key stakeholders responsible for inclusive and equitable education from the following organizations in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond:
- Representatives of the Ministry of Education and other relevant ministries
- Regional/national institutions
- Inter-governmental/non-governmental organizations
- United Nations agencies
- Universities
Dates
The Seminar will be held on 12-13 November 2020 (half day).

Mode
The Seminar will be held online via Zoom. To join the Seminar, please click here: https://zoom.us/j/97908584991?pwd=bXN3NGNtZDJGLORFVzJCUzMwZEH3UT09

Language
English will be the main language of the Seminar.

Organizers
The Seminar will bring together approximately 25-30 key stakeholders responsible for inclusive and equitable education from the following organizations in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond:
• UNESCO Bangkok
• Korean Educational Development Institute (KEDI)

Contact Persons

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