



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Sustainable
Development
Goals

Asia-Pacific Meeting on Education 2030

Target 4.1

By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes



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Providing access to education has been the focus of our past efforts. In 2015, governments and international education communities agreed to step it up by ensuring that children not only enter education, but progress through all stages, complete their education, and acquire the needed basic skills in reading and mathematics. To make sure that our children are successful and responsible citizens, making compulsory and free quality education available is essential. The target reminds us of the criticality of simultaneously ensuring continued expansion of access and participation, and guaranteeing the quality of education. We cannot promote one at the cost of the other.

There are two key expectations enshrined in Target 4.1:

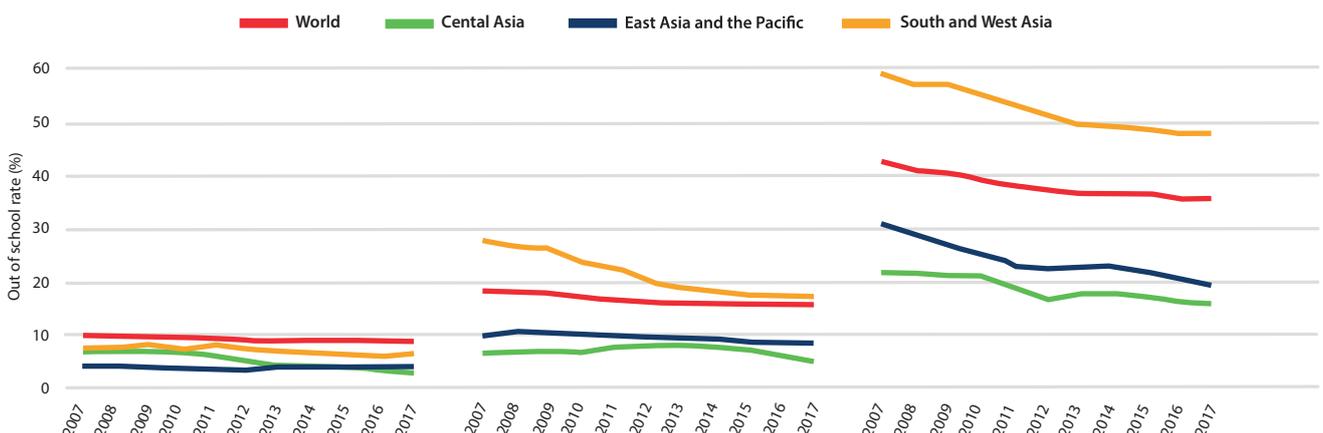
PROVISION: The provision of twelve years of free, publicly funded, inclusive, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education of which at least nine years are compulsory.

LEARNING: Upon completion of the full cycle of primary and secondary education, all children should have established the building blocks of basic literacy and numeracy skills, as well as subject knowledge and cognitive and non-cognitive skills that enable them to develop to their full potential, as defined by and measured against established curricula and official standards.

Situation Analysis

Almost two thirds of the global out-of-school youth live in Asia and the Pacific

Fig. 1: Rate of out-of-school children and youth, 2007 to 2017



At the lower and particularly upper secondary education levels, the rates have dropped sharply. In 50% of the countries included in the analysis, less than 72% of the population aged 3-5 years above the last grade of lower secondary age have completed lower secondary education. Regarding upper secondary level, the situation is even worse. In more than 55% of the countries, less than 50% of their population aged 3-5 years above the last grade of upper secondary education have

completed upper secondary. This clearly indicates that a full cycle of 12 years of basic education remains unobtainable for the majority of both boys and girls in Asia-Pacific. Lacking at least 9 years of compulsory basic education has consequences for the labour market participation as an informed and skilled citizen, because learning outcomes, as will be shown below, tend to manifest only as of lower secondary education and sometimes later.

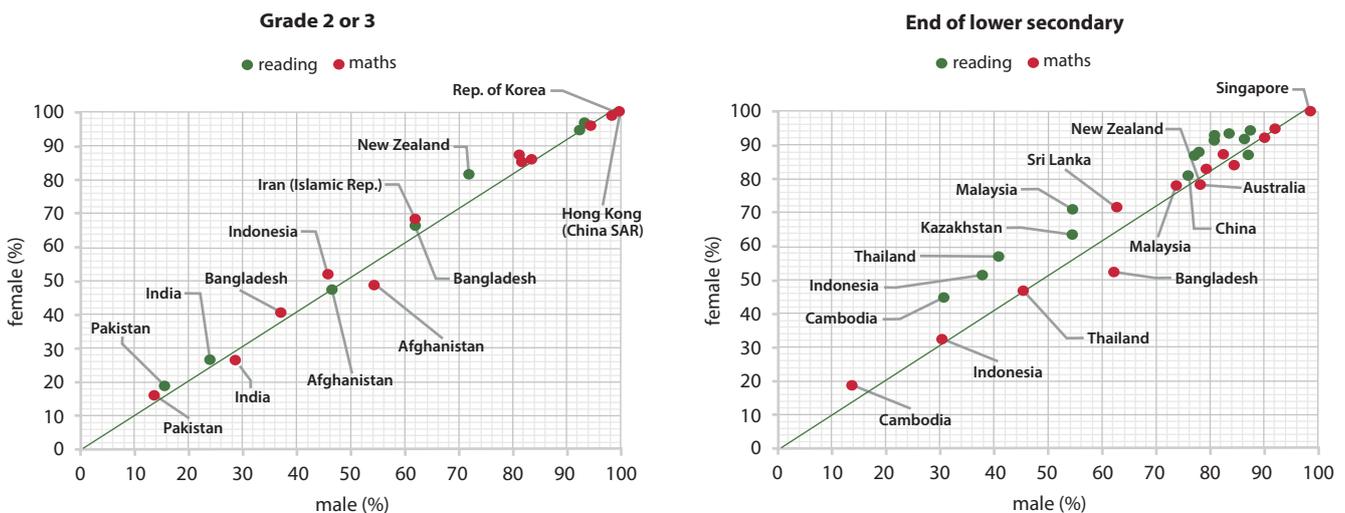
More than half of all pupils are not learning

Progressing through and completing basic education, however, is only one part of the learning equation. More than 617 million children and adolescents worldwide were estimated to not be achieving the minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics. The numbers in Central, South and East and Southeast Asia totalled to 200 million for primary school-age and 119 million for lower secondary school-age children, accounting for 51% and 52% respectively of the global population. Up until 2017, many countries have struggled to equip both girls and boys with the minimum necessary reading and mathematics competencies expected/required at (the end of) Grade 2 or 3 of primary education (Fig.). At the end of lower secondary education, in around 40% of the countries for which data is available, less than 75% of learners have achieved

minimum competencies in reading and mathematics (Fig.). However, almost all countries stray far from equipping all learners with the necessary minimum competencies. Another takeaway is that to a small extent, girls in comparison to boys in Asia-Pacific are better in reading and mathematics at Grade 2 or 3 as well as at the end of lower secondary education.

It is suggested that these numbers are rooted in a lack of access, with children who are out of school having little or no chance to reach a minimum level of proficiency; a failure to retain every child in school and keep them on track; and the issue of education quality and what is happening within the classroom itself.¹

Fig. 4: Completion rate for primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education, by gender, 2017 or latest



Note: Some countries have been tagged for visual orientation only and do not convey any negative judgment.

Major Challenges

Widening disparities in education completion influenced by underlying socio-economic factors of wealth, location or migrant status have shown to be major factors in whether a boy or a girl go through a full cycle of basic education.² Many countries continue to struggle to achieve equity and address the complexity caused by the compounded disadvantages that a learner may be subjected to, such as his or her language, location, migration, disabilities and of course gender. These disparities significantly impact this region, as the above

data shows that more than half of the global children and adolescents who do not achieve minimum proficiency level in reading and mathematics live in Asia and the Pacific.³ Many of these children never attended school or drop out early, while others are in school but do not learn the basics.

This implies that there are significant problems with the **quality of education** provided in the region. In order to ensure children leave school with at least a minimum

¹ UIS, 2017: More Than One-Half of Children and Adolescents Are Not Learning Worldwide, Fact Sheet No. 46. Available at: <https://uis.unesco.org>

² UNESCO, 2018: Paving the Road to Education: A Target-by-target Analysis of SDG 4 for Asia and the Pacific. Bangkok, UNESCO.

³ UIS, 2017: More Than One-Half of Children and Adolescents Are Not Learning Worldwide, Fact Sheet No. 46. Available at: <https://uis.unesco.org>

competency in reading and mathematics, rigorous measures will need to be introduced to increase investments to improve quality and create education that is inclusive, relevant and responsive to the needs of learners.

Investments can be made to improve the **knowledge, skills and development of teachers**. Quality education cannot advance without sufficient, qualified teachers. UIS projected that the world would need to recruit 25.8 million primary teachers to achieve universal primary education by 2030. Forty-two per cent, or close to 11 million, of the total 25.8 million teachers globally will come from the Asia-Pacific region. Providing better opportunities for training and development, feedback and support, appropriate wages and conditions, and career pathways are some of the challenges that countries need to overcome to ensure we have a qualified cadre of professional teachers.

The misalignment or disconnect between curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in many countries, can interfere with both **learning processes and outcomes**. This includes education systems overreliance on textbooks, examinations and tests, which simplify and narrow not only the curricula, but teaching and ultimately learning outcomes. Education

systems often find it difficult to deliver education that balances cognitive and non-cognitive skills, with teachers who are often unqualified or poorly supported, and are under pressure to deliver better test results.

The **lack of data** is hindering planning, management and monitoring of education policies and programmes. Poor quality data due to the lack of understanding and proper coordination among various data producers aggravates the struggle for proper policies and programmes.

Data on learning, particularly comparable data, is scarce among the Asia-Pacific countries. Many countries in the region have national assessment systems for measuring learning outcomes at different levels of schooling. However, such systems are not supported by well-established mechanisms, sound institutional environments, and adequate human, technical and financial resources.

Lack of disaggregated data on students in school and out of school is hindering to support quality planning, management and monitoring processes for better results.

Policy Recommendations

Remove barriers that hinder equity, inclusion and quality at all levels of education. The persistent inequalities in education perpetuate the marginalization of disadvantaged children, such as those in vulnerable situations, with disabilities, living in remote rural areas, from ethnic and/or linguistic minority groups, from the poorest communities, those facing gender discrimination and those on the move. Concrete and effective policy interventions to remove barriers (direct and indirect) to education and to significantly increase equitable access to quality primary and secondary level education are vital. Among these are parental engagement, community participation and sufficient and appropriate infrastructure.

Improve classroom strategies for holistic teaching, learning and evaluation. Addressing quality also requires consistent and persistent attention to pedagogy, language of instruction, curricula, teaching and learning materials, and assessment. Learner-centred, classroom-based initiatives that include holistic development and non-cognitive skills can have a significant impact on learning outcomes.

Expand learning opportunities through non-formal and other flexible learning strategies. Learning opportunities should also be created through non-formal modes by developing accreditation and equivalency programmes for those who have dropped out from the school or cannot attend school for various reasons. However, such programmes should not compromise quality and should be on par with formal education programmes.

Increase and ensure the supply of a motivated, supported, qualified, adequately resourced and empowered teaching force. Teachers play a vital role in preparing our future generation. Rigorous policies with effective strategies and interventions supported by adequate resources must be put in place. They should be provided with up-to-date pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes. They should also have a conducive environment where they can happily engage in teaching learning processes.

Strengthen monitoring of inclusion, equity and quality by ensuring mechanisms are in place and capacity is available. To comprehensively and systematically track progress and address inequalities, high-quality and more disaggregated data based on gender/sex, ethnicity, language, income, disability status, and geographical location must be available to planners, decision makers and stakeholders. Strengthening management information systems and the technical capacity of data users using multiple sources (e.g. administrative, household, etc.) are crucial in ensuring evidenced-based policies. The new agenda also calls for use of diversified data sources to review progress based on agreed framework and processes at different levels (global, regional and national).

Developing new approaches to assessing learning in the region, such as the South-east Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PM), and improving the use of existing measurement tools (e.g. EGRA, EGMA, TIMMS, PISA, etc.) is critical. Equally important is the strengthening of quality national learning assessment systems and improving the use of existing data on learning to inform national policies and planning and to better monitor their progress towards learning achievements.