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POLICY BRIEF

Equity and inclusion in education in Asia Pacific: Building back better and more equal

Introduction

Following the commitment to ensure "inclusive and equitable quality education" and promote "lifelong learning for all" made in 2015 in Goal 4 of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UNESCO, 2015), the Asia-Pacific region made significant progress in terms of both access to, and the quality of, education. However, as the mid-point to the 2030 deadline approaches, millions of learners have failed to learn what they need to reach their fullest potential, producing a "learning crisis" of serious proportions.

This learning crisis, however, does not affect all learners equally. Those affected most include (1) children coming from disadvantaged, marginalised families and communities – those living in poverty and in rural and remote areas and from non-dominant language groups, lower castes, and refugee and migrant families; (2) vulnerable children – girls (and sometimes boys) facing gender barriers, children with developmental delays and disabilities, and those perceived and stigmatised as gender-nonconforming or LGBTI , and (3) children and adolescents who have never been to school or were pushed out of school early. Among these groups, the impact of the pandemic has led to even greater learning loss. Thus, a framework for "building back better and more equal" needs to be at the heart of sustainable post-pandemic education recovery and transformation of the education system. This post-pandemic

Education 2030

framework calls for decisive action to protect the right to education of good quality and for measures – as spelled out below – to improve learning outcomes, especially for marginalized children made more vulnerable because of the pandemic.

Key issues and challenges for equity and inclusion in Asia-Pacific

- **Women and girls' access to education and learning**: COVID-19 has had a devastating effect on women's and girls' access to education and heightened already existing barriers related to sociocultural, economic and financial factors. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 15 million women and girls in East Asia and the Pacific were not enrolled. These numbers are likely to have increased since school closures, and UNESCO estimates that 1.2 million additional girls in the region are at risk of not returning to school (UNESCO and UNICEF, 2021). Further, COVID-19 has exacerbated factors that impact negatively on girls' educational opportunity, such as child marriage and pregnancy, exploitation and abuse, lower economic and financial capacity, and the digital divide.

- **Access to quality and adapted learning for children with developmental delays and disabilities:** Children with developmental delays and disabilities are often difficult to identify because there is no system in place to do so or no early intervention ; as a result, their learning challenges are neglected. Before the pandemic, it was estimated that 50% of children with disabilities did not go to school in the developing countries of Asia-Pacific and this rate reached 90% in some rural areas (UNESCO; UNICEF EAPRO, 2021).   The impact of COVID-19 on such children has been profound, including loss of social interaction and a lack of access to distance learning and support services.

- **Impact of increase in poverty and socio-economic disparities on learning:** The COVID-19 pandemic magnified existing social and economic inequities for those living near or below the poverty line in Asia-Pacific (ADB, 2021). This had a serious effect on both access to education and learning outcomes because of the need for children to contribute to family care and income, their lack of access to technological resources, the disruption of non-academic programmes (e.g., school meals) targeted at children of poor families, limited parental engagement to support their children in their learning, and less family income to cover the costs of schooling (UNICEF, 2021a).

- **Heightened location impact on access and learning:** COVID-19 has exacerbated the impact of a learner's location on education. Those in crowded urban slums may experience greater poverty and face the risk of illness and death in their family (OECD, 2020) – circumstances that increase the likelihood they will not be able to (re-)enrol in school. Learners in rural areas had lower completion rates in primary and secondary education in all regions of Asia-Pacific with the exception of Central Asia (UNESCO; UNICEF EAPRO, 2021). With school closures, those in remote, rural communities have experienced greater learning loss owing to COVID-19 and the lack of digital infrastructure, affordability, knowledge and skills, fewer opportunities for social interaction, and reduced family incomes and school budgets.

- **Limited education opportunities for refugees, migrants and internally displaced populations:** These groups face challenges of particular complexity – no legal status, temporary accommodations, and with limited access to social services.. The impact of COVID-19 on their educational opportunities has included less healthy and less safe living spaces, stigmatisation as possible "carriers" of the virus, limited access to technology, and the challenge of following a national curriculum at home (OECD, 2020).

- **Regression in access to education in mother-tongue**: Language is a strong exclusionary factor in education when the language of the classroom (usually the national, official language) is different from the language used by the learner in the home (UNESCO; UNICEF EAPRO, 2021). The impact of COVID-19 on learners from ethnic/linguistic minorities includes both the loss of school-based exposure to mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB MLE) programmes or to national language programmes, and the replacement of mother tongue materials with online materials in the national language (UNESCO, 2021.).

The negative impact of the pandemic on equity and inclusion is compounded in two ways. First, the pandemic has had serious effects on many other elements of many children's lives, including their physical and mental health, nutrition, and protection. For example, as of March 2022, about 100 million children in the Asia-Pacific region have missed school meals (World Food Programme, n.d.) – a hungry child cannot concentrate on learning (UNESCO, UNICEF, and World Bank, 2021). Second, while each factor of exclusion is harmful in itself, the harm is multiplied when one child experiences them all at once – for example, a girl from a non-dominant language group, living in a remote area, and with a disability.

Key priority areas for equity and inclusion on education in Asia-Pacific

Key priority areas for learning recovery:

In the short-term, children must get back to learning, in school or through any other relevant and appropriate mechanism, and the losses in learning that vulnerable children particularly suffered must be recovered. This will require special measures:

- A first urgent measure is **to re-open schools safely**. This is particularly important for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged learners as evidence shows that their learning has been the most impacted by school closures (UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, 2021).
- Seeking out those at risk of not returning to school because of the various impacts of COVID-19.
- Identifying increased vulnerabilities and assessing learning loss experienced by the most excluded learners;
- Developing alternative education programmes especially for vulnerable and disadvantaged learners who will not or cannot (re-)enrol;
- Developing inclusive learning recovery programmes to mitigate these learning losses and prevent subsequent school failure;

Box 1: Good practice –Pakistan's initiatives to improve girls' access to education and skills training

In Pakistan, with funding from the European Union, UNICEF has supported the Sindh Education and Literacy Department to develop and implement a **robust school monitoring system** to increase teachers' attendance and functional facilities and ensure girls' (re-)enrolment in schools. While social norms discourage girls from going to school, improving the basic facilities and the quality of education in schools can convince parents to send their children to school (UNICEF. 2021b).

Closing the Gap, an initiative by the NGO Acted, supported girls' education by implementing activities such as life skills sessions delivered by female coaches, community mobilisation (including engaging community leaders and men and boys), consultative sessions with parents on child marriage and the importance of girls' education, and awareness-raising around gender-based violence (Girls' Education Challenge, 2021)

Key priority areas for transforming education and its systems:

In the medium and long-term, education systems must be fundamentally transformed – more resilient, more flexible, and "better and equal". Despite what is known about how to build back schools and education systems to be "better and equal", there are many barriers to achieving this goal:

- **Improving EMIS and developing data** documenting the nature and extent of increased inequity and exclusion;
- Adopting legal instruments, innovative financing mechanisms, and funding to improve equity and inclusion;
- Improving the distribution of information communication technologies;
- **Building teacher capacity** to create inclusive classrooms and implement innovative mitigation strategies;
- **Developing assessment tools** able to accurately detect learning loss in general and the potentially greater loss suffered by the most vulnerable learners during the pandemic.

For Ministries of Education, therefore, there is now an opportunity and a challenge – in fact, an imperative – to fix systems and schools that in the past have tended to neglect the most vulnerable and marginalized children and, as duty bearers in fulfilling all children's right to education, to exercise stronger political will and commitment, more innovative thinking, larger investments, and increased collaboration with a wider range of partners.

Policy pointers

Learning recovery	Transforming education and its systems
System-level at centralized/national or sub-national levels	
• Develop learning recovery strategies and programmes to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19, especially for the most vulnerable learners: e.g., more effective drop-out prevention strategies, the greater provision of assistive products/learning materials for learners with disabilities, and expansion of mother tongue-based multilingual education; • Adjust the Ministry's curriculum and instructional time, post-pandemic, in order to promote the (re)mastery of foundational learning, and prioritise learning content to facilitate children re-entering school after a long absence	• Re-orient the Ministry's vision, mission, and mindset towards equity, inclusion, and gender equality • Reinforce the Ministry's commitments to the global targets of SDG 4.5 and to regional declarations such as the Bangkok Statement on Language and Inclusion (UNESCO, 2020) and the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Education for Out-Of-School Children and Youth (ASEAN, 2016); • Adopt and enforce a legal framework (laws, acts, decrees) and affirmative actions towards equity, inclusion, and gender equality (e.g., mandating universal free education (including pre-primary), prohibiting child marriage, and endorsing mother tongue-based multilingual education); • Use of funding mechanisms based on equity indices targeting investment and action for excluded groups; • Develop more inclusion-oriented monitoring and assessment mechanisms and tools: e.g., (1) redesign the Ministry's EMIS to focus on enrolment, the risk of dropping out, and learning loss, post-COVID-19; (2) ensure that data are disaggregated (at least) by age, sex, disability status, wealth, location, language/ethnicity, and refugee/migrant status; (3) develop specific tools to assess the extent and nature of learning loss

	due to the pandemic, especially that suffered by the most vulnerable learners;
	• Re-orient the Ministry's professional development programmes for school leaders and teachers in regard to: (1) equity and inclusion, so that all training teachers understand exclusionary processes and master the more inclusive pedagogies needed post-pandemic (e.g., in hybrid learning, in supporting their students' mental health and psychosocial needs); and (2) assessment and then mitigation of learning loss, especially that of the most vulnerable learners
	• Develop cross-sector strategies and partnerships with other relevant ministries/education stakeholders for promoting inclusive education
	• Harness technology to enhance equity and inclusion while ensuring access to technology for all learners and eliminating the digital divide
	• Promote recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) practices and national qualifications frameworks (NQF) so that learning in all forms (formal, non-formal, and informal settings) is officially recognised

School level

• Train teachers in formative and diagnostic assessment, and catch-up and remediation programmes • Build capacity of – and provide support to – local education offices, supervisors, school leaders, and teachers – in identifying learning loss and in developing approaches to mitigate it	• Develop school-focused regulations and mechanisms so that all schools directly address equity and inclusion • Provide tools for schools to carry out self-assessments and improvement plans focused on equity and inclusion

Learner level

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• Provide opportunities for self-learning; • Set up campaigns to encourage learners to return to education	• Develop flexible, alternative education strategies and programmes to attract children who cannot enrol in or return to formal school; • Allocate a larger proportion of the Ministry's budget for targeted investments for excluded groups; e.g., support for the (re-)enrolment of both girls and

	boys from these groups, and additional special services and resources for children with disabilities; • Target the school's resources on the most vulnerable children to enable them to (re-)enrol in school and make up the learning loss they have experienced: e.g., additional financial support to children from poor families, especially for girls at risk of not returning to school, and the implementation of multi-grade teaching and mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB MLE) where they are most appropriate

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Education is UNESCO's top priority because it is a basic human right and the foundation for peace and sustainable development. UNESCO is the United Nations' specialized agency for education, providing global and regional leadership to drive progress, strengthening the resilience and capacity of national systems to serve all learners. UNESCO also leads efforts to respond to contemporary global challenges through transformative learning, with special focus on gender equality and Africa across all actions.
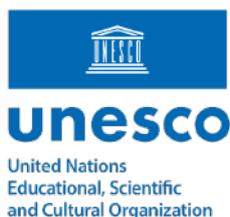
The Global Education 2030 Agenda

UNESCO, as the United Nations' specialized agency for education, is entrusted to lead and coordinate the Education 2030 Agenda, which is part of a global movement to eradicate poverty through 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Education, essential to achieve all of these goals, has its own dedicated Goal 4, which aims to *"ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."* The Education 2030 Framework for Action provides guidance for the implementation of this ambitious goal and commitments.

Stay in touch

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