

# Education in the Southern Caucasus

## Context

### *Impact of the economic crisis*

The Southern Caucasus nations of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia were each affected by the international economic crisis. Declining capital flow, a drop in foreign investments and a reduction in export demands affected these transition nations.

Georgia and Armenia were most affected by the financial crisis, with GDP drops in 2009 of 9 per cent and 16 per cent, respectively (see Figure 1). In Georgia, foreign investments declined by US\$1.5 billion, while national political instability and lingering effects from the 2008 armed conflict with Russia further crippled the nation. The impacts in Armenia of the economic downturn also reached beyond the financial sector. Rising poverty rates and a sharp decline in family spending have left more Armenian children vulnerable to malnutrition. Azerbaijan's limited assimilation into the global market served as a buffer from the international economic crisis. In fact, its GDP continued to increase, but at a lower rate. The largest impact was the declining price of oil, Azerbaijan's largest export.

Beyond the economic ramifications, poverty and unemployment rates in the Southern Caucasus are rising due to the recession. In 2006, 31 per cent of Georgians lived in poverty; by 2009, the poverty rate nearly doubled, to 60 per cent. Neighbouring Armenia and Azerbaijan also have increasing poverty, but rates are much lower, at 28.4 per cent and 11 per cent, respectively. National income inequalities are rising as well. For instance, Azerbaijan had a Gini coefficient of 0.19 in 2005; by 2007, this measure of inequality rose to 0.365. The three nations rank relatively close on the Human Development Index 2010, at 67 (Azerbaijan), 74 (Georgia), and 76 (Armenia), out of 169 countries. But each country has distinct struggles, such as Azerbaijan's large displaced population, Georgia's post-war effects and the animosity between Armenia and its neighbour Turkey.

## Education reforms

The three governments have made notable efforts to improve their national education systems. Highlights of reform efforts in the sub-region include:



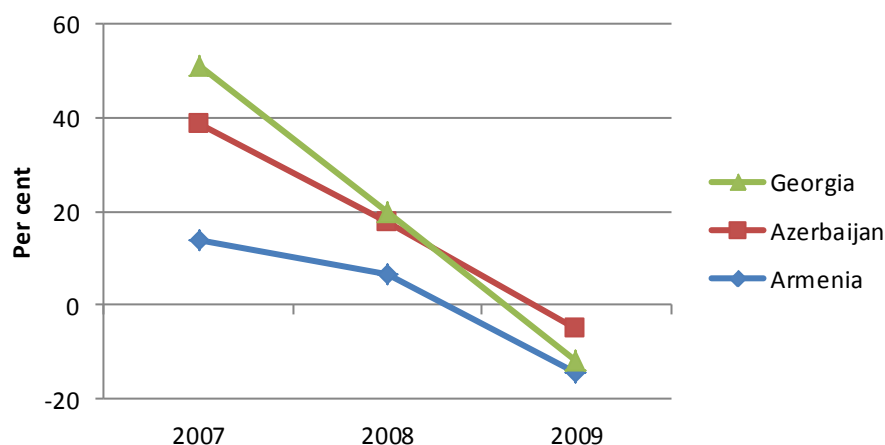
- The prioritizing of education
- Curriculum reforms to improve classroom learning
- Emphasizing the development of preschool education and early childhood learning (Georgia and Armenia)
- Re-examining financial allocations, including per pupil spending schemes (Georgia and Armenia) and increased expenditures in the education sector (Azerbaijan)
- Growing partnerships between governments and non-profit organizations
- A focus on improving the quality of education at the primary and secondary levels

## Access to education

### *Early childhood education*

Pre-primary access to education across the Caucasus remains low. Less than 42 per cent of students in all three nations attend some type of early education centre. Reasons for low preschool enrolment include poor preschool conditions and high school fees. Disaggregating the data by gender, rural/urban and rich/poor reveals greater disparities at this early level. For instance, in Azerbaijan, rural attendance rates for preschool drop as low as 2 per cent.

Figure 1: Real GDP Growth 2007-2009



Girls are overrepresented in pre-primary education across all three nations. Quality and teacher preparation at the centres also varies across the subregion.

All three countries in the Southern Caucasus recognize that pre-primary education improves school readiness for children. Commitments have been made to increase enrolment and the overall quality of teaching in preschools. For example, the Armenian government increased funding and resources for early childhood centres. Georgia, which currently has the highest enrolment rates in the Caucasus, is re-examining preschool teacher qualifications, advocating for inclusive practices and bilingual options and fostering child-friendly classrooms to improve early childhood education. The establishment of a preschool department at Azerbaijan's Ministry of Education illustrates that country's focus on improving preschool education.

Enrolment and access to primary education is high in both Azerbaijan (95 per cent) and Georgia (94 per cent). In Armenia, primary net enrolment rates (NER) are only 85 per cent. Access to secondary education is about equal across the Caucasus, with NERs ranging from 85 per cent in Armenia, to 82 per cent in Georgia. The average enrolment rate for tertiary education in the Caucasus is only 28.3 per cent. While Georgia and Armenia have gross tertiary enrolments of 37 per cent and 34 per cent, respectively, Azerbaijan has a gross tertiary enrolment of only 15 per cent (see Figure 2).

#### *Educational challenges facing adolescents and youth*

Limited employment options, a lack of public confidence in education and increased risky activity are the main challenges affecting the education of adolescents and youth in the Caucasus. Traditionally high unemployment rates have been compounded by the current economic downturn, resulting in greater numbers of youth out of work. The quality of secondary education is also a major concern. Disengagement in class and a lack of confidence about the long-term benefits of staying in school result in high absenteeism and school drop-out rates

across the three nations. High drop-out rates and limited opportunities, in turn, result in increased risk of illegal activity. Vulnerability to HIV/AIDS and trafficking are a concern across the Caucasus. Organized activities to support youth and opportunities for them to participate in communities are emerging, but are still minimal within this subregion.

#### **Equity**

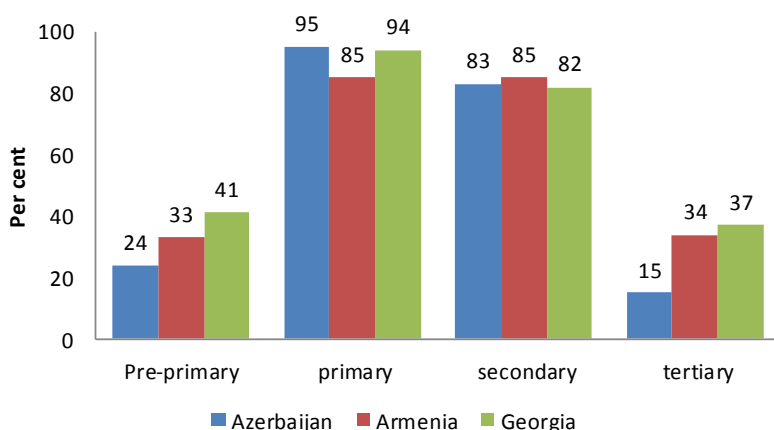
Educational inequities are a concern across the Caucasus. Gender inequalities are evident in all three nations, but are deepest in Georgia and Armenia. Azerbaijan's greatest struggle is to accommodate large numbers of displaced children. Perhaps most concerning in the Caucasus is the gap between rich and poor students, as indicated by national enrolment figures and drop-out rates.

Georgia and Armenia continue to struggle with gender gaps. While gender measures typically reveal problems with girls' access to education, in both Georgia and Armenia, it is boys who are most disadvantaged in the educational system. In Georgia, the Gender Parity Index (GPI) for girls/boys in pre-primary education is 1.13, indicating that boys are less likely to be enrolled than girls. The same finding emerges at the tertiary level, where the GPI (girls/boys) is 1.12. In the case of Armenia, the GPI shows that boys are less likely to enrol or participate from primary school and beyond. Armenia's GPI is 1.04 in primary school, 1.06 in secondary school and 1.20 in tertiary education.

Soviet philosophies that promoted equal access to school for boys and girls continue to dominate in Azerbaijan. The only gap surfaces in tertiary education, where girls are underrepresented, with a GPI of 0.88. But Azerbaijan, which has a long tradition of being a leader in equal access, has new challenges over equity due to the influx of displaced people and refugees. Many refugee children have less educational preparation than Azerbaijani children. Their access is further inhibited by limited mastery of the national language, straining teachers and school resources.

A gap between rich and poor students is evident in all three Southern Caucasus countries. In Georgia, children from the poorest families are 20–30 per cent less likely to enrol in preschool than their peers from families in the highest income quintile. Wealthy Azerbaijani children are 6 per cent more likely to attend primary school and about 1 per cent more likely to complete primary school. The same inequalities are evident in gross enrolment rates in Armenian secondary school. Children from the highest income quintile are 1.3 times more likely to enrol in secondary school than their peers who come from low income quintiles. This trend is similar for drop-out rates as well. Poor Armenian children are more likely to drop out of school than their wealthier peers.

**Figure 2: Enrolment rates in Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia**



### *Children with disabilities*

The current development across the Caucasus is to shift away from boarding schools and institutional placements for children with disabilities. There are growing concerns across the three countries, particularly in Armenia, over the treatment of children at boarding schools. Abuse and violence has led governments to re-examine how best to support children with disabilities. The Azerbaijan and Georgia governments are also promoting deinstitutionalization in response to concerns over the quality of education available to students.

Inclusive education is considered feasible by educational leaders in all three nations. In Azerbaijan, 15 per cent of children with disabilities are currently attending inclusive schools. In Armenia, 13 inclusive schools have already been established and 18 more are shifting to support special learners. In Georgia, early efforts to support preschool children with disabilities are underway, and inclusive childcare centres that support both disabled and mainstream children are emerging nationally.

Social stigmas are a serious issue across the Caucasus, and efforts to reform societal views are critical to the inclusion of all learners. A commitment to addressing this reality is slowly evolving in all three nations. Some support is evident in Azerbaijan by the creation of community centres, which offer sports programmes that include children with disabilities alongside their mainstream peers. However, greater awareness-raising efforts are necessary in all three countries to ensure the acceptance of people with disabilities.

### **Educational quality**

The quality of education available to children across the Caucasus is in need of improvement. A variety of internal and external measures suggest that the quality of instruction and learning in this subregion is subpar when compared to EU nations. Azerbaijan and Armenia both participated in international assessments (PISA and TIMSS). Azerbaijan scored below the national average in comparison to other PISA participating nations. Armenia scored above the average in mathematics, but below average in science on the TIMSS assessment.

Internal assessments confirm the lack of quality education available in schools across all three nations. In Azerbaijan, high completion rates and low performance on measures of learning outcomes indicate that schools lack high standards. In Armenia, deteriorating academic performance, minimal standards in schools and increasing bribery and paying for grades are inhibiting the educational system. The low expenditures on education in Georgia are also a concern. Deteriorating buildings and low teacher salaries are realities in Georgia that influence the education available to students.



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### **Education financing**

Total expenditures on education as a percentage of GDP are similar across the Caucasus. Armenia and Georgia both spend 2.6 per cent of GDP on education, while Azerbaijan spends 2.9 per cent. These expenditures have shifted since 1999, particularly in Azerbaijan, where education expenditures declined by 1.4 per cent.

### **Educational priorities in the Southern Caucasus**

All three countries in the Southern Caucasus are working to improve education while addressing their own unique issues, but there are overarching priorities across the region:

- Increasing pre-primary education enrolment
- Increasing the quality of education at the primary and secondary level
- Advocating for greater access to equal opportunity for children with disabilities and marginalized groups
- Revising secondary education curricula to ensure the acquisition of job-training skills
- Cultivating ways to involve youth and adolescents to positively contribute to their communities and nations by providing greater opportunities to have their voices heard
- Increasing national assessments and data collection to monitor student learning and ensure validity