Key issues in East Asia and the Pacific

Over 7.2 million children – or 4 per cent of all primary school-aged children – are out of school in the East Asia and the Pacific region. While most national primary enrolment rates are high, enrolment rates in the last year of pre-primary education average around 80 per cent, and are as low as 20 per cent in some countries. Regional aggregate enrolment rates also mask inequity that effectively excludes many of the most marginalized children from school, because of their sex, poverty, location, ethnicity, disability, migrant status and/or lack of documentation. The percentages of out-of-school children in the region, particularly at primary level, are increasing despite large investments and policy interventions. Children with disabilities continue to make up the largest proportion of the out-of-school population.

More than 70 million children, or 1 in 3 children, attending school in Eastern and Southeast Asia, and 1 in 5 children in the Pacific Island Countries, do not achieve minimum proficiency in reading and maths. On average, boys lag behind girls in both reading and maths at primary level. Many countries lack rigorous and sustainable systems to assess learning outcomes in core subjects at different levels (early learning, primary, secondary), and established methods to measure other critical learning areas and competencies, such as socio-emotional skills and ‘21st century’ skills. Many schools face significant challenges to delivering high quality education that meets the needs of children, jeopardizing their transition to secondary education and future integration into the labour market. The challenges include teachers with low skill levels and lack of professional support systems, overburdened curricula, poor quality learning environments, inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene facilities, violence in and around schools and excessive workloads. Financial, material and human resources for education are unevenly distributed across countries, often exacerbating inequity and challenges to quality.

Inefficiencies in education governance systems make it difficult for governments to tackle challenges related to school access and learning. Education officials often lack the capacity to conduct solid sector analysis, design and implement sector plans and invest strategically to improve student learning. Overall public expenditure in education has been stable or increasing in the region. However, some countries invest less than the internationally recommended 20 per cent of total government expenditure, and others allocate disproportionately fewer resources to pre-primary and primary education. Limited funds available are often diverted, poorly utilized or wasted before reaching sub-national and school level, often making spending ineffective at reducing inequity and improving learning. Governance inefficiencies add to concern in the region over the growing inequity between rich and poor families due to the rapid expansion of private tutoring inside and outside school systems.

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics
Note: [+] Other national data included in UIS Database; [o] Nationally reported data.

2 Out-of-School Children Country Reports.
3 Household Surveys (see e.g. UNICEF Office of Research Innocenti Working Paper, 2016).
5 UIS. 2016. Country readiness to monitor SDG 4 education targets. Information Paper No. 31
6 As a result, countries often exacerbate existing inequity because more investment in higher education benefits predominantly those from wealthy families.
Driving results for children

In line with the Sustainable Development Goal 4, UNICEF’s programme priorities are to: (1) expand access to and improve the quality of pre-schooling, particularly for disadvantaged children; (2) reach 100 per cent primary school enrolment, attendance, completion and transition through targeted, equity-enhancing interventions; and (3) improve pre-primary and primary school learning outcomes through more inclusive learning environments, better quality teaching-learning processes and strengthened accountability frameworks.

Key programme strategies

Systems and capacity

- Strengthen institutional and human capacity to develop and implement holistic ‘zero exclusion’ strategies and programmes in pre-primary and primary education, including through innovative and targeted approaches to delivering services, and facilitating effective learning, particularly for the most marginalized children.
- Support education sector planning and management processes at national, sub-national and school levels to be more gender-responsive, risk-informed and conflict-sensitive.
- Improve the quality of education management information systems and the capacity to analyse and apply statistics, such as census and household survey data, to inform policy development.

Data, evidence and knowledge

Turn data into action by contributing to the generation, processing, analysis and use of:

- Evidence on out-of-school children, including on how to tackle key barriers.
- Evidence on learning outcomes, including: measuring knowledge, skills and competencies; school and household factors that affect learning; who learns and who does not, and why; and how we can improve learning outcomes.
- Southeast Asia-Primary Learning Metrics, which is the first regional student learning assessment on maths, reading, writing and global citizenship.
- Evidence on emerging and sensitive issues, particularly the expansion of ‘shadow education/private tutoring’ and its impact.
- Good practices and costing in expanding inclusive education for children with disabilities, migrants and undocumented children.

Partnerships and alliances

Promote an inter-sectoral approach to getting out-of-school children into school, by:

- Strengthening existing partnerships between governments, international agencies, research institutions, donors and civil society.
- Mobilizing traditional and non-traditional partners to improve and innovate delivery of pre-primary and primary education.
- Engaging young people as partners in improving access and quality in the early years of education.
- Convening partners to jointly advocate for equity-enhancing education reform.

Governance, policy and budget

- Develop comprehensive national and regional strategies to: promote quality education and learning in the early years; strengthen the quality of transition between early childhood development programmes, preschool and the early years of primary school; create smooth transition from primary to lower secondary education, including foundational and transferable skills for lifelong learning; and improve learning at all levels of education.
- Improve national education policies, strategies and programmes by strengthening sector analysis and planning processes, with explicit attention to learning and equity.
- Advocate for equity-based budgeting and financing in education, including advocacy based on economic argument such as return on investment, per-student allocation and public expenditure reviews.
- Strengthen coordination and collaboration between education and other social sectors to facilitate holistic responses to children’s exclusion from school and learning.

Behavior change

- Make education more inclusive of marginalized children (such as those from migrant and undocumented families, those with disabilities, and those subjected to social, economic or gender discrimination or violence), by raising the awareness of sensitive education issues among the public, teachers, decision-makers and students.

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7 "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."