Key issues in East Asia and the Pacific

Over 27 million adolescents are still out of school in the region. This is 1 in 10 of those who should be in lower secondary education (8.5 million), and almost 1 in 5 adolescents expected to be enrolled in upper secondary education (18.5 million). Despite significant improvements in expanding access to education across the region, key barriers persist, including: lack of services, particularly in remote rural areas; irrelevant content and curriculums; inappropriate teaching practices; and poverty. There is also a need to act against child labour, gender discrimination and harmful practices (such as excluding pregnant girls and young mothers from education, migration, conflict and violence), as well as natural and manmade disasters. These barriers, in addition to adverse cultural norms and practices, impact on educational access, participation and the overall performance of adolescents.

Evidence shows that a significant number who attend school are not learning adequately or acquiring the skills they need to thrive. While data on adolescent learning remains limited in most countries in the region, and does not necessarily go beyond traditional academic subject areas (i.e. not covering ‘21st century skills’), the evidence shows poor results. An estimated 1 in 3 children in Eastern and Southeast Asia, and 1 in 5 children in the Pacific countries – over 70 million children – do not achieve minimum proficiency in reading and math, and thus do not acquire foundational skills. There is growing recognition that the traditional school model alone cannot effectively respond to the needs of today’s adolescents, particularly vulnerable adolescents who tend to be excluded from the current secondary education system. While there are alternative education programmes in several countries, many lack quality, and often do not provide students with recognized accreditation and equivalent access to further education levels. In addition to issues around ‘employability’ and ‘school-to-work transition’, there is a growing consensus that socio-emotional and other 21st century skills need to be further nurtured to allow adolescents to unleash their potential.
Driving results for children

As part of collective efforts to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4,5 UNICEF focuses on enhancing education, learning and skills development. UNICEF prioritizes support to: (1) expanding and diversifying secondary education and learning options and improving their quality, particularly for disadvantaged adolescents; (2) improving learning outcomes and skills development among young people, addressing their diverse, specific needs while empowering them to achieve their full potential; (3) strengthening education systems, including services, finances, data and assessment; (4) promoting equity-focused and cross-sectorial initiatives, together with innovative partnerships; and (5) embracing innovative ideas in terms of delivery modes, service providers, partners and stakeholders, and education and learning pathways.

Key programme strategies

**Systems and capacity**
- Improve the quality, equity and relevance of secondary schools, including curriculum improvement and quality assurance mechanisms.
- Promote alternative and flexible models addressing the needs of excluded adolescents, those out of school and those at risk of dropping out.
- Identify and develop effective models for 21st century learning and the skills of adolescents in formal and informal settings.
- Develop risk-informed approaches and effective responses during emergencies and crises, especially to support adolescents.

**Data, evidence and knowledge**
Gather data and generate evidence on:
- Adolescents still in primary school: improve their learning at primary level, and identify effective support strategies and options for school completion and transition to lower secondary.
- Out-of-school adolescents: identify who they are, how the main exclusionary factors and triggers operate, and what policy options can be implemented to reverse these trends.
- 21st century learning and skills: assess frameworks and best strategies for improving learning, frameworks and policies to develop foundational, socio-emotional, and other transferable 21st century skills and competencies.
- Alternative and inclusive pathways for secondary education services, including for future challenges and jobs: develop evidence on innovative, unconventional, bold and targeted ways to deliver quality secondary education, to adolescents with disabilities, indigenous and minority adolescents, migrants and adolescents on the move. Compile evidence on alternative models of secondary education.

**Partnerships and alliances**
- Engage with cities, the private sector, and non-governmental organizations to explore innovative ways to transform secondary education and learning.

**Governance, policy and budget**
- Promote policies to attract better teachers and school leaders to secondary education.

---

5 “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.”