



KEY ASKS

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SDG 4: EVERY CHILD LEARNS

As the SDGs are interdependent, achieving the education goal (SDG 4) will have transformative effects on other goals. Educating children gives the next generation the tools to fight poverty and prevent disease and build more resilient and peaceful societies. The adoption of SDG 4 was both a recognition of the importance of education and a commitment to achieve more ambitious outcomes in education access, learning outcomes, and skills development. UNICEF’s own goal “Every Child Learns,” is fully aligned with SDG 4 and other education-related targets and seeks to ensure that this applies in all country contexts, including humanitarian crises and development settings, regardless of wealth, location, gender, disability, migration status, language or minority status. For every child to learn, all girls and boys should gain access to and participate in education and education should lead to learning and the development of relevant skills for full participation in society.



KEY ASKS

1. **A demonstration of how the SDG 4 global ambitions are being nationalized into plans, policies, budgets, data collection efforts, and reports.** SDG 4 articulated higher ambitions for governments that often require a review and update to existing sector plans. Updated plans should be context-based and realistic in terms of pace of education system development. “Business as usual” at the national level will not result in progress towards greater ambitions at the global level and will require innovations in education.
2. **A renewed commitment to education to recover learning losses and manage impacts of COVID-19:** The global learning crisis prior to COVID-19 counts over 250 million children out of school and more than half of children in low- and middle-income countries unable to read for meaning. At the peak of the pandemic, it disrupted education for over 1.5 billion learners. To date, over 317 million in 29 countries¹ have not returned to their classrooms. Without remedial action, the learning crisis would turn into a learning catastrophe. According to data from the World Bank, COVID-19 could result in a loss of between 0.3 and 0.9 years of schooling adjusted for quality, bringing down the effective years of basic schooling that students achieve during their lifetime from 7.9 years to between 7.0 and 7.6 years. There is a unique window of opportunity as schools re-open to have a laser focus on addressing learning loss and building literacy and numeracy skills children need. Evidence-based programmes provide lessons for what works – this includes: a) assessing what children know; b) teaching at the right level including in languages children understand; c) parents who prioritize learning and who demand better quality foundational learning from leaders and schools; d) addressing the holistic needs of children and young people.
3. **The implementation and scaling of digital learning solutions and innovations to reimagine education:** Moving forward, we have the opportunity to address the learning crisis by reimagining education. We are presented with a once-in-a-generation opportunity to leapfrog into the future and revolutionize education – ensuring all children and young people develop the skills they need to succeed (foundational, transferable, digital, entrepreneurial and job-specific). A key element of this transformation is harnessing the power of technology and scaling up world-class digital learning solutions to reach all children. Digital learning solutions can be deployed rapidly and at scale in any context, including in low and no tech context to reach every child. Most importantly they can reach the most marginalized including adolescent girls, children on the move, and children with disabilities, with content tailored to their interests, needs and context and in languages they are familiar with as well as formats that are accessible. It is also key to reimagine education for girls and break persistent barriers to leave no girl behind. Addressing the digital divide for girls and investing in STEM skills including digital skills is a key priority to unlock 21st century opportunities for girls. This also means for children affected by conflict, when schools are under attack, children’s education can continue safely at home.

¹ UNESCO: <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse> data retrieved on 3rd December 2020.

4. **Attention to skills development should be a core component to education:** Giving all children and adolescents the skills, competencies, knowledge and values necessary to lead healthy and productive lives from early childhood through basic and secondary education and beyond. This means:
 - Every 5-year-old is developmentally on track and is ready to start school
 - Every 10-year-old can read and do basic math
 - Every 18-year-old has the foundational, transferable, entrepreneurial and job-specific skills they need. Adolescents and young people should have access to opportunities to develop skills for empowerment, learning, employability and active citizenship. This includes support for the transition to work, such as through apprenticeships and internships, as well as skills for the future of work and technology, skills for a green economy and sustainability, and skills that promote leadership, resilience and tolerance among young people.
 - In addition, mental health, wellbeing and social emotional learning are important for all children- particularly children living in humanitarian situations and even more so now for all children impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic

5. **Focus to provide quality education to the most vulnerable – including girls, children affected by conflict and crisis, children with disabilities, refugees and displaced children:** COVID-19 highlights many equity gaps in education that are further deepening, including the alarming gender gaps, as well as digital and connectivity gaps: [Malala Fund's report](#) estimates that 20 million more secondary school-age girls could be out of school after the COVID-19 crisis has passed. More than half of the world's children and young people are on the wrong side of the digital divide, limiting access to the same learning opportunities as their connected peers. [UNICEF data](#) shows that at least for 463 million children, whose schools closed during COVID-19, there was no remote learning. Children from the poorest quintiles and those living in rural areas were most left behind. Globally, three out of four students not reached are from rural areas and/or poor households. The share of students not reached is highest in the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa: at least 48 per cent in West and Central Africa and 49 per cent in Eastern and Southern Africa. There was also limited focus on early years as 40 per cent of countries did not provide remote learning opportunities at the pre-primary level of education.

6. **A continued commitment to improving access to pre-primary, primary and secondary education for all, including for children from minority groups and those with disabilities.** Globally, 258 million children and adolescents are not in school.² To achieve SDG 4, national and local governments must accelerate action plans to close the access gaps and ensure all children are in school, with a focus on marginalized children and children in humanitarian settings. Too often, a child's access to education is predetermined by their geographic location, sex, gender, disability status, economic status, or other criteria. Further, the SDGs and the Habitat III commitments require schools, materials, transport and public places to be made accessible for children with disabilities.

7. **A renewed focus on learning outcomes and their enablers, including learning in safe and adequate environments, supported by well-trained teachers and structured content.** Even for those in school, a combined 617 million students in primary and lower secondary institutions are not achieving the minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics. The number of illiterate adults remains stubbornly high at 774 million. Capacity building to monitor learning outcomes is therefore essential. To support this agenda, there are examples of existing and growing tools include a new Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) module on child foundational learning skills, which assesses reading, comprehension and numeracy competencies of children aged 7-14 years old, both in and out of school. Improved data collection on learning must be met with policy response and coordination that focuses on learning outcomes and their enablers informed by Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principals for truly inclusive education systems. School safety and inclusive infrastructure and facilities must be ensured to create conducive learning environments for all children. A recent [global baseline report on Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene](#) also indicates the need to ensure schools have basic drinking water, sanitation and hygiene services.

8. **The implementation of SDG-focused learning throughout schools to raise awareness and inspire positive action.** Best practices include local and national governments and other school systems formally integrating SDG education in national curricula where students can learn about the importance of the issues articulated in the SDGs and how to think critically about barriers to and solutions for achieving the goals. Through schools, students should also be consulted as stakeholders on SDG plans, progress and reports.



MONITOR - THE IMPORTANCE OF DISAGGREGATED DATA COLLECTION, ANALYSIS AND USE

Achieving the globally agreed [SDG 4 Targets and Indicators](#) will require expanded data collection and disaggregation. SDG 4 is comprised of seven targets and three means of implementation. These are operationalized through a set of 11 global indicators recommended for global monitoring of progress on key targets. In addition, [32 thematic indicators](#) have been identified by a UNESCO-led, UNICEF- supported body of member states, multilateral agencies and civil society called the Technical Cooperation Group (TCG). Thematic indicators are optional and complementary to the global ones, allowing for a more comprehensive picture of SDG 4 achievement. Countries may customize the targets, as well as choose their own indicators to monitor SDG 4,

² 2018 UIS data

including country-specific indicators not part of the 11 global or 32 thematic indicators, but it is recommended wherever possible to align national indicators to the internationally agreed SDG 4 indicators.

Not all of the 11 global SDG 4 indicators (as well as many thematic indicators) have established methodology and/or widespread availability, either at national level or when disaggregated by priority groups such as children with disabilities and ethnic and linguistic minorities. To fill these gaps, Member States are encouraged to:

- **Carry out a data mapping exercise to identify SDG 4 data gaps**, identify existing data sources, identify indicators based on national priorities, sets national targets, and develop data strategy to monitor progress towards SDG 4 goals.
- **Collect and analyze data from different sources** to generate baseline estimates for SDG 4 indicators.
- **Mainstream SDG 4 monitoring within national education sector plans/strategies.**
- **Collaborate with partners to implement new [MICS household survey modules](#)** including early child development, early learning and child functioning (disabilities).
- Improve capacity to **collect and disaggregate data for disadvantaged children** to ensure no child is left behind. For example, UNICEF is improving the coverage and quality of data and statistics on child functioning and disability through its new MICS module and guidance on inclusive EMIS questionnaires.
It will be impossible to deliver education to all without successfully reaching children in locations affected by conflict and natural hazard. Disaggregation of data should include children affected by conflict and reliable data is required to report on attacks on education.



INVEST -- SOCIAL SPENDING AND PROGRESS ON RESULTS FOR CHILDREN, ADOLESCENTS & YOUTH

Research shows that proper resource allocation and financial investments in education yield some of the strongest economic and social returns. Every year of schooling raises an individual's earnings by [10 percent](#). This rate of return is, in fact, higher than alternative [investments](#), including bonds, stocks, deposits, and housing. UNICEF recommends that Member States:

- **Meet agreed education budget quotas and minimum spending thresholds.** As the [GEM Report](#) shows, the international community is not meeting the education financing benchmarks to meet SDG 4 by 2030. One in four countries do not reach the two key targets on public financing of education appear in the Education 2030 Framework for Action, which proposed that governments should be allocating "At least 4 to 6 per cent of GDP to education, and/or at least 15 to 20 per cent of public expenditure to education". To successfully reach children in locations affected by conflict and natural hazard funding needs to be increased, to date less than 4% of humanitarian aid is spent on education.
- **Ensure education is included as an essential sector for COVID-19 response and recovery** in national, global, and regional multisectoral development finance conversations and include a wide range of stakeholders in decision-making to improve education policymaking and build the case for urgent support to education
- **In the context of COVID-19, protect education budgets and target public spending at those left furthest behind.** In the context of COVID-19, governments are facing enormous financial pressures, and these are particularly magnified for low- and middle-income countries. Low and lower-middle income countries could face an annual financing gap of almost \$200 billion over the next 10 years. This is a big jump from the pre-COVID estimate of \$148 billion, and many multiples of current annual ODA allocated to education, which stood at just \$16 billion in 2018. Education has been largely invisible in high-stake decision making on fiscal trade-offs of COVID-19 stimulus packages in many countries, with a mere 0.78% (or US\$ 91 billion) worldwide allocated to the education and training sector. Reductions in public spending on education will be further exacerbated by declines in household spending, often an important component of education spending in low-income countries. As outlined in the [White Paper "Averting an Education Catastrophe for the World's Children"](#), it is important that governments grow public revenues where possible, protect education spending as a critical component in the COVID-19 recovery efforts. It is key to target public resources to prioritize lower levels of education and support the most marginalized across the system. Developing strategies to fully finance education will require improving financial data and public financial management systems and more widely adopting equity financing formulas.
- **Apply the Education Commission's recommendation of "progressive universalism."** Recognizing the scarcity of public funding compared to the needs, the [Education Commission](#) recommends that, when balancing spending across different levels of education, decision-makers should prioritize the poor and early years where social returns are highest, and minimize household spending on basic education by the poor. Credible financing plans to fully finance education following principles of progressive universalism, including adopting equity financing formulas that reflect the needs of the most marginalized children. [UNICEF's 2020 publication](#) on public financing shows that current patterns of public education spending favor the upper levels of education and disfavors the poorest children due to high disparities in terms of access to

primary education and of progress to upper levels of education.

- **Spend more on early childhood, care and education.** Empirical evidence shows that quality pre-primary interventions increase educational success and adult productivity. Yet low-income countries spend an average of less than 2 percent of their education budgets on pre-primary education and lower middle countries only 5 per cent. External financing for pre-primary education is also extremely limited: less than 1 percent of international aid for education is spent on pre-primary. Tackling the learning crisis requires greater investments from governments, donors and partners to quality early learning programmes, especially for the poorest children.
- **Adopt principles of results-based management, with a focus on equity and effectiveness.** Policies that allow for the equitable targeting of resources and improve the efficiency of overall education spending are needed. With limited resources and a long way to go before every child has access to education and learning, it is essential to identify and support country-specific, cost-effective policies and interventions. Given that the learning crisis is compounded by COVID-19, we need strengthened learning assessment systems, particularly for the early grades, and strong accountability structures to improve the way in which investments are transformed into actual learning. The SDGs also provide an opportunity to ensure education sector plans and strategies aim for inclusion of all children into the national systems, regardless of status, and include context-based and evidence-based cross-cutting policies that relate to learning environments and outcomes such as child protection, gender equality, adolescent development, social inclusion, nutrition, health, water sanitation and hygiene and early childhood.



ACTIVATE -- AWARENESS BUILDING & MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN, ADOLESCENTS & YOUTH

- **Actively involve children, adolescents and youth, especially the poorest and most vulnerable, in local and national planning processes in development and humanitarian contexts** through consultation and other participatory means, and as part of ongoing efforts to make children, adolescents and youth aware of these issues, inspire their positive action and expand the space for their participation in accountability mechanisms and activities. This should be part of a continuum to regularly, meaningfully and consistently engage children, adolescents and youth as agents of change to influence behaviors and social norms amongst themselves, their households and their communities. It goes beyond engagement just for the purposes of reporting periods, but rather systematizing the engagement of young people in a variety of ways and across media and communications channels, including for example: digital platforms (including U-Report), participatory theatre, intergenerational community dialogues, community & children's radio, participatory video, school clubs, TV Edu-tainment and child-participatory research.
- **Establish institutionalized mechanisms for promoting participation and implementing recommendations from children, adolescent and youth** by ensuring that there is a responsive audience, dedicated budgets, accountability mechanisms and feedback loops.
- **Provide spaces for children, adolescents and youth to learn about, discuss and take action on the SDGs, including *Quality Education*.** UNICEF can support this effort due to our existing work in this space and creating child-friendly education and entertainment materials through our foundational partnerships on the [World's Largest Lesson](#) and [Comics Uniting Nations](#). [UNICEF's Youth Activate Talk Methodology](#) is also a platform from children to express their ideas on the SDGs through a variety of mediums.