Committee: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Topic: The Question of Promoting Equitable Access to Quality Education Across All Regions

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Introduction

Education is universally acknowledged as a fundamental human right and a cornerstone for individual and societal development. Yet today, millions of individuals, including many of the most marginalised groups, remain invisible in education data at the global and national levels. This encompasses children and adults with disabilities, those displaced by conflict, child soldiers and labourers, as well as nomadic populations. According to the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report, 272 million children and youth remained out of school in 2023, underscoring the persistent gap between educational ideals and reality. These gaps stem from a complex interplay of factors, including restrictive laws and sociocultural norms that bar certain groups, such as girls, refugees, and persons with disabilities, from accessing schooling. In some cases, political instability or historical legacies like colonial exclusionary policies continue to undermine equitable access.

In response to these growing disparities, the global community has increasingly emphasized the significance of equitable—rather than merely equal—access to education. While "equality" implies providing the same resources and opportunities to everyone, "equity" recognizes that individuals face different circumstances and therefore requires tailored support to achieve comparable outcomes. Equity acknowledges the diverse barriers faced by individuals and seeks to provide tailored solutions that ensure fair opportunity for all learners to succeed. This perspective has gained particular urgency following the COVID-19 pandemic, which not only disrupted global learning but also widened pre-existing inequalities. According to UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report (2023), pandemic-related school closures resulted in an average global learning loss equivalent to about seven months of schooling, with losses exceeding nine to twelve months in some low and

lower-middle income countries. These disruptions disproportionately impacted students in rural areas, low-income households, conflict zones, and other under-resourced settings, where remote learning opportunities were scarce or ineffective.

This topic holds critical relevance within the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4: "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all." Ensuring that no one is left behind in education is essential not only for the personal development of individuals but also for the achievement of broader objectives such as gender equality, poverty reduction, peacebuilding, and sustainable development. As such, addressing this issue requires a holistic and internationally coordinated response rooted in legal commitments, financial investment, policy innovation, and community-driven strategies to guarantee that quality education is accessible and meaningful for every learner, regardless of geography or circumstance.

Definition of Key Terms

Equity in Education:

Equity in education refers to a condition in which personal or social circumstances such as gender, ethnic origin, or family background do not hinder one's ability to achieve educational potential and that all individuals reach at least a basic minimum level of skills.

Marginalized Populations:

Marginalized populations are groups systematically excluded from meaningful participation in education and society due to structural discrimination, geographic isolation, poverty, displacement, disability, or minority status. As of 2024, over 250 million children and youth, about one in five are out of school worldwide, with the out-of-school rate in low-income countries being 33%.

Segregation:

Segregation refers to the act or state of separating individuals or groups based on specific characteristics such as race, gender, or ability, often resulting in discrimination and unequal access to educational opportunities.

Digital Divide:

The digital divide refers to the gap between individuals or communities with access to modern information and communication technology and those without, which reinforces existing educational inequalities, particularly in rural or low-income areas.

ICT (Information and Communications Technology) skills:

ICT skills refer to the ability to effectively use digital tools and technologies—such as computers, the internet, and mobile devices—for communication, research, problem-solving, and

content creation, which are essential for full participation in modern education and society. Lack of ICT skills often exacerbates educational inequality, particularly in rural or underserved regions.

Background Information

Colonial Legacy and Educational Inequality

In many former colonies, such as India and Kenya, the education systems established during colonial rule were designed primarily to serve the administrative and economic interests of the colonizers. As a result, formal education was made available only to a narrow elite, usually urban, male, and aligned with colonial linguistic and cultural norms, while rural populations, women, and ethnic minorities were systematically excluded. Even after gaining independence, many post-colonial states inherited and maintained these highly centralized and exclusionary education structures.

For example, under the British colonial education policy in India, 1835 Macaulay's Minute on Education promoted English as the primary medium of instruction while systematically undermining indigenous languages, literature, and knowledge systems. This policy created an English-educated elite trained mainly for clerical and bureaucratic roles, while the vast majority of rural populations were excluded from formal education. Similarly, in Kenya and other parts of East Africa, colonial authorities restricted access to advanced education for Africans, ensuring that only basic literacy and vocational training were available, thus reinforcing economic dependency.

In East Asian contexts, Japan's colonial education policy in Korea (1910–1945) deliberately suppressed Korean language and culture. Korean students were compelled to learn Japanese and were exposed to a curriculum that glorified the Japanese Empire while erasing Korean history and identity. Only a small fraction of Korean students could advance to higher education, and opportunities were heavily skewed toward Japanese settlers. This model of cultural assimilation left long-term scars on national identity and access to equitable education.
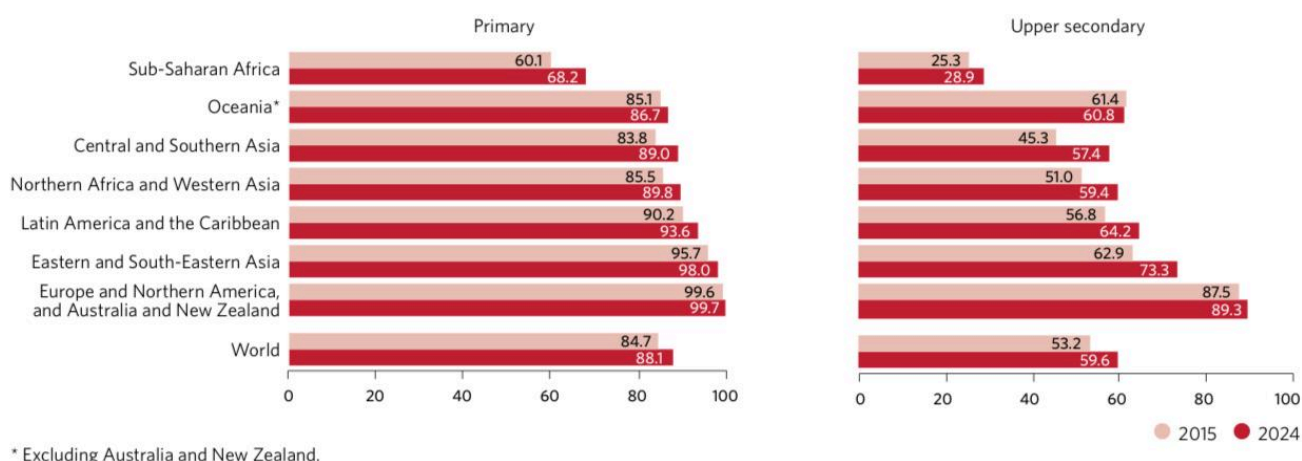
Even after gaining independence, many post-colonial states inherited and maintained these highly centralized and exclusionary structures. A lasting impact of colonial policies is the linguistic barrier: in numerous African and Asian countries, colonial languages (English, French, Portuguese, Japanese) remain dominant in higher education, government, and law. This continues to disadvantage rural, low-income, and indigenous communities who lack access to such linguistic capital.

Furthermore, post-colonial curricula often preserved colonial-era hierarchies and neglected local histories and cultural narratives, perpetuating a sense of alienation among marginalized groups.

As a result, colonial education policies not only shaped structural inequality during the colonial period but also laid the groundwork for persistent urban–rural divides, ethnic exclusion, and linguistic barriers that continue to limit equitable access to education in the present day.

Trends in Global Education Access and Equity

Primary and upper secondary school completion rates, 2015 and 2024 (percentage)

	Primary		Upper secondary	
	2015	2024	2015	2024
Sub-Saharan Africa	60.1	68.2	25.3	28.9
Oceania*	85.1	86.7	61.4	60.8
Central and Southern Asia	83.8	89.0	45.3	57.4
Northern Africa and Western Asia	85.5	89.8	51.0	59.4
Latin America and the Caribbean	90.2	93.6	56.8	64.2
Eastern and South-Eastern Asia	95.7	98.0	62.9	73.3
Europe and Northern America, and Australia and New Zealand	99.6	99.7	87.5	89.3
World	84.7	88.1	53.2	59.6

* Excluding Australia and New Zealand.

The Sustainable Development Goals Report (United Nations, 2025)

Over the past two decades, notable progress has been made in expanding global access to primary education. According to the UNESCO GEM(Global Education Monitoring) Report, the global primary school completion rate increased from approximately 83% in 2000 to over 90% in 2023, largely due to sustained policy efforts and international development initiatives. This trend reflects a growing recognition of education as a universal human right and a priority in national development agendas.

However, this progress has not been evenly distributed across all regions or educational levels. While primary education enrollment has improved globally, disparities in secondary and upper secondary education remain substantial, particularly in low-income and conflict-affected areas. For

instance, in 2023, only 45% of upper secondary-aged adolescents in Sub-Saharan Africa were enrolled in school, compared to over 90% in high-income countries. Similarly, children in rural areas, refugee populations, and ethnic minorities continue to face significant barriers to sustained educational attainment.

These figures demonstrate that while many countries have achieved formal access to basic education, the goal of equitable, inclusive, and meaningful learning opportunities remains unmet for millions. However, this progress has not been evenly distributed across all regions or educational levels. While primary education enrollment has improved globally, disparities in secondary and upper secondary education remain substantial, particularly in low-income and conflict-affected areas. For instance, in 2023, only 45% of upper secondary-aged adolescents in Sub-Saharan Africa were enrolled in school, compared to over 90% in high-income countries. Similarly, children in rural areas, refugee populations, and ethnic minorities continue to face significant barriers to sustained educational attainment.

These figures demonstrate that while many countries have achieved formal access to basic education, the goal of equitable, inclusive, and meaningful learning opportunities remains unmet for millions. Such opportunities extend beyond mere enrollment and include access to qualified teachers, culturally relevant curricula, safe and adequately resourced learning environments, and support systems that ensure students not only attend school but also thrive within it.

Technological Disparities and the Digital Divide:

In the increasingly digitalized global education landscape, the ability to access and effectively use technology has become essential. However, technological disparities remain a significant barrier to equitable education across regions.

According to the ITU(International Telecommunication Union), as of 2023, approximately 2.6 billion people—nearly one-third of the global population—remained offline, the majority residing in developing countries and underserved regions. This technological inaccessibility severely limits students' ability to participate in remote learning, especially during emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic highlighted the severity of this divide: school closures in 2020 disrupted learning for 1.6 billion students worldwide—91% of all learners, according to UNESCO and UNICEF. While wealthier nations were able to transition rapidly to online platforms, many low-income countries lacked the infrastructure to sustain remote learning. In 71 out of 183 countries surveyed by UNICEF, less than half of the population had reliable internet access, leaving millions unable to participate in education. Even alternative methods such as television and radio broadcasts proved uneven; in Chad, for example, television ownership was only 1% in rural households compared to 32% in urban areas. As a result, rural and low-income communities faced disproportionately high non-participation rates during the pandemic, further widening pre-existing inequalities.

In contrast, students in well-connected areas are more likely to continue uninterrupted education and develop essential ICT competencies, which are becoming prerequisites for both higher education and employment. This demonstrates that bridging the digital divide is not only about providing devices or internet access, but about ensuring equal opportunities for all learners to acquire the digital skills necessary for participation in modern education and society.

Innocenti Research Brief from UNICEF(2022)
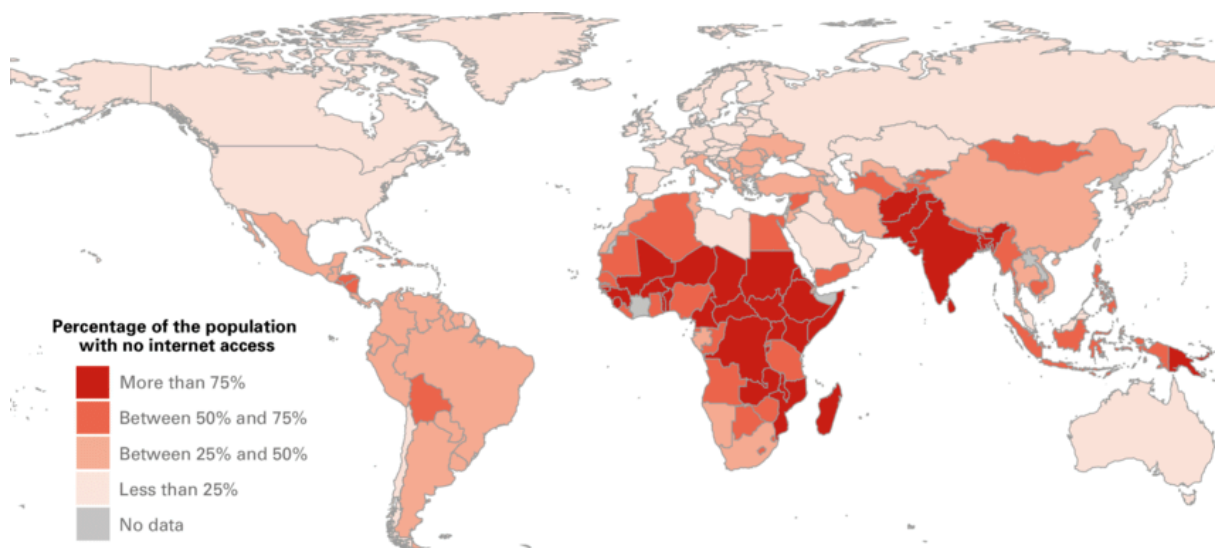
The Digital Divide: percentage of the population with no internet access

Disability and Access to Special Education

People with disabilities represent one of the largest groups systematically excluded from education worldwide. According to UNESCO's GEM Report(2020), children with disabilities are 2.5 times more likely to have never attended school compared to their non-disabled peers. Globally, it is estimated that over 90% of children with disabilities in developing countries do not complete primary education. This exclusion results from a combination of physical and systemic barriers.

One major challenge is the lack of accessible learning materials and assistive devices. For instance, fewer than one in tech books globally is available in accessible formats-including braille, audio-limiting learning opportunities for students with visual impairments. Similarly, sign language interpretation is rarely provided in classrooms, leaving deaf students at a severe disadvantage.

Gender-Based Education Disparities

In several regions, particularly in parts of the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa, deeply embedded sociocultural norms and restrictive laws limit girls' and women's access to education. One of the most striking examples is Afghanistan, where the Taliban government has prohibited girls from attending secondary schools and universities since 2021. According to UNICEF, at least 1.4 million girls have been barred from secondary education, and an estimated 2.5 million girls, representing 80% of school-age girls, are now excluded from schooling altogether.

This policy violates international human rights frameworks, including the CEDAW(Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) and the CRC(Convention on the Rights of the Child). UNESCO has warned that such restrictions could result in generational regression in gender equality and national development.

Similar challenges are present in several participating countries. In South Sudan, widespread early marriage contributes to high dropout rates among girls, with over 50% of girls marrying before the age of 18. In India, rural girls often face cultural expectations to support household responsibilities, resulting in lower school completion rates compared to boys. In Kenya, limited access to menstrual hygiene products has led to significant absenteeism among female students. According to a 2021 report by the Ministry of Education, one in ten girls misses school due to menstruation-related issues, resulting in an estimated 3.5 million lost learning days annually. Unlike boys, whose

attendance is not affected by such barriers, girls face a gender-specific challenge that undermines their academic performance and increases dropout risks, thereby reinforcing gender-based educational disparities. Meanwhile, in Saudi Arabia, although formal restrictions on female education have eased, deeply rooted gender norms continue to limit educational and career choices for women. These examples from diverse regions reflect the systemic and context-specific nature of gender-based educational disparities.

Armed Conflict and Disruption of Education

Armed conflict represents one of the most destructive barriers to equitable education. The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) reported that in 2022 alone, more than 3,000 attacks on schools and universities occurred across 41 countries, with the highest concentration in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. Such violence deprives millions of children of safe learning environments and forces many to abandon their education altogether.

Beyond the destruction of infrastructure, children are directly drawn into conflicts. According to UNICEF, an estimated 250,000 children worldwide are associated with armed forces and groups. Conflict also displaces millions, leaving refugee and internally displaced children without access to formal education. UNHCR estimates that nearly half of refugee children are out of school, with only 22% enrolled in secondary education and just 6% accessing higher education. These gaps create a generational crisis, where young people already traumatized by war are further denied the skills needed for recovery and participation in society.

The long-term consequences are profound. The World Bank warns that children missing years of schooling due to conflict may experience lifetime earnings reductions of up to 40%, perpetuating cycles of poverty and instability.

Urban-Rural Disparities in Educational Quality

Even within the same country, children in rural areas face significant disadvantages compared to their urban counterparts. A prominent example is Vietnam, where national education policies have improved overall access, but rural and ethnic minority students continue to face lower literacy rates

and school completion rates. According to a UNICEF Vietnam report (2021), the percentage of students completing lower secondary school is 21% lower in rural areas compared to urban districts. Key contributing factors include teacher shortages, poor infrastructure, and language barriers for minority populations.

Similar urban–rural divides are evident in other regions. In China, rural students face significantly lower opportunities to pursue upper secondary and higher education; while over 90% of urban youth enroll in upper secondary school, the rate in rural areas remains closer to 70%. Educational inequality is further exacerbated by shortages of qualified teachers and the economic pressures of migration, which leave many rural children as "left-behind" students with limited academic support. In India, the 2022 Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) highlights that only around 65% of rural women are literate, compared to over 80% of their urban counterparts, reflecting persistent gendered and geographic disparities. These comparative cases demonstrate that urban–rural educational inequalities are not confined to a single nation but represent a global structural challenge.

Underfunding of Public Education

Globally, there is a pronounced disparity between high-income and low-income countries in the proportion of national budgets allocated to public education. According to the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report 2023, while high-income countries invest on average between 5.5% to 6.2% of their GDP in education, nearly 40% of low-income nations allocate less than 4%, with some investing as low as 2%. This falls short of UNESCO's recommended benchmark of at least 4% to 6% of total public expenditure on education, indicating that a significant number of low-income countries are failing to meet internationally agreed spending targets and risk perpetuating cycles of educational inequity. This divergence reflects not only differences in economic capacity but also in political prioritization and long-term strategic planning.

Low-income countries often cite competing development priorities—such as healthcare, defense, or infrastructure—as justification for lower education funding. While these needs are valid, chronic underfunding in education leads to the systematic denial of a basic human right: the right to free and quality education, as recognized by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 26) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 28).

In practical terms, insufficient education budgets in low-income nations result in overcrowded classrooms, a lack of qualified teachers, inadequate school facilities, gender inequality, and the exclusion of children with disabilities or from rural/indigenous communities. This underinvestment further entrenches cycles of poverty and undermines national economic resilience. For instance, in sub-Saharan Africa, countries that spend less than 3% of their GDP on education tend to have adult literacy rates below 60%, and school dropout rates exceeding 40% in rural areas.

Most critically, when states fail to meet even the minimum international spending thresholds, they are not only failing their youth but violating global commitments under Sustainable Development Goal 4, which emphasizes inclusive, equitable, and lifelong learning opportunities for all. The issue is not merely one of economic disparity, but one of moral and legal obligation.

Adult engagement in education

Organized learning encompasses both formal education and non-formal programmes, such as adult literacy and work-based training. In 2024, globally, one in six individuals aged 15-64 had recently participated in education or training programmes; however, participation was mainly among youth. Worldwide, over half of the young people aged 15-24 engage in learning activities, with rates ranging from 45 percent in sub-Saharan Africa to 64 percent in Europe and North America. In contrast, participation drops sharply among older adults; for ages 25-54 and 55-64 years, only 3 and 1 percent of adults, respectively, engaged in learning.

This low level of adult participation can be attributed to several factors. According to UNESCO's Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE 5), low adult participation rates are driven by a combination of structural, social, and institutional barriers. Lack of awareness of available learning opportunities is one of the most common issues, particularly among low-income or rural populations. Many adults also perceive limited personal or professional benefit from additional education, especially when formal credentials are not awarded. Financial constraints, including course fees and the opportunity cost of lost wages, deter participation, especially in countries where adult learning is not publicly funded. Furthermore, inflexible program formats, such as rigid class schedules or in-person-only delivery, fail to accommodate the time demands of working adults or caregivers. Finally, in many regions, insufficient policy support and a lack of adult-oriented infrastructure, such as

learning centers, counseling services, or accessible platforms, limit sustained engagement in lifelong learning.

These findings emphasize that increasing adult participation requires more than expanding program availability; it calls for a comprehensive approach that addresses informational, economic, institutional, and motivational barriers across age groups.

Economic and Social Impacts of Educational Inequality

Educational inequality is not only a human rights issue but also a driver of broader economic and social disparities. Studies by the World Bank(2022) estimate that countries lose up to $2-3 trillion annually due to poor access to quality education, as unequal education limits the development of skilled labor forces. Individuals who are excluded from schooling face significantly lower lifetime earnings: UNESCO notes that each additional year of schooling increases a person's income by an average of 10%, while communities with high dropout rates remain trapped in cycles of poverty.

From a macroeconomic perspective, educational gaps reduce national productivity and innovation. Countries with unequal access to secondary and higher education often struggle to diversify their economies, relying instead on low-skilled labor and extractive industries. For example, in Sub-Saharan Africa, where secondary education enrollment remains under 50%, per-capita GDP growth is consistently lower than in regions with higher educational attainment.

The social consequences of educational inequality are equally profound. Lack of access to schooling contributes to intergenerational poverty, child labor, early marriage, and political instability. Societies where large groups are excluded from education experience greater social polarization, weaker civic participation, and higher vulnerability to conflict. For instance, UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report highlights that young people without education are more likely to be unemployed, marginalized, or recruited into extremist movements.

In contrast, when access to education becomes more equitable, the benefits extend beyond individual achievement. Broader participation in schooling allows economies to cultivate a more

diverse and innovative workforce, while societies gain stronger civic institutions that are better equipped to address shared challenges. This in turn nurtures values such as gender equality, public health, and sustainable development, not as isolated outcomes but as interconnected elements of a more resilient and cohesive social order. Education therefore, operates simultaneously as a pathway for personal advancement and as the foundation of collective prosperity and long-term stability.

Health and Well-being of Students

Health and well-being are critical determinants of educational access, attendance, and academic performance. Poor physical and mental health can significantly reduce students' ability to engage meaningfully in learning. In many low- and middle-income countries, malnutrition remains a major obstacle: according to UNICEF (2023), an estimated 148 million children under five suffer from stunting, which not only undermines physical development but also impairs cognitive capacity and school performance. School feeding programs in countries such as Ghana and Brazil have shown measurable improvements in attendance and literacy outcomes, highlighting the strong link between nutrition and educational achievement.

In addition to physical health, access to basic healthcare services such as vaccinations, regular check-ups, and menstrual hygiene support also plays a vital role. In regions with weak healthcare infrastructure, children often miss school due to preventable illnesses. For example, the WHO notes that parasitic infections like intestinal worms cause millions of lost school days annually in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Similarly, inadequate menstrual hygiene management remains a gender-specific barrier, with girls in countries like Kenya missing up to four school days each month, which cumulatively affects academic performance and increases dropout risks.

Mental health represents an equally pressing challenge. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a global mental health crisis among youth, with UNESCO (2022) reporting that school closures and isolation led to sharp increases in anxiety, depression, and disengagement from learning. In conflict-affected regions, the psychological toll of violence and displacement often leaves children traumatized, reducing their ability to concentrate or even attend school. Refugee students, in particular, face compounded risks: not only are they more likely to suffer from trauma, but they also experience systemic barriers in accessing psychosocial support services in host countries.

Ultimately, ensuring equitable education requires recognizing that learning cannot occur in isolation from students' well-being. Health and education are deeply interconnected: investments in nutrition programs, school-based health services, and mental health support are essential to guarantee that all students can reach their full academic potential.

Possible Solutions

To accelerate SDGs' Goal 4, countries must prioritize inclusive policies and financing that simultaneously address access, learning, and equity. This includes scaling up quality early childhood education, enforcing legal guarantees for free and compulsory education, closing digital and infrastructure gaps - especially in LEDCs - and expanding lifelong learning opportunities for adults and marginalized populations.

Addressing Colonial Legacies and Structural Inequalities

International organizations and national governments should invest in curriculum reform that acknowledges local languages, cultures, and histories, thereby counteracting colonial-era educational models that marginalized indigenous knowledge. UNESCO can also promote South–South cooperation, enabling formerly colonized countries to share best practices in decolonizing education.

Expanding Inclusive Education for People with Disabilities

In order to solve the issue of lack of accessible learning materials for people with disability, promising success stories that demonstrate how inclusive education policies can overcome these barriers. In Rwanda, a national inclusive education policy has expanded teacher training on special needs and provided braille textbooks, leading to higher enrollment rates for visually impaired students. Similarly, in Vietnam, pilot projects funded by UNESCO have integrated digital tools and community-based support to improve access for children with hearing and mobility impairments.

These examples show that ensuring access to education for children with disabilities is not only a matter of equity but also a critical test of whether societies can uphold the principle of "education for all." Addressing disability-related barriers requires investment in inclusive infrastructure, teacher training, and the scaling up of assistive technologies so that all learners, regardless of ability, can fully participate in education. At the same time, partnerships with private technology companies can accelerate the development and distribution of affordable devices.

Solutions for Digital Divide

Increasing and improving technological infrastructure is an important way to decrease the digital divide. Having quality infrastructure is critical because it provides communities with the necessary physical and technological foundations they need to provide residents with access to the internet. When infrastructure is expanded, students can gain access to digital resources.

For example, expanding broadband access in rural regions can be done through federal initiatives that create sustainable solutions through grants and other federal programs. Private sector initiatives can also help improve the infrastructure around broadband access.

Improving inclusivity is another crucial component of closing the digital divide in education. Access for marginalized groups. This can be done through federal funding that helps to advance critical ways to boost inclusivity by creating or amending government policies to prioritize digital equitable solutions.

Economic and social impacts of inequality

To mitigate the economic and social consequences of educational inequality, Member States should integrate targeted monitoring mechanisms that track both access and outcomes across different social groups. This entails not only expanding financial investment in education but also establishing national equity indicators-such as enrollment, and learning outcomes disaggregated by such problems mentioned above. International organizations like UNESCO and the World Bank can provide technical assistance to develop standardized measurement frameworks, enabling countries to assess whether reforms are effectively narrowing disparities. In addition, governments should invest in labor-market-aligned curricula and vocational training programs to ensure that education directly contributes to national productivity and social mobility. Public-private partnerships can further support the creation of inclusive job pathways for marginalized populations, reducing intergenerational cycles of poverty. By embedding continuous monitoring and accountability into

policy implementation, the international community can ensure that progress toward equitable education translates into tangible economic growth and strengthened social cohesion.

Marginalized populations

Addressing the educational exclusion of marginalized populations requires multi-dimensional and context-specific strategies. First, governments should enact and enforce legal frameworks guaranteeing the right to education regardless of status or background, including the removal of discriminatory policies that restrict access for minorities or displaced groups. Second, investment in community-based and alternative schooling is critical: mobile classrooms, local-language instruction, and teacher training tailored for multicultural contexts can significantly expand access in remote or unstable areas. Economic interventions are also vital: scholarship schemes, conditional cash transfers, and school-feeding programs can offset financial barriers that disproportionately affect marginalized households. By adopting these measures, states can directly empower marginalized populations and ensure that global education efforts are not limited to the majority but reach those most at risk of being left behind.

Gender-based disparities

Addressing gender-based disparities in education requires tackling not only the symptoms visible in schools but also the deeper societal roots of inequality. Fundamentally, a broad shift in attitudes toward gender equality is necessary before sustainable progress in the education sector can be achieved. Governments, civil society, and international organizations must therefore prioritize awareness campaigns and community engagement that challenge discriminatory norms, such as early marriage or the perception that girls should prioritize domestic work over education.

Building on this foundation, Member States should enforce international human rights frameworks, such as CEDAW and the CRC, by ensuring that girls are not excluded from secondary and higher education due to discriminatory laws or practices. Teacher training programs should also promote gender-sensitive pedagogy, fostering inclusive classrooms where both boys and girls can thrive. Finally, monitoring systems must collect and analyze gender-disaggregated data to evaluate whether interventions are effectively narrowing the gap. By combining root-level social change with

concrete educational reforms, the international community can move toward eliminating systemic gender inequalities in education.

Armed conflict and disruption of education

Education during conflict is often treated as secondary to humanitarian relief, yet its absence fuels cycles of violence and instability. Ensuring access to learning in these contexts must be seen as a peacebuilding measure as much as an educational goal. One possible step is for Member States to endorse and implement the Safe Schools Declaration, which commits governments to preventing the military use of schools and to protecting educational facilities from deliberate attack. Strengthening international humanitarian law enforcement and establishing accountability for violations against education are critical first steps toward safeguarding children's rights.

At the same time, emergency education systems must be strengthened. Establishing temporary learning spaces, mobile schools, and accelerated learning programs can ensure continuity of learning for displaced or conflict-affected children. International organizations such as UNESCO and UNICEF should coordinate with local authorities to integrate these efforts into broader humanitarian responses and ensure that funding for education is prioritized alongside food and shelter.

By treating education not as an afterthought but as a cornerstone of both humanitarian relief and long-term stability, the international community can ensure that children in conflict zones are given the opportunity not only to survive but to build a future beyond war.

Expanding Adult and Lifelong Learning Opportunities

Expanding adult and lifelong learning opportunities is essential for ensuring that education systems remain inclusive across all stages of life. Too often, policy frameworks prioritize children and youth without access to meaningful educational pathways. To address this gap, national authorities are encouraged to strengthen emergency education systems by establishing temporary learning spaces and mobile schools. Participating countries could also expand mobile schooling initiatives to ensure

continuity of learning. The international community has a role to play in supporting these efforts through coordinated funding and expertise.

In addition, online and blended learning platforms offer cost-effective ways to reach adults who cannot attend formal institutions. Governments could consider subsidizing digital literacy programs and providing affordable devices to reduce barriers for older learners, especially in rural or underserved regions. Employers also have a critical role to play: workplace-based training and incentives for continuous professional development can help embed lifelong learning into economic systems.

Finally, it is recommended that national education policies integrate adult education targets into broader development strategies, with monitoring mechanisms to track participation and outcomes disaggregated by age, gender, and socioeconomic background. By expanding opportunities for adults to learn and reskill, societies can not only improve individual livelihoods but also strengthen economic resilience, civic engagement, and social cohesion across generations.

Major parties involved

United States of America

The USA has long been one of the largest bilateral donors to global education initiatives, channeling funding through USAID's *Education Strategy* and partnerships with UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank. U.S. programs emphasize improving literacy, expanding girls' education, and supporting education in conflict-affected states such as Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Yemen. The USA also plays a leading role in promoting digital learning, having invested in technology-based solutions and teacher training in low-income countries. However, critics argue that U.S. assistance often aligns with geopolitical priorities, which may limit long-term sustainability in recipient countries.

France

France maintains a strong commitment to education as part of its foreign policy, particularly in francophone Africa. Through the French Development Agency (AFD) and contributions to UNESCO, France provides both financial support and technical expertise for education reform, teacher training, and curriculum development. The country also champions multilingual education, promoting both French and local languages to expand literacy. France was among the first states to ratify CADE and continues to advocate for education as a human right in international forums. Nonetheless, some critics note that its emphasis on the French language can reproduce linguistic hierarchies in post-colonial contexts.

South Korea

As a nation that rapidly transformed from an aid recipient to a major donor, South Korea actively supports education in developing countries through the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) and the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). South Korea prioritizes sharing its own development experience, focusing on ICT-based education, vocational training, and capacity-building for teachers. The government has also hosted high-level forums on digital learning and the future of education, positioning itself as a leader in bridging the digital divide. However, its initiatives have sometimes been criticized for focusing more on technology transfer than on adapting solutions to local cultural and social contexts.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan represents one of the most severe cases of gender-based educational exclusion in the world. Since the Taliban regained control in 2021, girls have been prohibited from attending secondary schools and universities, leaving over 1.4 million girls without access to education. This policy directly violates international human rights treaties such as CEDAW and the CRC, and has drawn widespread condemnation from UNESCO, UNICEF, and the broader international community. Despite ongoing humanitarian aid, Afghanistan's education system remains heavily dependent on foreign assistance, with donor countries funding primary education and literacy programs. The international community views Afghanistan as a critical test case for defending the universality of the right to education, but political instability and restrictive governance pose significant barriers to meaningful reform.

Ethiopia

Ethiopia faces multifaceted educational challenges, ranging from urban–rural disparities to conflict-driven school closures. The civil war in Tigray (2020–2022) displaced millions of children and destroyed hundreds of schools, exacerbating already low national enrollment rates. Rural areas, particularly in pastoralist and minority communities, experience chronic teacher shortages and limited infrastructure, resulting in literacy rates far below national averages. Although Ethiopia has adopted ambitious policies under its Education Sector Development Program (ESDP), implementation is hampered by budgetary constraints and political instability. International donors and NGOs remain heavily involved in rebuilding infrastructure and providing emergency education services, but long-term equitable access remains uncertain.

India

India, home to the world's largest school-age population, has made significant progress in expanding access to primary education through initiatives such as the Right to Education Act (2009) and nationwide programs like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. However, deep inequalities persist. Rural girls, particularly from low-income and marginalized caste communities, face high dropout rates due to

early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and limited access to secondary schools. According to the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER, 2022), rural female literacy remains significantly lower than that of their urban counterparts, highlighting the gendered and geographic divides. India's challenge lies not only in providing access but also in improving the quality of instruction, reducing absenteeism, and closing gaps in digital access. The country is therefore a key actor in debates on how to align large-scale policy with equitable outcomes.

China

China has made significant progress in expanding access to education, achieving near-universal primary enrollment and investing heavily in higher education and STEM fields. Its top universities now rank among the world's best, reflecting its ambition to become a global leader in innovation. Nevertheless, stark domestic disparities persist: urban high school enrollment exceeds 90%, while rural regions remain closer to 70%, and over 60 million "left-behind children" face limited academic support due to parental migration.

Internationally, China is emerging as a major actor in education development through South–South cooperation and the Belt and Road Initiative, funding schools, teacher training, and digital platforms abroad. While these initiatives help bridge the digital divide in partner states, critics note that they often align with China's geopolitical interests, and concerns remain about academic freedom and political influence within its own education system.

Ukraine

The ongoing war in Ukraine has caused severe disruption to education, with thousands of schools damaged or destroyed since the 2022 Russian invasion. Millions of children have been displaced internally or across borders, forcing governments and NGOs to establish temporary learning spaces and digital education platforms to ensure continuity. Ukraine's case highlights how conflict in a relatively high-income country can still devastate educational systems and widen inequality, particularly for displaced and rural populations. International partners, including UNESCO, UNICEF, and the EU, have provided substantial financial and technical support. However, sustained reconstruction and the reintegration of displaced learners remain long-term challenges.

Syria

More than a decade of civil war has left Syria's education sector in crisis. According to UN reports, over one-third of schools have been destroyed, damaged, or repurposed for military use, and millions of children remain out of school. Refugee flows into neighboring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan have created additional pressure on regional education systems, with only a fraction of Syrian refugee youth accessing secondary or higher education. While international aid programs have established non-formal learning centers and remedial classes, persistent insecurity and underfunding severely limit their reach. Syria exemplifies how protracted conflict not only disrupts education in the short term but also risks creating a "lost generation" with long-term social and economic consequences.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has made notable progress in expanding access to education, including for women, particularly under recent modernization efforts such as *Vision 2030*. Female enrollment in secondary and higher education has increased significantly, and women now represent more than half of university students nationwide. However, gender-based disparities remain deeply embedded. Traditional norms continue to restrict women's educational and career pathways, with fields such as science and engineering still dominated by men. Moreover, while formal legal restrictions on female education have eased, cultural expectations and limited workplace opportunities mean that educational gains do not always translate into equal professional outcomes. Saudi Arabia therefore represents both progress and limitation: while reforms signal a shift toward greater gender inclusion, systemic social and cultural barriers continue to reinforce inequality.

Timeline Of Events

Date	Description of Event
Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948	The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted, recognizing education as a fundamental human right under Article 26.
Convention Against Discrimination in Education, 1960	UNESCO adopts the *Convention Against Discrimination in Education (CADE)*, establishing legally binding obligations for states to eliminate discrimination in education.
World Conference on Education for All, 1990	Held in Jomtien, Thailand, where 155 countries committed to universal primary education and literacy.
Dakar Framework for Action, 2000	Governments and NGOs have set six global education goals and mobilized international support for achieving them by 2015.
Sustainable Development Goals, 2015	The United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with *Goal 4* focusing on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all.
COVID-19 Global School Closures, 2020	COVID-19 triggers unprecedented global school closures, affecting 1.6 billion learners and exposing the digital divide in education. UNESCO launches the *Global Education Coalition* to coordinate emergency responses.
Transforming Education Summit, 2022	The UN convenes the *Transforming Education Summit* in New York, focusing on post-pandemic learning recovery and long-term equity reforms.

UN Involvement, Resolutions, Treaties and Events

- The 1960 Convention Against Discrimination in Education (CADE)

Adopted by UNESCO, this legally binding treaty obligates signatory states to eliminate discrimination in education based on race, gender, language, religion, or economic status. It also mandates equal opportunity in access, quality, and treatment in education. Following CADE, several states, including many in Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa, adopted anti-discrimination laws in education. However, weak enforcement and lack of monitoring mechanisms limited its impact, and many marginalized groups remain excluded even today.

- The World Conference on Education for All(1990, Jomtien, Thailand)

Organized by UNESCO in collaboration with UNICEF, UNDP, and the World Bank, the World Conference on Education for All (EFA) held in Jomtien, Thailand, marked a turning point in global education policy. The conference brought together representatives from 155 countries and over 150 organizations, resulting in the adoption of the World Declaration on Education for All and the Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs. This event was driven by growing international concern over widespread educational exclusion and illiteracy, particularly in developing nations.

- The Global Education Coalition (2020-present)

Launched in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, this coalition brings together over 175 partners to support distance learning, reduce digital divides, and reach marginalized learners during crises. While the coalition has facilitated partnerships that delivered online and radio-based education in dozens of countries, its impact has been limited in regions without basic internet or electricity infrastructure.

- The Transforming Education Summit (2022, New York) is convened by the UN Secretary-General, this summit emphasized "learning recovery" after the pandemic and launched global commitments to reduce inequality and transform educational systems. It provided a high-level political platform, with over 130 countries pledging reforms.

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