



HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Background note¹

Sustainable Development Goal 4 and interlinkages with other SDGs

1. Introduction

The theme of the 2022 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) is “Building back better from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”. The 2022 HLPF will have an in-depth review of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): 4 on Quality Education, 5 on Gender Equality, 14 on Life Below Water, 15 on Life on Land, and 17 on Partnerships for the Goals. The forum will consider the different and particular impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic across all SDGs and the integrated, indivisible, and interlinked nature of the Goals.

The 2022 HLPF with its review of progress on SDG 4 - ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all - and the Transforming Education Summit in September 2022 provide important opportunities to reaffirm the centrality of education for a resilient recovery from COVID-19 and a sustainable future. Quality education enables upward socioeconomic mobility and is a key avenue for escaping poverty. Access to quality education and life-long learning build the human capabilities and knowledge to tackle today’s global challenges like climate change and biodiversity loss. And quality education can help prepare today’s youth for employment in the high-skill jobs of the fourth industrial revolution, while training and life-long learning are important for ensuring just transitions to green economies.

This background note covers the current state of SDG 4 progress in terms of: 1) status and trends in progress for the range of targets included in SDG 4, including new developments since SDG 4 was last reviewed at the HLPF in 2019; 2) recent trends and changes, and new opportunities for change especially in light of the Covid-19 crisis; 3) obstacles to progress and issues of concern, globally and across contexts; 4) an integrated understanding of action toward SDG 4 that leverages synergies with other goals and targets; and 5) knowledge about success stories, good practices and challenges and suggesting ways forward in terms of policies, partnerships and coordinated actions at all levels.

2. Stocktaking and challenges

¹ This background note draws substantially from an expert group meeting (EGM) held in Paris on 17 May 2022 organized by the Division for Sustainable Development Goals of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-DESA/DSDG) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to take stock of where we are in terms of progress towards SDG 4. This EGM was organized back-to-back with the meeting of the SDG4-Education 2030 High-level Steering Committee Sherpa Group and was informed by the its [input paper](#) to the 2022 HLPF.

Even before the pandemic, when progress on SDG 4 was first reviewed at the HLPF in 2019, projections showed that the world was off track to meet its education commitments by 2030.² Some progress had been made - at the time COVID-19 struck, the completion rate was 91 per cent in primary school, 81 per cent in lower secondary and 62 per cent in upper secondary education. In terms of learning, about half of children met minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics by the end of primary and the end of lower secondary school. This varied significantly across regions though with only one in ten African adolescents reaching minimum proficiency.

At that time, stakeholders urged that the world was facing a learning crisis where children were not learning the most basic skills they need. Shortcomings in quality and inclusiveness were identified as among the biggest barriers to SDG 4 particularly for girls and in conflict areas and humanitarian situations. The awareness for inclusion policies grows slowly as 68 per cent of all countries have a definition of inclusive education, but only 57 per cent of those countries cover multiple marginalised groups. Identifying the specific barriers to education and learning across contexts and breaking them down was seen as instrumental for achieving the 2030 Agenda. Today, calls continue for reimagining education to fit the modern world with new platforms for cooperation, new partnerships, and shared values around the importance of education, more support for teachers and increased investment in universal quality education and lifelong learning.

Additional challenges for SDG 4 progress include ineffective education systems that often have issues of skills matching, education supply and demand, working in silos, financial investment and resources in education and skills development and training, a lack of qualified teachers and professionals, and a lack of strong leadership all of which require urgent attention.

Other persistent challenges included research and development (R&D) funding divides between the global north and the global south. And the limited higher education opportunities and the wide digital divide contributes to brain drain in the global south. A majority of Artificial Intelligence PhD graduates in the United States, for example, are from abroad, and are choosing to stay in the United States rather than returning to their country of origin. In high-income countries, the number of engineers is up to 10 times higher than in developing countries. Gender gaps are an additional challenge in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) education where women make up only 20.7 per cent of the global STEM R&D workforce, contributing to the gender-based income gap. As digital technologies become more prevalent in work and education, the digital divide and inequality in access to and capacity to use new digital technologies requires more urgent attention.

Given the strong links between education and other SDGs, a key challenge to achieve the 2030 Agenda is to transform education with a focus on the future of humanity and the planet. This would require increased integration of gender equality, health, and disaster risk education, and developing better curriculum content fit for sustainable development including in STEM and climate courses. We need to think not only about how to accelerate progress in education, but also how education can contribute to progress in other SDGs.

3. COVID-19 crisis impacts and recovery

² UNESCO Institute for Statistics and Global Education Monitoring Report. 2019. *Meeting commitments: are countries on track to achieve SDG 4?* Paris: UNESCO.

The COVID-19 outbreak has caused a global education crisis with most education systems in the world severely affected by education disruptions. It is estimated that 147 million children missed more than half of their in-class instruction over the past two years. However, the pandemic's impact on in-person learning was unequal between countries (ranging from no to full closures) and within countries (with an estimated 483 million children having no learning opportunities). The longest full closures among low- and lower-middle income countries were observed in Bangladesh, Honduras, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Uganda. School closures affected girls, children from disadvantaged backgrounds, those living in rural areas, children with disabilities and children from ethnic minorities and indigenous communities more than their peers.

The disproportionate impact of the pandemic on lower income countries and marginalized populations was also evident in the abilities to offer remote learning and reopen schools to minimize learning disruptions. This in turn largely depended on financial and infrastructural conditions, highlighting the importance of retrofitting existing and building new schools and other education facilities to become disaster resilient, including to the impacts of climate change. As a result, high-income countries were able to safely reopen schools sooner with the average duration of full school closure of 53 days whereas full school closure lasted on average 115 days in lower-middle-income countries and 88 days in low-income countries.³

Evidence about the full scope of impacts is still preliminary. Regarding enrolment, early evidence suggests that the impact is likely to be small, although the possibility of increased repetition in the short term could increase early school leaving in the medium term, which – in poorer countries – would affect girls more. Impact on learning is also likely to be unequally distributed. Cross-national assessments, the mainstay of monitoring progress, are only going to start producing results in late 2022 at the earliest. But initial evidence suggests that the impact has been substantial, especially in middle-income countries that experienced long closures and limited means to ensure learning continuity, as well as among children in primary education and the more disadvantaged. For instance, in rural Karnataka, in India, students able to read a grade 2 text in grade 4 fell from 33 per cent in 2018 to 18 per cent in 2020.

The question that will not be answered for several years is whether, and how quickly, students will recover learning losses or whether the impact will be cumulative and permanent. The international community must support poorer countries to develop their national assessment systems and, if they wish, to participate in cross-national assessments to monitor the effect; so far, such coordination has been lacking.

The pandemic has also accelerated the existing trend in education being driven by digital transformation, highlighting the digital divide. Wide digital gaps exist in different infrastructures in educational settings required for online and hybrid education as well as digital devices for students to participate online. There needs to be a general reflection around how children learn and how to make best use of tool digital tools to facilitate their learning. Depending on the style of teaching-learning, studies have shown that online learning reinforces gaps and demotivates learners. In the labour market, STEM fields and AI continue to grow in significance and contributed to the development of advanced technologies.

³ UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank and OECD. 2021. *What's Next? Lessons on Education Recovery: Findings from a Survey of Ministries of Education Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic*.

The lost learning due to school closures risks can impact across the SDGs due to the interlinkages among the goals. This generation of students risks losing \$17 trillion in lifetime earnings in present value. In low- and middle-income countries, the share of children living in “learning poverty” is projected to rise sharply, potentially up to 70 per cent. Compounded to these challenges are the threats to hard-earned progress in gender equality and women’s empowerment (SDG 5) due to unequal access to remote learning as well as increased exposure to violence and exploitation during prolonged school closures and lockdowns, resulting in women learners’ dropouts and school absence.

In addition to lost learning, school closures adversely impacted the nutrition levels of school going children who received lunch and mid-day meals at the school. The negative impact has extended to global immunization programs, as schools are a key venue for this important task. Furthermore, school closures in rural areas, where many learners could not access remote learning modalities due to limited connectivity, may have exposed children in rural communities to higher risks of child labour.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted both government and household spending, which together accounts for more than 99 per cent of global education spending. UNESCO estimated that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic could increase the pre-COVID annual education funding gap of US\$148 billion in low and lower-middle income countries to as much as US\$200 billion.⁴ Education budgets declined in 65 per cent of low- and lower-middle-income countries since the onset of the pandemic. The need for increased education financing—both domestic resources and international aid—thus is even more urgent for the world’s recovery from the pandemic and acceleration of the progress towards SDG 4.

In order to address the impacts of COVID-19 on education, gender inequality, and sustainable development priorities, it is critical to create responsive policies and buffers when impacts are relatively short-term, transitory and could be reversed once we return to open schools after the pandemic and build support for larger policy strategies and development pillars to offset impacts that translate into long-term inequalities and shortcomings that would create life-long obstacles. To further track progress there is also an urgent need for disaggregated data for COVID-19 related factors.

4. Policies and actions to maximise synergies, mitigate trade-offs and drive transformation

This section identifies promising actions for accelerating progress on SDG 4, recovering any losses from COVID-19, leaving no one behind and leveraging interlinkages with other goals including the other SDGs under review at the 2022 HLPF (5, 14, 15, 17). The section considers ways that solutions could be adopted and scaled up through collaboration among all stakeholders and sectors - governments, business, households and individuals, civil society, as well as the science and technology community. Recommendations are made regarding changes needed within education systems and also regarding the types of knowledge learners need to acquire to strengthen links between education and progress on other SDGs.

Changing education systems

Making Technologies work for equitable and quality education - New technologies, including digital technologies that became even more widely used in education systems during the pandemic, can be applied to increase access and reduce disparities in education. Attention is needed to make sure that

⁴ UNESCO. 2020. “Act now: reduce the impact of COVID-19 on the cost of achieving SDG 4” GEM Report Policy Paper 42.

education innovations emerged during the Covid-19 crisis are retained, fostered, and matured. One example could be to establish a public education platform to provide open quality education resources for everyone. Simple technologies can also be applied with significant impact. In Botswana, for example, teachers use cell phones where needed to deliver courses to students and through SMS.

For the uptake of technology to be effective, education systems need to help schools develop their capacity and infrastructure for strong and inclusive digital learning that is accessible and relevant to all students and teachers. The crisis also showed us that holistic digital strategies for schools can harness the potential of digital tools. Digital learning works best when teachers are at the centre of the design, development, and implementation of digital learning environments. It works when governments and unions work together so that students and teachers are not just consumers of digital technologies but co-creators and designers of innovative learning environments. Working together encourages the integration of new pedagogical approaches; better compatibility between different technologies; and the shift in attention from learning technology to learning activities. Of course, successful integration of digital technologies in learning requires investment in digital infrastructures and assurance that all learners have access to digital devices and electricity at home.

Better data – Monitoring and responding to the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on learning and school attendance requires disaggregated data to assess the impacts on different groups and in different contexts. We also need to learn from previous efforts that have been made to improve learning continuity in emergencies and crises, such as through accelerated learning programmes and education flexibility. This requires investment in better data, and integrated work across sectors to improve education monitoring, including disaggregated data by marginalised groups. This is essential for developing solutions that target all stakeholders. Refugees, for example, should also be taken into account and supported but there is little data on education disaggregated by refugee or migrant status.

Leveraging social innovations - A key innovation of the pandemic period for education was social innovation, and the engagement of the community and household in learning. For example, parents had to learn how to engage with their children's education and with teachers in new ways to adapt to this crisis. Teacher's engagements also changed. Moving forward, it is important to ensure that these meaningful social innovations that were key for learning continuity during this crisis are leveraged. Not just the access to technology in terms of hardware and software, but the soft skills that go behind adapting to crises of this nature. Household and community engagement are key.

Empowered students and youth - Youth mobilization to demand public sector strengthening and education emphasis is absolutely necessary to move the needle in scenarios where education has been underprioritized. To meet the challenges of the 21st century, students need to be empowered and feel that they have a voice to help shape a world where well-being and sustainability – for themselves, for others and for the planet – are achievable. For example, the OECD [Learning Compass 2030](#) identifies three “transformative competencies” that students need in order to contribute to and thrive in our world, and shape a better future: creating new value, reconciling tensions and dilemmas, and taking responsibility. Helping to build these competencies and also ensure that youth are among the decision-makers in education systems can ensure engaged and interested young people.

Build capacity everywhere – Experts agreed that research, education, and knowledge production remain vastly unequal in the world. It is crucial that efforts are made to tackle the issues caused by brain drain to strengthen developing countries' positions to both solve context specific development challenges, and to identify global risks. Support to higher education in the global south can be increased to address brain drain and in doing so also tackle the digital divide.

It is also imperative to reach those groups at risk of being left out, for example, through investments in tutoring, which is particularly important for the poor. In Germany, a “talent scouting program” aims to find young bright talents in poor and rural regions to motivate them to study through mentoring. This solution could be scaled up to accelerate progress on SDG 4.

Support girls and women in education and learning – Greater efforts are needed to support women and girls through education, employment, and empowerment to tackle gender inequality. This would ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all, including lifelong learning opportunities. Gender inequality goes beyond education access. It is a social issue where the drivers of legal restrictions and social norms must be tackled – for example, girls with disproportionate burdens of unpaid care work at home often have less time for schoolwork. Even before the pandemic, we knew that child marriages and pregnancies adversely affect schools’ retention rates.

Making education work for equity and sustainability

Reform education to strengthen resilience – Efforts are needed to review and adjust curriculum policies to integrate disaster risk management, public health emergency management, and climate change to advance resilience in facing these risks. This is particularly suited for education systems in adverse and fragile contexts. In many countries and contexts, the Covid-19 pandemic only represents one of multiple layers of complex and concurrent risks. It is important to ensure that education integrates these areas to be able to respond and to provide education during crisis periods.

Strengthen education for sustainable development – Building knowledge to tackle global challenges like climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution are essential for advancing progress on sustainable development. All learners from early childhood through adulthood need knowledge and skills that help empower them contribute to change towards sustainable development and green transformations through just transitions. Education for sustainable development, including climate change education, is also vital for building media and information literacy that contribute to informed decision-making. Much more could be done to train teachers and to generate interest from students. As it stands, while over 95 per cent of teachers think that climate education is an important topic to teach, only 40 per cent of teachers are confident in teaching it⁵.

Support education for skills development - Young people and adults need continuous reskilling and upskilling for rapidly changing labour markets with increased digitization and greening economies. This is an essential part of ensuring that transitions to a green economy are just and inclusive. New skills are needed to both learn and to be prepared for high-tech jobs in the future. These include digital competencies, critical thinking, entrepreneurship, environmental protection, intercultural and international cooperation. All of these need to be better integrated into curricula. It is also important to consult employer organizations during the process of innovating new curriculum and approaches to learning to support transitions from school to work and to ensure skills development matches labour market demands.

Enhance trust and build peace through education - The role of education in building just and peaceful societies and trust in public institutions is increasingly recognized across the world. However, more work is needed to build an awareness among educational professionals highlighting how this role can be best fulfilled. The education sector as a whole can leverage its transformational power to support and encourage young people to be positive and constructive members of society. Teaching values, such as honesty, integrity, justice, respect at every level of education is key to ensure that the

⁵ UNESCO. 2021. “Teachers have their say: motivation, skills and opportunities to teach education for sustainable development and global citizenship”. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf00000379914>

education sector is transformed to contribute to creating engaged global citizens. The Covid-19 crisis has shown that there is public need and appreciation for education and healthcare. Trust in institutions has also eroded in some places and investment in education sectors is an opportunity to build broader trust in institutions and communities.

Education institutions also play an important role in promoting the rule of law and building new forms of engagement based on global citizenship, human rights, and inclusion. Equipping children and youth with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes to contribute to global peace, sustainable development and societal transformation means embracing the Global Citizenship Education (GCED) for the rule of law approach. GCED can be achieved through a Whole School Approach (WSA). WSAs are collective and collaborative actions undertaken in and by a school community to improve student learning, behaviour and well-being, and the conditions that support these.

Make learning consistent with human rights norms - It is important to ensure that places of learning "practice what they preach". Places of learning include formal education institutions, schools, and universities, in and outside the ministry of education but also informal education spaces. All aspects of school management and school life, including teacher-teacher relations, learner-teacher relations, and school-family relations, should be guided by a culture of fairness, rights, accountability, and transparency, consistent with international human rights norms and standards. Education plays a fundamental role in shaping global citizens, and with them the world views that are necessary to prevent conflict and guarantee just and peaceful institutions and societies as a whole. Additionally, such practices can create virtuous cycles of improved accountability and transparency within the education environments.

5. Means of implementation: Mechanisms and partnerships to accelerate progress

The educational crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic has mobilized unprecedented levels of international solidarity and multi-stakeholder cooperation that should be harnessed toward transformed education systems and new partnerships for long-term action. Although much more needs to be done over the next eight years to realize the aspirations of the 2030 Agenda and implement SDG 4, there are positive signs of collaboration and commitment.

Building solidarity - UNESCO has convened two Global Education Meetings to galvanize political and financial commitments to education, established the Global Coalition for Education to bring together over 200 members from the UN family, civil society, academia, and the private sector to ensure that #LearningNeverStops, and led the rethinking of the global education cooperation mechanism through the strengthened SDG4-Education 2030 High-Level Steering Committee. Regional initiatives such as the Caribbean Safe School Initiative Pre-Ministerial Forum have also provided forums to advance school safety and build resilience in the education sector at the regional level.

Moreover, the unprecedented educational disruptions prompted the education community to rethink and reimagine the purpose, content, and delivery of education, with a view to transforming education toward peaceful, inclusive, and sustainable futures of humanity and the planet. In this context, the UN Secretary-General proposed the Transforming Education Summit in his report, *Our Common Agenda*, which will take place later this year and bring stakeholders from all sectors together with a view to mobilizing political ambition around the power of education to transform societies and deliver on the 2030 Agenda.

National benchmarking – An opportunity to galvanise political commitment to education at the country level is the ongoing process of national SDG 4 benchmarking which can drive transformation, and link national, regional, and global agendas. Embedded in the Education 2030 Framework for Action, two in three countries engaged in the process in 2021: drawing on their national education sector plans, they made voluntary commitments of where they plan to be in seven SDG 4 benchmark indicators by 2025 and 2030. The remaining third of countries are expected to make their commitments later this year. These commitments will be monitored on an annual basis from 2023 onwards. Further action can be taken to encourage countries to set national targets that allow for collaboration amongst stakeholders and across levels of governments.

Local enabling partners – Partnerships at the local level are key to scaling up solutions and reaching policy targets. Around the world, local governments are integral for well-integrated education planning that ensures the marginalised are not left behind. Local, community led transformations can be used to build momentum at scale for national-level impacts. Engaging youth in best practice focused campaigns can help to deliver at the local level. Education systems can build on school-led micro-innovations during the pandemic to develop more equitable learning. The private sector can also play an essential role to enable implementation at the local level. In Germany, for example, companies donated their older laptops to refugees to help them access digital schooling.

Finance for education – Delivering on promises of quality education for everyone requires significant resources. The public sector investment needs to be strengthened including through the strengthening of domestic tax systems. This will allow countries to invest more in education. Globally, education has been underprioritized in COVID-19 stimulus package funding. Scaling up spending, including ODA for education, is imperative for expanding quality education including in key areas like quality early childhood care and education, teacher training and professional development, youth employability skills and digital transformation in the education sector.

6. Proposed guiding questions

The session on SDG 4 and its interlinkages with other SDGs at the HLPF can explore the barriers that exist to scaling up access to quality education and life-long learning and how these have deepened during the pandemic. It can also explore new innovations and solutions that can accelerate progress on SDG 4 and generate synergies with other SDGs while also pointing to opportunities for the kinds of cross sectoral collaboration that can really transform education. In doing so, the session can also contribute to the Transforming Education Summit. Questions that may be addressed include:

- What are the major impacts of COVID-19 on education and lifelong learning that risk pushing back progress towards SDG 4 and other SDGs?
- How can recovery from the pandemic be used to accelerate progress in education in ways that contribute to all three pillars of sustainability – economic, social, and environmental? Are there strong examples of how education and training systems are supporting just transitions to green economies?
- What innovations have emerged during the pandemic that hold promise for inclusive education, including those that address challenges for girls, and how can they be scaled up?
- How should the education sector be transformed to better contribute to building aware and engaged global citizens who can be change-makers? How can education contribute to building trust in science and in institutions?
- What opportunities does the Transforming Education Summit offer for overcoming barriers to accessing quality education and life-long learning for everyone? What are some policy changes that can happen now, what actions could be taken over the next year, and what are some longer-term commitments that need to be started now?