4 QUALITY EDUCATION

KEY ASKS
2022 ● SDG National Reviews

SDG 4: EVERY CHILD LEARNS

Education is an investment not only in children's futures, but in future economic productivity, poverty reduction, social cohesion, sustainability and more. Achieving the education targets under Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 will help to accelerate progress under many other SDGs. 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 global priority of working to ensure every child learns is fully aligned with SDG 4 and other education-related targets and includes the most vulnerable children in humanitarian crises and development contexts, 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 quality education with the opportunity to learn and develop the skills they need to reach their full potential, find meaningful work and participate in society.

KEY ASKS

1. **A demonstration of how SDG 4's 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. **Reopening schools for in-person learning as soon as possible and supporting teachers and students to recover learning loss**: Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the world was facing a learning crisis, with over 250 million children out of school and more than half of children in low- and middle-income countries unable to read a simple story by the age of ten. At its peak, the pandemic disrupted education for over 1.5 billion learners. As new UNICEF data shows, for nearly 77 million children, the pandemic has taken away their classrooms for the past 18 months. We have also found that schoolchildren worldwide have lost 1.8 trillion hours and counting of in-person learning due to COVID-19 lockdowns. The pandemic has exacerbated inequities and impacted all aspects of the lives of children and families. The World Bank estimates a US$10 trillion loss of earnings for this cohort of learners. In March, UNICEF estimated ten million additional child marriages may occur before the end of the decade, partly due to school closures, threatening years of progress in reducing the practice. There is a dire need to reopening schools as soon as possible and ensure that all children, including those out of school before the pandemic, return to in-person learning. As schools re-open, education systems, including teachers, should be ready to support students in catching up with the lost learning and meeting other needs including for psychosocial support. Teachers have played a critical role during the pandemic. Supporting them with skills and resources is critical to recovering from the impacts of the pandemic on children's learning.

3. **Tackle the learning crisis by investing in foundational literacy and numeracy, prioritising the most vulnerable children, and increasing the proportion of Official Development Assistance going towards pre-primary and primary education:** 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. These skills are the foundation for all learning throughout childhood and beyond and are crucial to the realisation of nearly all targets under SDG 4. Without these basic skills, or 'foundational literacy and numeracy' (FLN), students are not prepared to transition to secondary education and, ultimately, to the workplace. Yet, in many countries, there is a lack of quality evidence and data on early grade learning, compared to secondary or tertiary education. This lack of data is hampering our ability to track which countries are progressing or falling behind on FLN and undermining evidence-based policy-making leading to policies and plans that don't improve learning outcomes for millions of children. When it comes to the early years of learning, most low-and-middle income countries have left pre-primary

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learning out of their responses to COVID-19. As of June, this year, more than 60 countries had not fully reopened their pre-primary schools. Yet, without any mitigation measures, pre-primary school closures in 2020 alone are estimated to cost the current cohort of pre-primary-aged children US$ 1.6 trillion in lost future earnings.

4. **Scale-up of digital learning solutions to reimagine education**: The innovations and partnerships that have been mobilized in response to the pandemic have presented us with a once-in-a-generation opportunity to transform education so that 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 at speed and scale to reach all children and young people, particularly the most marginalized including girls, children living in or fleeing from crises and conflicts, and children with disabilities, with affordable and accessible content tailored to their interests, needs and context and in languages they speak.   Addressing the digital divide and gender divide by investing in STEM skills including digital skills particularly for girls will be key. The Secretary-General identified both these issues – gender and digital access – as two of the six great divides that we must bridge, in an address during the General Assembly.

5. **Attention to skills development should be a core component of education at all levels:** All children and young people require a full range of skills (foundational i.e., literacy and numeracy, and transferable such as communications, negotiation, creativity) to lead healthy and productive lives from early childhood through transition to work. This means that:

   - 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 socio-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.

6. **Focus on providing quality education for 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 deepening further, including alarming gender gaps, as well as digital and connectivity gaps: Malala Fund estimates an additional 20 million 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 show that at least for one in every three children (463 million children), whose schools closed during the pandemic, 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. To achieve SDG 4, national and local governments must accelerate action plans to close inequities 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. one in every three children (463 million children), whose schools closed during the pandemic, 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. To achieve SDG 4, national and local governments must accelerate action plans to close inequities 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, economic or social status, or disability status. Further, the SDGs and the Habitat III commitments require schools, materials, transport, and public places to be made accessible for children with disabilities.

7. Measuring acquisition of life skills (transferable and 21st century skills) will be equally important to monitoring learning outcomes. 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) principles for truly inclusive education systems. School safety and inclusive infrastructure and facilities must be ensured to create conducive learning environments for all children.   Schools should serve as safe and adequate environments that provide students with quality and relevant education as well as water and sanitation, health, protection, wellbeing, and psychosocial support.

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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 upon 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 monitored through a set of **12** global indicators recommended for global monitoring of progress on key targets. In addition, 31 other 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). The non-global 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, including country-specific indicators not part of the 12 global or 31 non-global indicators, but it is recommended wherever possible to align national indicators to the internationally agreed SDG 4 indicators. Not all the 12 global SDG 4 indicators (as well as many non-global 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 analyse data from different sources** to generate baseline estimates for SDG 4 indicators
- **Mainstream SDG 4 monitoring within national education sector plans and 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 migrant and displaced children and those affected by conflict. Also, reliable data are required to report on attacks on education.

INVEST -- SOCIAL SPENDING AND PROGRESS ON RESULTS FOR CHILDREN, ADOLESCENTS AND 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 per cent. This rate of return is, in fact, higher than alternative investments, including bonds, stocks, deposits, and housing. UNICEF recommends that Member States:

- **In the context of COVID-19, protect education budgets and target public spending at those left furthest behind.** Before the pandemic government education expenditures in many lower income countries hardly reached the international benchmark of 4 per cent of their GDP. In the context of COVID-19, governments are facing further financial pressures, and these are particularly magnified for low- and middle-income countries. In 2020, the education sector the education sector received a mere 2 per cent of governments' COVID-19 stimulus packages. The sector received 2.6 per cent of humanitarian aid, a drop from 2.9 per cent in 2019. The annual funding gap to achieve SDG 4 for lower income countries has increased from $148 billion pre-COVID to nearly $200 billion post-pandemic. Education has been largely invisible in high-stake decision making on fiscal trade-offs of COVID-19 stimulus packages in many countries. 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, 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. 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 also 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.

- **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.

- **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 poorest and youngest where social returns are highest, so that poorer households' spending on basic education is minimized. 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 favour the upper levels of education and disfavours 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 per cent 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 per cent 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 AND MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN, ADOLESCENTS AND 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 engage children, adolescents, and youth regularly, meaningfully and consistently as agents of change to influence behaviours 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 through our existing work in this space and by 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 for children to express their ideas on the SDGs through a variety of mediums.

For more information, visit: https://www.unicef.org/sdgs