

The SDG4-Education 2030 High-Level Steering Committee's contribution to the 2023 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

“Accelerating the recovery from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at all levels”

with focus on SDGs 6 (clean water and sanitation), 7 (affordable and clean energy), 9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure), 11 (sustainable cities and communities) and 17 (partnerships)

1. Education: a driver for resilience, innovation and sustainable development

The vision of the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4 – “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”) is to transform lives through education, recognizing the important role of education as a main driver of development and in achieving the other SDGsⁱ. The SDG4-Education 2030 commitment promotes inclusive, quality **lifelong learning** from early childhood to adulthood and encompasses quality early childhood care and education, technical and vocational education and training, as well as higher education and research. Inclusion, equity and gender equality in and through education (SDG 5) is the cornerstone of SDG 4’s transformative education agenda.

In an increasingly complex and interconnected world facing an existential threat such as climate change, growing inequalities and emergencies, the education community has been calling for education that equip individuals with knowledge, skills and values necessary to become active agents of change for green transition and sustainable development of our societies. Education helps build resilience, innovation and digital skills, which are essential for the full recovery from the pandemic.

Education’s relevance and contribution to the SDGs under review at the 2023 HLPF are as followsⁱⁱ:

- **SDG 6:** Comprehensive water education provides the necessary tools to monitor water quality in order to reduce contamination, helps improve water use by developing greater resources for its reuse and contributes to raising awareness among communities to ensure they play an active part in improving their water management and sanitation ([Access to Learning objectives for SDG 6](#)).
- **SDG 7:** Energy education promotes energy efficiency, teaching us to develop technologies that waste less energy and encouraging us to work together to research and develop renewable and other clean energy resources ([Access to Learning objectives for SDG 7](#)).
- **SDG 9:** Allocating resources for research is key to addressing each country’s specific needs in the field of industry and infrastructure, and in order to improve its technologies. Enhancing scientific research, encouraging innovation and increasing the number of researchers will help upgrade the technical capabilities of industrial sectors in all countries ([Access to Learning objectives for SDG 9](#)).
- **SDG 11:** Quality education provides the appropriate tools to ensure the monitoring of waste management and air quality. It prepares communities to manage their resources properly and tackle climate change. Through participatory approaches, communities are engaged in discussions and in planning activities for the improvement of their own cities ([Access to Learning objectives for SDG 11](#)).
- **SDG 17:** Quality education allows engagement with organizations and individuals working on various topics that relate to the global goals. With international support, effective and targeted capacity-building activities can be implemented in developing countries allowing them to support national plans to implement all the SDGs including through North-South, South-South and triangular cooperation ([Access to Learning objectives for SDG 17](#)).

2. Progress, challenges, lessons learned and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of SDG4 and its linkages with SDGs 6, 7, 9, 11 and 17

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that rapid action at a global scale, led by governments and propelled by new technologies, is indeed possible. Immediate behavioural changes for hundreds of millions of people have been brought about within days, entire economies have been brought almost to a halt – actions that were almost unthinkable only a few months earlier. The crisis has shown that where there is a (political) will, there is a way.

The educational crisis is long-standing and often unforeseen, yet having a devastating impact on the futures of children and youth worldwide. The COVID-19 pandemic was the worst disruptor to education in recent history and it has exacerbated the pre-existing educational inequalities and learning crisis. As the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the globe, governments temporarily closed schools and other learning institutions, affecting more than 90% of learners (some 1.5 billion) globally at the peak of the pandemic, including nearly 369 million children who rely on school meals for daily nutrition. Governments around the world mobilized various remote learning solutions to ensure learning continuity, including through mobile phones, digital online platforms, broadcast media such as TV and radio, and paper-based take-home materials. The school closures elucidated the world's digital divide, placing a severe burden on education systems to urgently design, create and implement remote learning platforms and programmes, materials and training mechanisms for teachers and school staff. Local, national and international community provided innovative learning solutions including low-tech content in an attempt to mitigate digital exclusion and learning losses^{iiiiv}.

Technical and vocational education and training, as well as tertiary education were also severely affected by the pandemic, which disrupted work-based practical learning—up to 98% according to a global survey conducted in May 2020—which need to be acquired in person^v. UNESCO's global survey on higher education reports the increased difficulty in transiting from higher education to the labour market due to reduced job opportunities, while employers seek applicants with higher technology skills^{vi}. Unemployment is affecting youth in particular and the transition from school to work is disrupted by sluggish economies and changing labour markets. Globally, youth employment fell by 8.7% in 2020 compared with 3.7% for older adults^{vii}. Technological development, migration, climate change, conflicts and epidemics are reshaping society and changing the landscape of learning and skills development for enhanced employability and sustainable development, particularly for young people. Young people and adults need continuous reskilling and upskilling for rapidly changing labour markets with increased digitization and greening economies.

More than ever, empowering and increasing the capacity of cities and communities to integrate education for sustainable development (ESD) is essential. Local authorities and leaders need to increase and strengthen learning opportunities for the whole community through formal, non-formal and informal venues. The ESD for 2030 Roadmap^{viii} offers guidance on taking action in the five Priority Action Areas —policy, learning environment, educators, youth and local communities. Mayors and elected officials can use ESD as a tool for achieving the 17 SDGs and for making cities and communities more inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. Cities and communities are key centres of thought and action for education and learning about sustainable development. Education providers in cities should coordinate their programmes so that they address all SDGs and related local sustainability challenges in a coherent way.

3. The state of the progress towards the SDG4-Education 2030 at the mid-point of the 2030 Agenda implementation

The world is far from reaching the SDG4 targets and realizing the SDG4-Education 2030 vision. At the mid-point of the 2030 Agenda, education is facing two dramatic and interconnected challenges to ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all. First, our world

continues to struggle with educational inequalities and learning crisis that are depriving hundreds of millions of children, young people and adults of their right to quality education, leaving many of the education-related targets of the SDGs off track. The COVID-19 pandemic was a crisis within a crisis, which exacerbated the pre-existing inequalities and affected disproportionately vulnerable communities and learners. Yet, the inadequate and inequitable public spending and investment in education is threatening these learners' return to school and learning recovery, turning this crisis into a generational catastrophe.

Access: The proportion of the world's children that were out of school had declined from 26% in 2000 to 17% immediately before the pandemic. During the two years of the pandemic (March 2020 – February 2022) countries saw school closures of an average length of 41 weeks. This increased the risk that many of the children affected by school closures would never return. The recent review of administrative data by the Global Education Monitoring Report^{ix} shows that the out-of-school rate in sub-Saharan Africa has actually gone up in 2021.

Learning: Four out of five of the 104 countries that studied the impact of COVID-related school closures on learning reported learning losses^x. As countries with lower pre-pandemic learning levels tended to close schools longer, the learning disparities between countries may deepen. The estimated proportion of ten-year-olds in low- and middle-income countries who cannot read a simple text has risen from around 58% to 70%^{xi}. It should be noted that the pre-pandemic proportion of children who attained the minimum proficiency standards in reading and mathematics were significantly lower in lower- and middle-income countries (less than 60% overall and as low as 10% in some low-income countries) compared to high-income countries (70-90%).

Equity: The pre-existing inequalities in educational access and quality, as well as learning outcomes were illuminated and exacerbated during the pandemic, with learning continuity dependent on learners' abilities to access remote learning opportunities. UNICEF estimated that at least 463 million children could not be reached by digital and broadcast remote learning programmes during school closures, with three out of four unreached students coming from rural areas and/or poor households^{xii}. Learners with disabilities faced an additional barrier to accessing its content due to the lack of sign languages, braille, closed captions, etc. Gender norms and expectations have reduced girls' access to devices and internet in some countries, and increased household chores for girls also constrained their time to learn and benefit from remote learning^{xiii}. School closures have negative effects beyond learning, especially for the most disadvantaged children in lower-income countries, particularly adolescent girls. Protection of girls and young women from gender-based violence, child marriage and early pregnancy, as well as prevention of child labour and school dropouts have been major concerns from the onset of the COVID-19 educational crisis, particularly in emergency contexts.^{xiv}

Education financing: The pandemic has had an alarming and uneven effect on education budgets, which declined in 65% of low- and lower-middle-income countries and 33% of upper-middle and high-income countries since the onset of the pandemic.^{xv} While fiscal space tightened and debt burdens on governments have increased, countries had to deal with unexpected additional costs associated with safely reopening schools and keeping them open. Public investment in education is chronically too low in most countries, and household spending can be highly regressive. Moreover, per-pupil expenditure among low-income countries (\$188), lower-middle-income countries (\$894), upper-middle-income countries (\$2,488) and high-income countries (\$8,133) is highly unequal.^{xvi} Public investment in education, though rising in some cases before COVID-19, is still too low in most countries. UNESCO estimated that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic could increase the annual funding gap in low and lower-middle income countries to as much as US\$200 billion^{xvii}.

Second, the learning crisis is part of the broader challenge of relevance—that of the ability of today’s education systems to equip children, young people and adults with the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes needed to thrive in the rapidly changing world and contribute to sustainable and peaceful futures. In the context of a global climate crisis, rapid technological transformation and revolutionizing world of work, and the rise of disinformation and intolerance, UNESCO’s landmark report on the futures of education noted that “far too often, formal learning does not meet the needs and aspirations of children and youth and their communities”^{xviii}. In this context, there is a general consensus that meeting the 2030 Agenda and SDGs will not be possible without a surge in domestic commitment and global solidarity in pursuit of education transformation.

4. Examples of actions undertaken to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic that also accelerate progress towards multiple SDG targets

Education empowers individuals to be active and responsible citizens; it drives economic prosperity, reduces poverty and inequalities, and protects and promotes gender equality, cultural diversity and environmental sustainability. In other words, education is a driving force for sustainable development and an accelerator for all SDGs. The unprecedented global education crisis galvanized multilateral and multi-stakeholder cooperation for education as the key response to the COVID-19 crisis. The historical educational disruptions also led the world to rethink and reimagine the purpose, content and delivery of education—in other words, to transform education.

Global Education Coalition^{xix}: led by UNESCO, the COVID-19 Global Education Coalition served as a platform to match country needs with the contributions and services of 200+ Coalition members including UN agencies, international organizations, private sector and civil society organizations, in order to address connectivity and content challenges during the pandemic-induced school closures. Through the Coalition, 233 projects were initiated around three central flagships (connectivity, teachers and gender equality) across 112 countries impacting 400 million learners and 12 million teachers. The Coalition has since shifted its focus from response to recovery while maintaining its three flagships and pursuing a mission approach to achieve concrete targets through:

- Global Skills Academy to equip 1 million youth with employability skills;
- Global Teacher Campus to help 1 million learners benefit from remedial learning in STEAM;
- Global Learning House to provide 1 million teachers with remote learning skills.

During the Transformation Summit Meeting, Coalition members formed the Digital Transformation Collaborative to mobilize in-kind and financial resources at national scale with the participation of governments wanting to digitally transform their education systems.

Global Education Cooperation Mechanism^{xx}: The series of multi-stakeholder mobilization, including the joint preparation of UN Secretary-General’s Policy Brief on “Education during COVID-19 and beyond,”^{xxi} the #SaveOurFuture campaign and the extraordinary sessions of the Global Education Meetings in 2021 and 2022, paved the way for strengthening the global education cooperation mechanism as a key pillar in the education community’s efforts to build more resilient, flexible, inclusive and gender-responsive societies and education systems. The elevated, multi-stakeholder **SDG4-Education 2030 High-Level Steering Committee (HLSC)**, co-chaired by UNESCO and Sierra Leone, was then launched to lead the global SDG 4 coordination and monitoring, foster cooperation and greater alignment among actors within the Global Education Cooperation Mechanism, provide strategic guidance and recommendations for countries’ accelerated progress towards SDG 4. The HLSC promotes global and regional cooperation and harmonized actions through its three functional areas: evidence-based policy, data and monitoring, and financing. In June 2022, the HSLC issued an urgent call for action for the Heads of State and Government to take decisive actions to invest in and transform education as the clearest pathway to the shared goals of peace, prosperity and sustainability^{xxii}.

Transforming Education Summit^{xxiii}: In September 2022, the UN Secretary-General convened this first major Summit recommended in his “Our Common Agenda” report in response to a global crisis in education. The Summit provided a unique opportunity to elevate this global education crisis on both national and international political agendas as “an urgent political imperative for our collective future^{xxiv}”. Leading up to the Summit, 163 Member States convened national consultations, bringing together government leaders, teachers, students, civil society, academia, and other stakeholders and partners. It also provided a platform to generate commitments from the highest level of national governments through 135 National Statements of Commitment submitted to date, to launch new game-changing global initiatives (see below), and to support a broader stakeholder mobilization and solidarity for transforming education, with youth as central actors and agents of transformation as manifested in the Youth Declaration^{xxv}. The Secretary-General called on the SDG4 High-Level Steering Committee to ensure effective Summit follow-up by strengthening global, regional and national level cooperation and integrating the Summit outcomes into SDG4 coordination, monitoring and implementation efforts.

Global Initiatives: The Transforming Education Summit saw the launching of five global multi-stakeholder initiatives that can leverage greater financial, technical and political support for country-level implementation. These initiatives respond to the respective Calls to Action to mobilize support for critical priorities for education transformation:

- *Greening Education Partnership* aims to prepare every learner to acquire the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to tackle climate change and to promote sustainable development and skills development in the transition to the green economy.
- *Gateways to Public Digital Learning* aims to establish and support a global platform to ensure that every learner, teacher, and family can easily access, find, and use high-quality and curriculum-aligned digital education content.
- *Education in Crisis Situations: Partnership for Transformative Actions* aims to advocate for and implement Triple Nexus actions (humanitarian, development and peacebuilding), to secure increased and better-utilized financing and coordinated planning for refugees, internally displaced populations and other crisis-affected learners.
- *Coalition for Foundational Learning* commits to halving the global share of 10-year-old children unable to read and understand a simple text by 2030 by enrolling all children and keeping them in school, increasing access to remedial and catch-up learning, supporting teachers, and supporting children’s and teachers’ health, nutrition and psycho-social well-being.
- *Global Platform for Gender Equality and Girls’ and Women’s Empowerment* in and through Education will monitor progress towards relevant commitments made at the Transforming Education Summit and elsewhere, highlight gaps in progress at the country level, and encourage transformative action.

Moreover, in order to take forward the recommendations of the Youth Declaration, *the Global Youth Initiative* was launched aiming to ensure meaningful youth engagement and leadership in education policymaking.

5. Key messages for inclusion into the Political Declaration of the 2023 SDG Summit

The SDG4-Education 2030 High-Level Steering Committee reiterates its Urgent Call for Action made on the occasion of the Transforming Education Summit, urging the Heads of State and Government, international financial organizations and all partners to champion tangible actions around five thematic focus areas, mainstreaming equity and gender equality:

1. Prioritize the most marginalized and furthest behind, and those affected by crisis and emergencies by creating learning environments and schools free from violence and discrimination and supported with comprehensive care and health services.
2. Skill, re-skill and empower young people and adults for well-being and full development, for green and digital societies and the future of work, and for ensuring sustainability of the planet.
3. Increase, empower and retain well-trained, well-qualified, motivated and supported teachers and education workforce.
4. Ensure inclusive and equitable access to digital learning solutions supported by open educational resources as a tool for better learning. Provide all learners with free high-quality digital learning, pedagogical capacity and innovation, and safe use and data protection.
5. Mobilize investments in education through bold, whole-of-government and international action, including tax reform to raise domestic resources, innovative financing and debt relief, and promoting public-private partnership. Ensure the equitable allocation as well as effective and efficient use of all education investments.

The urgent and effective implementation of these actions are essential for transforming education and contribute to the advancement of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. By organizing national consultations and participating in the Transforming Education Summit processes, Member States committed to take action to transform their education systems, and to increase financing of education to achieve this transformation. Going forward, continuous and collective efforts are need to spur “tangible actions where it matters most: on the ground, in the classroom, and in the experience of teachers and learners alike”.^{xxvi} Education transformation must be a key component of the 2023 SDG Summit and the 2024 Summit of the Future.

ⁱ *Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4.* <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245656>

ⁱⁱ UNESCO. 2017. *Education for Sustainable Development Goals: learning objectives.* <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000247444>

ⁱⁱⁱ UNESCO. <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/globalcoalition>

^{iv} UNICEF. 2021. *Reopening with Resilience: Lessons from remote learning during COVID-19.* <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/1220-reopening-with-resilience-lessons-from-remote-learning-during-covid19.html>.

^v ILO et al. cited in *Global Education Monitoring Report 2021/2: Non-state actors in education: Who chooses? Who loses?* Paris, UNESCO.

^{vi} UNESCO. 2021. *COVID-19: reopening and reimagining universities, survey on higher education through the UNESCO National Commissions.* <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000378174>.

^{vii} ILO. 2021. *Statistical Brief: An update on the youth labour market impact of the COVID-19 crisis.* https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/briefingnote/wcms_795479.pdf

^{viii} UNESCO. 2020. *Education for sustainable development: a roadmap.* <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374802.locale=en>

^{ix} Global Education Monitoring Report and UNESCO Institute for Statistics. 2022. “New estimation confirms out-of-school population is growing in sub-Saharan Africa”. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000382577>

^x <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2022/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2022.pdf>

^{xi} World Bank, UNESCO UIS, UNICEF, FCDO, USAID, BMGF, and UNESCO, 2022, *The state of global learning poverty: 2022 update.* <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/e52f55322528903b27f1b7e61238e416-0200022022/original/Learning-poverty-report-2022-06-21-final-V7-0-conferenceEdition.pdf>

^{xii} UNICEF. 2020. *Covid-19: Are Children to Continue Learning During School Closures? A Global of the Potential Reach of Remote Learning Policies Data from 100 Countries.* New York: UNICEF.

^{xiii} UNESCO. 2021. *When schools shut: gendered impacts of COVID-19 school closures.* Paris: UNESCO.

^{xiv} INEE. 2021. *Mind the Gap: The State of Girls’ Education in Crisis and Conflict.* <https://inee.org/resources/mind-gap-state-girls-education-crisis-and-conflict>

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- ^{xv} World Bank and UNESCO. 2021. [Education Finance Watch 2021](#).
- ^{xvi} Al-Samarrai, Samer; Gangwar, Maulshree; Gala, Priyal. 2020. *The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Education Financing*. World Bank, Washington, DC.
<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/33739>
- ^{xvii} https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/sites/default/files/covid_cost_Press_Release_EN.pdf
- ^{xviii} UNESCO: Reimagining our futures together: a new social contract for education
<https://en.unesco.org/futuresofeducation/>
- ^{xix} <https://globaleducationcoalition.unesco.org/>
- ^{xx} <https://www.sdg4education2030.org/>
- ^{xxi} https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/08/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_education_august_2020.pdf
- ^{xxii} <https://transformingeducationsummit.sdg4education2030.org/SDG4HLSCallJune2022>
- ^{xxiii} <https://www.un.org/en/transforming-education-summit>
- ^{xxiv} Vision Statement of the Secretary-General on Transforming Education: An urgent political imperative for our collective future. <https://www.un.org/en/delegate-delegate/vision-statement-secretary-general-transforming-education>.
- ^{xxv} <https://www.un.org/en/transforming-education-summit/youth-declaration>
- ^{xxvi} Vision Statement of the Secretary-General on Transforming Education: An urgent political imperative for our collective future. <https://www.un.org/en/delegate-delegate/vision-statement-secretary-general-transforming-education>.