



THE POWER OF EDUCATION TO FIGHT INEQUALITY

How increasing educational equality and quality is crucial to fighting economic and gender inequality

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A good-quality public education is liberating for individuals. It can also be an equalizer within society. This report shows the unparalleled power of public education to tackle growing inequality and bring us closer together. To achieve this, education must be both of good quality and equitable; it should be free, universal, adequately funded, with well-supported teachers, and accountable public oversight. Fairer taxation of the wealthiest can help pay for it.

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email advocacy@oxfaminternational.org

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Front cover photo: A young student at a school in Santa Cruz Estelí, Nicaragua.

Back cover photo: Students at St Andrea Primary School in Lologo, Juba, South Sudan.

Both photos by: William Vest-Lillesoe.

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SUMMARY

Inequality is reaching new extremes. Significant increases in inequality of both income and wealth are leading to larger gaps between rich and poor, men and women.¹ This is creating serious obstacles to overcoming poverty and exclusion,² and stopping us from beating poverty.³ With women substantially over-represented in the ranks of the poorest, this is also reinforcing gender inequality, blocking progress on women's rights.⁴ These inequalities threaten to pull our societies apart, and unravel the social contract between state and citizen, by undermining social cohesion and eroding democratic institutions.⁵

But inequality is not inevitable. It is a political choice. It is the result of deliberate policy choices made by governments and international organizations. Conversely, it is now broadly agreed by most global policy makers that extreme inequality is also avoidable, and that concrete steps can be taken to reduce inequality.⁶

*Inequality is not inevitable.
It is a political choice.*

Good-quality education can be liberating for individuals, and it can act as a leveller and equalizer within society. This report will show the unparalleled power of education to level the playing field, to help close the growing divides, and bring us closer together.

'There can be no contentment for any of us when there are children, millions of children, who do not receive an education that provides them with dignity and honour and allows them to live their lives to the full.'

Nelson Mandela⁷

EDUCATION THAT PULLS US APART

A highly unequal education system can also pull us further apart.

In most countries, children born into rich families will go to the best possible schools, very often being privately educated. They will have small class sizes, good teachers and get good results. These students will be given multiple opportunities to grow their inherited privilege.

Girls and boys born into poverty, suffering from ill health and malnutrition, arrive at the school gates already disadvantaged – if they arrive there at all. They will then struggle with overcrowded facilities that lack trained and qualified teachers, textbooks and toilets.

Pulled out of school before their brothers, millions more of the world's poorest girls will continue to have their life chances stymied by an education that is all too brief.

New analysis by Oxfam, using data from UNESCO, shows that in developing countries, a child from a poor family is seven times less likely to finish secondary school than a child from a rich family.⁸

In developing countries, children from **rich families are 7 times more likely** to complete secondary school than children from **poor families**.



Even in rich countries, only three-quarters of children from the poorest families complete secondary education, compared to 90% of children from the richest families.⁹

Inequalities of income are compounded with other inequalities of gender, ethnicity, disability and geography to form a suffocating web of exclusion. In a poor rural area of Pakistan, girls are three times as likely as poor boys to have never attended school.¹⁰ In India, the median number of years of education girls from the poorest families receive is zero, compared to 9.1 years for girls from the richest families.¹¹ Educational inequalities are also driven by policies that encourage commercialization of education and expand private provision of schooling through public-private partnerships (PPPs), which can deepen segregation and stratification in education systems.¹²

When good education can only be accessed by families with money, it undermines social mobility; it ensures that if you are born poor, you and your children will die poor, no matter how hard you work. It also undermines our societies, as the children of the wealthy are segregated from the children of ordinary families from an early age.

'I have seen so many clever girls and boys who score highly despite coming from poor backgrounds. I remember Chimwemwe Gabisa – she was brilliant at mathematics, the best I have taught. She finished secondary school but could not proceed to college for lack of funds.'

Nellie Kumambala, secondary school teacher, Lumbadzi, Malawi¹³

While schooling remains segregated by class, wealth, ethnicity, gender or other signifiers of privilege and exclusion, this cements inequality. Segregated patterns of schooling build segregated communities, driving a wedge between the haves and the have-nots, right at the start of life.

EDUCATION CAN CLOSE THE GAP BETWEEN RICH AND POOR

Conversely, good-quality public education for all can be a powerful engine for greater equality.

Governments can take the cost of a good education away from families, with an immediate impact on the income gap between rich and poor, as the cash benefit is proportionately far greater for families on lower incomes.

To find out more about these positive effects, Oxfam looked at available public spending data for primary education across 78 low-, middle- and high-income countries. The cash value of public education often exceeds the total income of the poorest families by a wide margin. For a single mother with two children both in primary school, for example, public spending on her children's schooling exceeds her family income by three times in Colombia.¹⁴

Yet beyond this boost to incomes, good education is an engine of equality in other important ways, by:

- **Reducing poverty.** A good education makes the likelihood of higher incomes and lower poverty much greater. It is estimated extreme poverty could be halved if universal primary and secondary education were achieved.¹⁵ UNESCO estimates that each year of schooling raises earnings by around 10% for men¹⁶ and up to 20% for women.¹⁷
- **Boosting opportunity for all.** Social mobility, i.e. the possibility for children from poor families to end up better off than their parents, is intimately tied to the availability of education.
- **Bringing society together.** Schools can be places where the children of rich and poor families can become friends, and the barriers of inequality are broken down. They can challenge the rules that perpetuate economic inequality in broader society, and give young people the tools to go into the world and build more equitable societies.
- **Supporting democratic societies.** Education offers individuals the tools to exercise their right to an equal say over the structures and policies that govern their lives, which boosts democracy.¹⁸ Extensive research shows that increased education leads to greater political and civic engagement.¹⁹

EDUCATION CAN CLOSE THE GAP BETWEEN WOMEN AND MEN

Good education has considerable power to increase equality between women and men. Education can help tackle gender disparities in wages, poverty, reproductive autonomy and political power. It can dramatically improve the health outcomes for women and their children.

The more educated women are, the closer their earnings are to those of men. In Pakistan, women with only a primary education earn around 50% of men's wages. Women with a secondary education earn 70% of men's wages – still unacceptable, but a far narrower gap.²⁰

The more educated women are, the more power they have over their lives, particularly over when they marry and how many children they have. If all girls in sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia completed secondary education, there would be a 64% drop in child marriages.²¹

The more educated mothers are, the healthier they and their children are.²² UNESCO estimates that if all women had completed primary education, there would be a 66% reduction in maternal deaths globally, and a 15% reduction in child deaths.²³

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, good quality education has the power to challenge traditional social attitudes and ensure that girls and boys know that they are equal.

FREE, PUBLIC AND HIGH-QUALITY EDUCATION FOR ALL

The way that education is delivered is key to ensuring its positive impact on reducing inequality can be maximized. To do this, education needs to be:

- **Universal.** In recent decades, there has been huge progress. Primary school enrolment is now almost universal, with nearly as many girls enrolling as boys – a huge challenge only a generation or so ago.²⁴ Nevertheless, at current rates, it could be another 100 years before all girls in sub-Saharan Africa have the opportunity to complete a full 12 years of education, which is a commitment in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).²⁵
- **Free.** Government investment in free education is crucial for building equality because it gives every child a fair chance, not just those who can afford to pay. Fees of any kind at pre-primary, primary and secondary level exclude the poorest, and especially girls. In Ghana, after fees for senior high school (upper secondary) were dropped in September 2017, 90,000 more students came through the school doors at the start of the new academic year.²⁶
- **Public.** When publicly delivered education works, the scale and speed of its impact cannot be matched. Many public education systems face challenges in terms of learning outcomes, but the answer is adequate investment, not turning to the private sector, as donors like the World Bank are increasingly advocating.²⁷ Public-private partnerships (PPPs) and for-profit schools are a dangerous diversion from what is needed to deliver education for all.

Box 1: PPPs in Pakistan are a dangerous diversion from public education

Pakistan has 24 million children out of school. To tackle this, Punjab State is no longer building any new public schools, but instead investing in a PPP. The key aim is to get more of the 5.5 million out-of-school children in Punjab into education.²⁸

However, Oxfam's research²⁹ found that only 1.3% of children in the private schools surveyed had previously been out of school. The following are quotes from private school principals interviewed during the research:

'We don't have any out-of-school children in this school. The ones in the community don't want to study and can be a waste of our time.'

'The poor go to government schools in the area. They cannot afford any expenditure on education. We as school owners cannot include the poorest of the poor in this school with other kids. It's not like a charity, we have limited funds from [the PPP], and I also need to earn a livelihood from this.'

'In [the PPP] it is the teachers who suffer the most. I cannot pay a decent salary to my teachers. I cannot hire male teachers, as they demand a higher salary. Females have fewer options for work.'

- **Investment in teachers.** An empowered and professionally trained teacher has been shown to be the biggest contributor to ensuring quality education.³⁰ Public school teachers, the majority of whom are women in most regions, are often

underpaid, under-supported and portrayed as part of the problem.³¹ Yet they are the backbone of every school system.

- **Inclusive.** Education and teaching have to address the unique learning needs of all students and be designed to meet the needs of those left out and left behind, including children with disabilities, minorities, marginalized groups, the poorest and out-of-school children.
- **Relevant.** The curriculum, or what is taught in school, is vital to ensuring the maximum impact of education on reducing inequality. Teaching needs to be in the local language and done at a pace that benefits all children, not just the top performers. Curricula need to challenge traditional attitudes to gender equality and inspire critical thinking in children.
- **Accountable to families and citizens.** Good education systems have good public oversight mechanisms. These ensure that every school is properly scrutinized and accountable to those it serves.

INVESTING IN FREE PUBLIC EDUCATION FOR ALL

Delivering universal public education for all is an investment. As the World Bank and others have noted, investment in human capital is integral to driving sustainable and equitable economic growth.³² Many governments recognize this and have dramatically increased their funding of education.

Box 2: Progress in education in Ethiopia

Many developing countries today operate public services on a scale impossible to conceive in the history of rich nations when at comparable income levels.

Ethiopia is a poor country, with around the same per capita income as Canada in 1840.³³ However, it is the fifth largest spender on education in the world as a proportion of its budget:

- It employs over 400,000 primary school teachers;³⁴ and
- Between 2005 and 2015, it has brought an additional 15 million children into school – from 10 to 25 million.³⁵

Ethiopia still faces serious challenges with learning outcomes and improving the quality of education,³⁶ but the scale of its commitment and effort to educate girls and boys is dramatic.

Sadly, many others have not. Nigeria has more than 10 million children out of school, yet some of the lowest education spending in the world.³⁷

Most of the increased spending can be covered by increased tax collection from rich individuals and corporations. For example, Ecuador tripled its education spending from 2003 to 2010 through effective tax mobilization policies and prioritizing education in its budget.³⁸

However, tax alone is not enough. The poorest countries need significantly increased levels of aid from rich nations for education. Of the \$340bn needed, \$40bn will need to come from increases in donor aid. Aid to education, after falling, is now stagnant, and being diverted away from those countries that need it most.³⁹

EDUCATION TO FIGHT INEQUALITY

'Education is not a way to escape poverty. It is a way of fighting it.'

Julius Nyerere, founding president of Tanzania⁴⁰

Economic inequality is growing. The kind of education system a country has will have a major impact on the capacity to respond to this. Access to good quality education for individual children offers a pathway to liberation from poverty and illness, towards the fulfilment of basic rights. It can transform lives and bring children out of the shadows of poverty and marginalization. For societies, it acts as a leveller, and as an agent for greater equality. Rapidly investing in quality public education for all should be a priority for all nations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To build equitable and good-quality public education that can help fight economic and gender inequality, policy makers must focus on the following actions:

1. Deliver universal, fee-free education from pre-primary to secondary

- Set out plans to ensure free, equitable and high-quality primary and secondary education for 12 full years, as agreed in SDG 4 on education.
- Eliminate fees at all levels, including informal fees, progressively achieving fee-free secondary education. This must be carefully planned so as not to jeopardize quality. Progressively expand access to at least one year of fee-free, quality pre-primary education.
- Support the poorest, minorities and children with disabilities with extra help to redress disadvantage, so that they stay in school and learning.
- Support poor and vulnerable girls to go to school and stay in school.

2. Focus on policies that can help to deliver quality for all

- Develop a fully costed and funded strategy to deliver a trained, qualified and well-supported professional workforce, with enough teachers and other personnel to deliver education for all up to secondary school.
- Invest in relevant and non-discriminatory teaching materials, taking into account mother tongues; the changing needs of the majority; and the need for schools to be places where sexist and patriarchal rules are challenged, not learned.
- Develop local accountability mechanisms between schools and their communities, parents and children; build better safeguarding and accountability mechanisms from national to local levels, including ensuring budgets and other information is available publicly and transparently for citizen scrutiny.
- Use appropriate assessments that encourage a feedback loop for curriculum development and classroom adaptations at the local level; do not simply equate higher test scores with improved quality.

3. Deliver more equal education systems

- Develop national education plans that focus coherently and comprehensively on identifying pre-existing inequalities in education, producing data on gaps and needs, and developing appropriate strategies.
- Ensure equitable teacher deployment, coupled with equitable spending on school infrastructure and learning inputs, to help redress disadvantage. This may require affirmative action in poorer or more marginalized districts or regions.
- Ensure additional spending targeted at redressing disadvantage for marginalized or poor children in ways with proven impact.
- Ensure schools and teachers are supported to address the unique learning needs of all students, including children with disabilities. This will require training teachers on differentiated instruction as well as proper data collection and diagnosis.

4. Focus on building public systems first; stop supporting privatization

- Devote the maximum available resources to public education provision, to ensure adequately and equitably financed public schools; do not direct public funds to commercial or for-profit private schools, or market-oriented PPPs. Avoid diverting scarce public resources and attention away from the essential task of building good-quality, inclusive public schools that are free and accessible for all students.
- Ensure adequate regulation of private education providers, especially commercial schools, to ensure educational quality and standards are being upheld.
- Safeguard the labour rights of teachers, especially female teachers, in the public sector and the private sector as well.
- Donors and multilateral institutions such as the World Bank should support the improvement and expansion of public education delivery, and should not direct public aid funds to commercial or for-profit private schools, or market-oriented PPPs.

5. Ensure education works to strengthen equality for girls and women

- Address the particular barriers that keep girls out of school or learning, such as providing separate bathrooms for boys and girls, addressing the non-fee related costs of schooling, and ensuring curricula and teacher training promote positive gender roles and avoid stereotypes.
- Invest in early childhood care and education programmes that take account of the needs of women (i.e. fit around typical working hours), and young girls who are expected to care for children: this can free up women's time by easing the millions of unpaid hours they spend every day caring for their families and homes.

6. Fully fund public education systems to deliver quality and equality for all

- Governments must scale up spending to deliver quality and equity in education; in low- and middle-income countries this will require at least 20% of government budgets, or 6% of GDP allocated to education. Those with the furthest to go, and large youth populations, may need to invest more than this in the short term.

- Government spending must proactively redress disadvantage, including by adopting equity-of-funding approaches to address the historical disadvantage faced by the poorest groups.
- Invest in building robust structures, from school to local to national levels, for the effective oversight and accountability of education budgets.
- Tax wealth and capital at fairer levels. Stop the race to the bottom on personal income and corporate taxes. Eliminate tax avoidance and evasion by corporations and the super-rich. Agree a new set of global rules and institutions to fundamentally redesign the tax system to make it fair, with developing countries having an equal seat at the table.
- Donors should substantially increase their official development assistance (ODA) commitments to education, especially to basic education and in countries with the greatest needs, in order to ensure developing countries are able to devote adequate resources to build quality public education provision.



Three students at Project School in Bajarial, South Sudan. Photo credit: William Vest-Lillesoe.

1 THE GREAT EQUALIZER

Public education has long been described as ‘the Great Equalizer’ because of its transformative power for individuals and society.⁴¹ It can help to tackle extreme income inequality⁴² and chronic poverty; ensure economic growth is more broadly shared by acting as a redistributive tool; and lead to more equitable national economies.⁴³

In this way, a good-quality education can be liberating for individuals, and it can act as a leveller and equalizer within society, closing the gap between rich and poor, and women and men. However, the converse can also be true: a highly unequal education system can pull us further apart. This is because an education system that is itself highly unequal will contribute towards more unequal societies by solidifying pre-existing inequalities and limiting social mobility.

If we want to use education as a tool for fighting inequality, it matters how we do it.

Quality for all is key to unlocking potential

In the report *Public Good or Private Wealth?* Oxfam presented clear evidence of the role quality public services play in reducing inequality.⁴⁴ To most effectively reduce the gap, public services need to be universal, free, public, accountable and work for women. This includes education.

Quality in education is also about how much, and what, is learned. In an increasingly complex world, this cannot merely be about just learning the basics. It must be about giving an opportunity for every child to make the most of their talents, to contribute to and benefit from economic prosperity, and to be part of human progress. The type of education available to the majority must be good enough to unlock that potential.

This requires a bolder vision for the kind of education available to all our children: transformative, giving girls and boys the skills to make their own choices and decisions, and empowering individuals to become active and responsible citizens. It must focus on breaking down gender inequalities, giving girls and boys the same opportunities, while challenging stereotypes about the roles of women and men, and empowering girls to challenge inequality.

THE TWIN CRISES OF QUALITY AND EQUALITY IN EDUCATION

It is not enough to only focus on improving quality; we must also attempt to equalize opportunity within education. Governments must focus on the extreme inequality in education in many developing countries, where schools are often segregated by class. Poor children do systemically worse than their richer peers, dropping-out earlier,⁴⁵ and girls face severe discrimination.⁴⁶ Making education more equal means improving access to education for all – from early years through to at least secondary schooling.

The evidence from around the world shows that raising quality while focusing on making education more equal is key to raising standards for all, and tackling broader inequality in society.⁴⁷ In other words, if a government wishes to ensure that education contributes to building a more equal society, then education systems themselves need

to be more equal. Action on equality and quality must go hand-in-hand: they cannot be seen as policy trade-offs.

Action on equality and quality must go hand-in-hand: they cannot be seen as policy trade-offs.

Addressing the combined challenge of expanding educational access together with improving learning for all young people, regardless of their background, must remain a top priority for governments. But the reality in the majority of developing countries is that there is an enormous gulf in the schooling experience of its richest and poorest girls and boys. The richest children tend to go to private, well-resourced schools, in which their talent is nurtured, usually until the end of secondary schooling, and often beyond. The poorest manage a few years in an underfunded public school, often with an overwhelmed teacher; they learn little, drop out in large numbers and their talent is squandered. Many of the poorest girls, in particular, don't even make it through the classroom doors.

The international community, through Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, has committed to inclusive, equitable and quality primary and secondary education for all children by 2030.⁴⁸ The challenge remains in turning these words into reality – it requires tackling the twin crises of quality and inequality in countries with poor education systems. This report shows how governments can do it through the right policies.

Box 3: Defining quality, equity and equality in education

When discussing inequality in education, we discuss both 'inequality of opportunity' and 'inequality in outcomes'. We sometimes use the word 'inequity' and 'inequality' interchangeably. Oxfam recognizes that these are contested terms used differently by different people. Oxfam has chosen, in the main, to talk about *equality* in education to better mirror the importance of the broader struggle towards greater equality in societies.

Oxfam recognizes that the education sector has often used the term 'equity' to signify an approach that considers the social justice ramifications of education – i.e. the fairness or justness of education. We recognize the fundamental importance of social justice, and apply the same principles to the term 'equal education'. Oxfam's interpretation of equal education also includes the important role of education as a public good, in fighting for equality and other social goods.

In some instances, however, the word 'equity' is deliberately used⁴⁹ because equality in education is not always achieved through equal policy interventions for all, i.e. the poorest children often require more resources to catch up, and eventually close the achievement gap, or children with a disability may require additional support. This is at the heart of equitable policy making in educational provision.

When talking about 'quality', it should be clear that this is not focused only on equipping children with basic skills (such as literacy and numeracy); such foundations are critical but insufficient to unleash the equity-enhancing and transformative role of education. Rather, Oxfam believes that a good-quality education supports the cognitive, creative and emotional development of all learners. Education should be transformative for learners.

2 THE POWER OF EDUCATION

Education can be a powerful tool for individual opportunity. It can help equip men and women, rich and poor with equal voice and power; it can drive social mobility, build more cohesive societies and, ultimately, build greater equality. This section reviews the evidence of the unparalleled power of education to act as an equalizing force.

EDUCATION CAN FIGHT POVERTY

There is considerable evidence that education tackles poverty. It is estimated that extreme poverty could be halved if universal primary and secondary education was achieved.⁵¹

Universal free education enhances people's earning power, and can bring them out of poverty. Low levels of education hamper economic growth, which in turn slows down poverty reduction.⁵² UNESCO estimates that each year of schooling raises earnings by around 10%;⁵³ this figure is even higher for women. In Tanzania, having a secondary education reduces the chances of being poor as a working adult by almost 60%.⁵⁴

Investment in education is also a proven enabler of the whole sustainable development agenda: it can lead to improvements in long-term health benefits, help ensure greater gender equality, promote democratic governance and peace, foster more sustainable livelihoods and tackle environmental degradation.⁵⁵

EDUCATION CAN FIGHT ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

A growing body of evidence has shown that extreme income inequality is preventable through investment in quality and equitable education.⁵⁶ Increased spending on education is, as the IMF has highlighted, an element of the 'right policies' to tackle inequality.⁵⁷ The OECD has made education central to its policy agenda for tackling rising income inequalities in both developed⁵⁸ and emerging economies.⁵⁹ The 2018 *World Inequality Report* pointed to the need for public investment in education 'to tackle existing inequality and to prevent further increases'.⁶⁰

This is because public spending on education has an immediate impact on income inequality and poverty by redistributing public resources; it can also have a secondary and longer-term impact on inequality through its effects in promoting social mobility and boosting future earnings and opportunities.

The expansion of schooling across the developing world has had a particularly profound impact on poverty and inequality; as greater schooling has targeted the most disadvantaged populations, it has had a large impact on inequality. An IMF cross-country analysis⁶¹ found that, while spending on education is 'always inequality reducing', expansion in developing countries over the last few decades accounts for much of this. This means that education expansion over the last 15 years has had a

'Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that the son of a mine worker can become the head of the mine, that a child of farmworkers can become the President of a great nation. It is what we make out of what we have, not what we are given, that separates one person from another.'

Nelson Mandela⁵⁰

‘significant impact’ on income inequality across multiple countries – especially in developing and emerging economies.⁶² Looking to the future, the IMF noted that continuing to tackle inequality in education will put ‘strong downward pressure on income inequality’.⁶³

Continual investment in bringing increased levels of education to more of the population must therefore be central to fighting inequality and poverty. This is particularly pressing now, as previous progress on poverty reduction is stalling. With extreme poverty increasing in sub-Saharan Africa,⁶⁴ expanding education as an engine for poverty reduction must continue to be a focus for governments.

EDUCATION CAN FIGHT GENDER INEQUALITY

Education has a particularly important role to play in fighting the economic divide that both drives the gap between women and men and is driven by it.

By ensuring all girls have equal educational opportunities, governments can have a huge impact on women's empowerment and gender inequalities. The considerable progress in reducing gender disparities in school enrolment over the last 15 years or so – mainly at primary level – has helped to reduce gender inequalities. But significant inequalities still exist in many countries. Data consistently shows, especially in low- and middle-income countries, that girls from poor families are the children most likely to be (and remain) out of school.⁶⁶ There remains an extremely troubling likelihood for girls not to continue their schooling beyond primary education. They are also substantially more likely to drop out of school earlier due to work or early marriage.⁶⁷ Moreover, girls often have to juggle a multitude of domestic duties – such as fetching water, cooking and cleaning – with school work.

These gaps need to be overcome to fight gender inequality in the short, medium and long term. When girls and young women are educated – even to primary level, but ideally up to at least secondary – the benefits are significant, for themselves, their families and their societies.

Ensuring that girls can continue in school longer plays a well-established role in limiting other practices, such as child marriage.⁶⁸ Expanding secondary level education has been shown to have the biggest impact overall on reducing child marriage.⁶⁹ Girls and young women with no education are three times more likely to marry before 18 than those with a secondary or higher education.⁷⁰ It is estimated that if all girls in sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia completed secondary education, there would be a 64% drop in child marriages.⁷¹ Girls pushed into child marriage, almost always to older men, often become pregnant while still adolescents, causing gender and age imbalances that leave them struggling to negotiate their sexuality.⁷² Neither physically nor emotionally ready to give birth, they face higher risks of death in childbirth – the leading cause of death among older adolescent girls in developing countries.⁷³ Such practices are often viewed in communities as a part of the traditional way of easing economic hardship by transferring this ‘burden’ to her husband’s family, or to preserve a girl’s honour: the underlying driver, though, is inequitable relationships between men and women, boys and girls.

The disproportionate benefits of expanding education extend to women's children. The more educated mothers are, the less likely their children will be subject to early death,

‘Education can be a locus of gender inequality, where stereotypical behaviour and views are reinforced, or a catalyst of transformation, providing individuals with opportunity and capability to challenge and change discriminatory attitudes and practices.’

2016 Global Education Monitoring Report, Gender Review⁶⁵

waterborne diseases, malaria and malnutrition.⁷⁴ In Kenya, education reforms that increased schooling for young women by 1.8 years also led to a 34% decline in the maternal mortality rate later in their lives. UNESCO estimates that if all women completed primary education, there would be a 66% reduction in maternal deaths globally, and a 15% reduction in child deaths.⁷⁵ All this helps to reduce the transmission of intergenerational poverty and inequality.



Girls from Chembera secondary school in Balaka district, Malawi, with the bicycles they received from Oxfam in order to commute to school every morning. The aim is for the bicycles to act as an incentive for parents and guardians to send their girls to school, since distance will no longer be a barrier to them accessing education. Photo: Corinna Kern.

EDUCATION CAN DELIVER DECENT WORK

Education disrupts persistent and growing inequality by supporting the growth of more decent work, raising incomes for the poorest people.

These opportunities are significant: in El Salvador, for example, 47% of adults with a secondary education have a formal employment contract, compared to just 5% of those with less than primary education.⁷⁷ In South Africa, completing upper secondary education, as opposed to just lower secondary education, raises the chance of employment from less than 45% to 60%.⁷⁸ The work and income effects of education are particularly marked for women. In Pakistan, for example, working women with good literacy skills earn nearly twice as much as women with weak literacy.⁷⁹

However, the more significant wage-boosting power of education does not come simply from basic literacy, but from the education that can be received at secondary level and above.⁸⁰ Thus, ensuring that poor children, especially girls, advance through the education system is crucial. As the World Inequality Lab states, 'more equal access to education and well-paying jobs is key to addressing the stagnating or sluggish income growth rates of the poorest half of the population'.⁸¹

'Education should be a driver of equal opportunity and social mobility, not a transmission mechanism for social injustice.'

2010 Education for All Global Monitoring Report⁷⁶

Current trends in working patterns and the nature of employment seem likely to elevate the importance of good education for all in reducing inequality. Many economies are now shifting employment away from agriculture and manufacturing, while demand for high-skilled workers grows. The global employment share of high-skilled workers has grown by almost 40% since 1990, and work is increasingly polarized between high- and low-skilled jobs, as advancing automation puts low- and medium-skilled jobs at risk.⁸² With many of the world's low-skilled jobs most susceptible to automation, developing economies will be at greater risk of technology-induced unemployment. For instance, it is estimated that half of the world's jobs are expected to disappear due to automation by 2030.⁸³ There will be an increased demand for high-skilled labour as many low- and medium-skilled jobs become obsolete. The very nature of this work requires dramatically increasing the quality of education in almost all developing countries. Thus, holistic, high-quality education that teaches critical thinking and higher-order skills, not just narrow numeracy and literacy, will be vital because these are the skills required for the jobs of the future.

EDUCATION CAN BRING US CLOSER TOGETHER

The opportunity for every child to learn and make the most of their talents is crucial for building fairer societies, and crucially, the sense that a society is fair among its citizens. Education can help to promote long-lasting, inclusive economic growth and social cohesion; it can empower individuals to reach their full potential and enjoy the fruits of their labour, regardless of their circumstances at birth. Education can also help to mitigate some of the more corrosive impacts of extreme inequality on society, such as the erosion of democratic institutions.

Social mobility – the ability to move up the income ladder, both in one's lifetime and relative to one's parents – is central to reducing inequality, fighting poverty and inclusive growth. Historical evidence clearly shows that equal education has been a major driver of social mobility, and this continues to be the case in many countries.⁸⁴

On an individual level, the abilities to read, write, and analyse and evaluate different sources empower citizens to engage in civic and political life. In a democratic society, education offers individuals the tools to exercise their right to an equal say over the structures and policies that govern their lives. Extensive research dating back at least to the 1970s bears out the intuitive expectation that increased education leads to greater political and civic engagement.⁸⁵ This holds in wealthy countries,⁸⁶ as well as less wealthy democratic countries. The latest Afrobarometer survey of 36 African countries, for example, shows that respondents who had completed primary school or above were all more likely to have ever contacted their local government councillor than those with no or very little formal education.⁸⁷

This matters for nations as a whole, not just individuals. Around the world, higher levels of education correlate to greater support for democracy, as opposed to less equitable and participatory forms of government.⁸⁸ Analysis of this data has showed clearly that:

- education itself leads to democracy;
- this relationship holds across countries; and

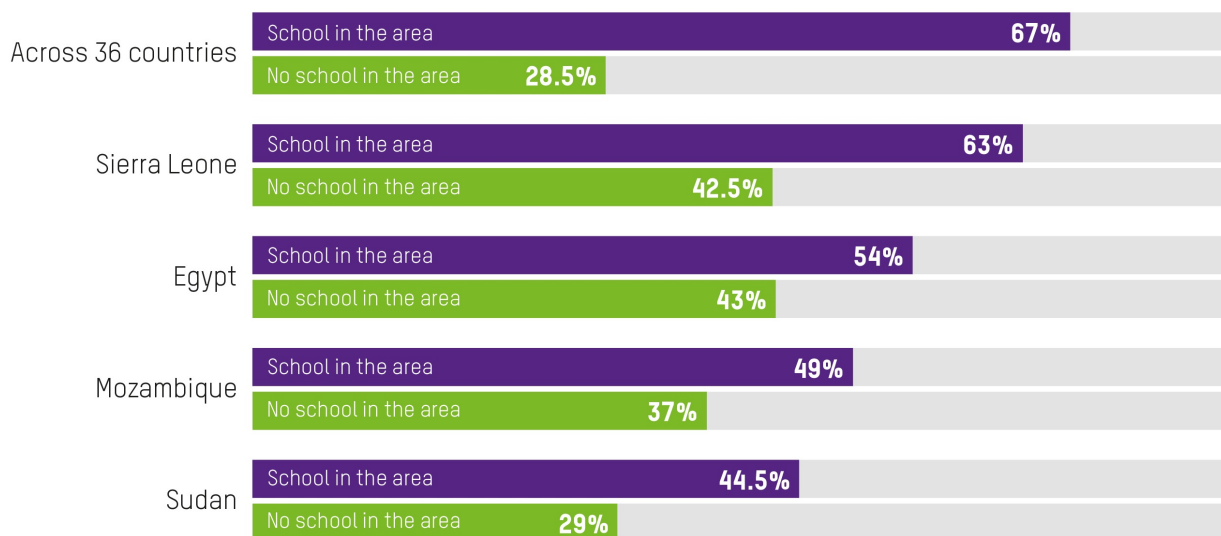
Education can help to promote long-lasting, inclusive economic growth and social cohesion; it can empower individuals to reach their full potential and enjoy the fruits of their labour, regardless of their circumstances at birth. Education can also help to mitigate some of the more corrosive impacts of extreme inequality on society, such as the erosion of democratic institutions.

- as education levels increase, democracies are more likely to be stable and to persist in the face of challenges.⁸⁹

The same Afrobarometer survey shows that education levels are a significant predictor of support for democracy and rejection of non-democratic alternatives, with a 13 percentage point increase in support for democracy among those with some secondary education compared to those with no formal schooling, and nearly a 20 point difference between those who have completed university and those with no schooling.⁹⁰ As shown in **Figure 3**, even having a school in the local area increases support for democracy, with this difference most marked in some of those countries – such as Egypt and Sierra Leone – where democracy is less well entrenched.⁹¹

The evidence thus indicates that, in countries where access to education is restricted, opening up education to a broader section of society plays an important role in entrenching democracy and democratic decision making. As one recent analysis of the data concludes, ‘education causes the more inclusive groups to dominate politics’.⁹² This is borne out by a recent study by economists Mark Gradstein and Moshe Justman, which has made explicit the role of public education specifically in building the social cohesion that underpins inclusive and equitable government and politics, or, as they describe it, the role of public schooling in providing benefits ‘by shrinking the “social distance” between individuals’.⁹³

Figure 1: Surveyed level of support for democracy among 36 African countries



Source: Data taken from the Afrobarometer Survey. Afrobarometer Data, 2016, available at: <http://afrobarometer.org>.

In developing countries (especially fragile states where the social contract is still being built), the delivery of public education plays a crucial role in building state-citizen trust. Studies show that positive schooling experiences give children and families faith in government and society. If the coverage or quality of government schools is very weak, it can erode this faith.⁹⁴ This is particularly important in fragile and low-income countries, where the only visible sign of that contract may be the local school.

Positive schooling experiences give children and families faith in government and society. If the coverage or quality of government schools is very weak, it can erode this faith.

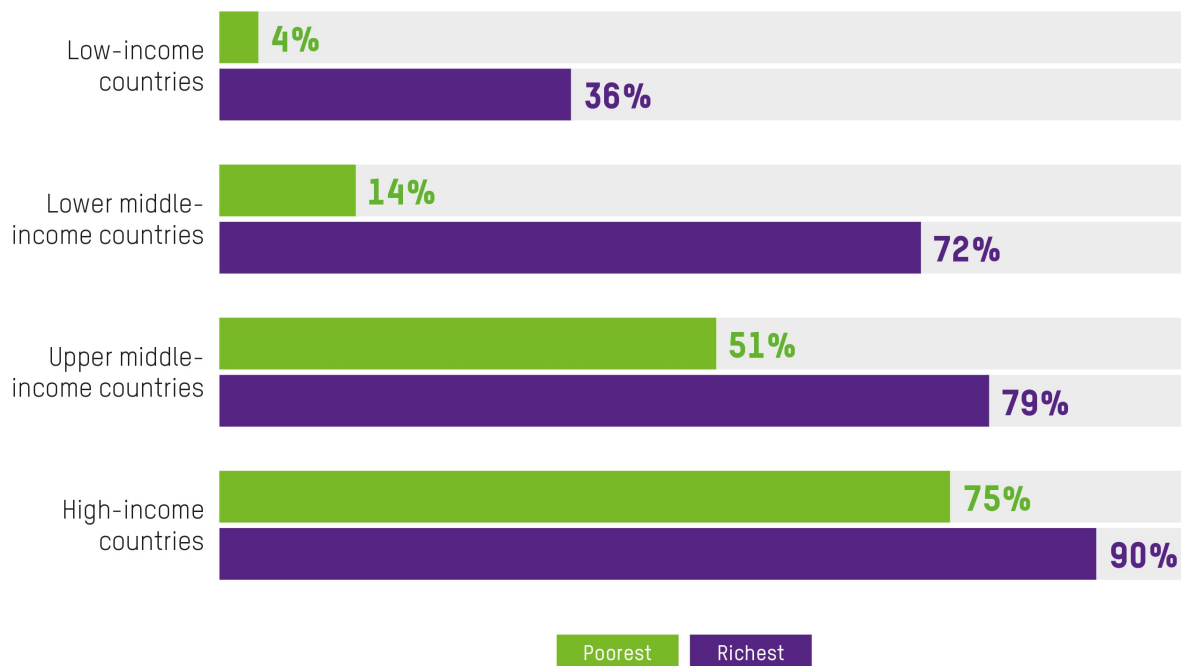
More equitable public education is key to building or repairing the social contract, by helping people to participate more equally in public discourse, democracy and decision making; increasing the sense of equal opportunities; and helping to build a coherent sense of ‘the public’.⁹⁵

3 THE PROBLEM OF UNEQUAL EDUCATION

In spite of the vast potential of education to tackle inequality in society, at present, education systems in many developing countries are largely reproducing inequalities. Vast disparities in educational opportunities are a mirror image of pre-existing inequalities in wider society.

The education available to the majority is letting children down, because it is often very poor quality; not free; or biased against people who are poor, disabled or the most marginalized. Many girls continue to struggle to go to school; when in school, they have to fight against powerful patriarchal expectations of their roles. This gets in the way of these children realising their potential, and limits education in its power to transform lives and promote meaningful opportunity.⁹⁶ Put simply, right now education is not doing enough to help bring societies closer together.

In developing countries, children from rich families are seven times more likely to complete secondary school than children from poor families.⁹⁷ Even in rich countries, only three-quarters of children from the poorest families complete secondary education, compared with 90% from the richest families.⁹⁸



THE STATE OF EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY

While patterns of educational inequality vary between countries based on historical, geographical or economic factors, common bases of inequality include:

- rural/urban divides;
- family income poverty;

- gender;
- disability;
- ethnic, religious or language identity; and
- location.

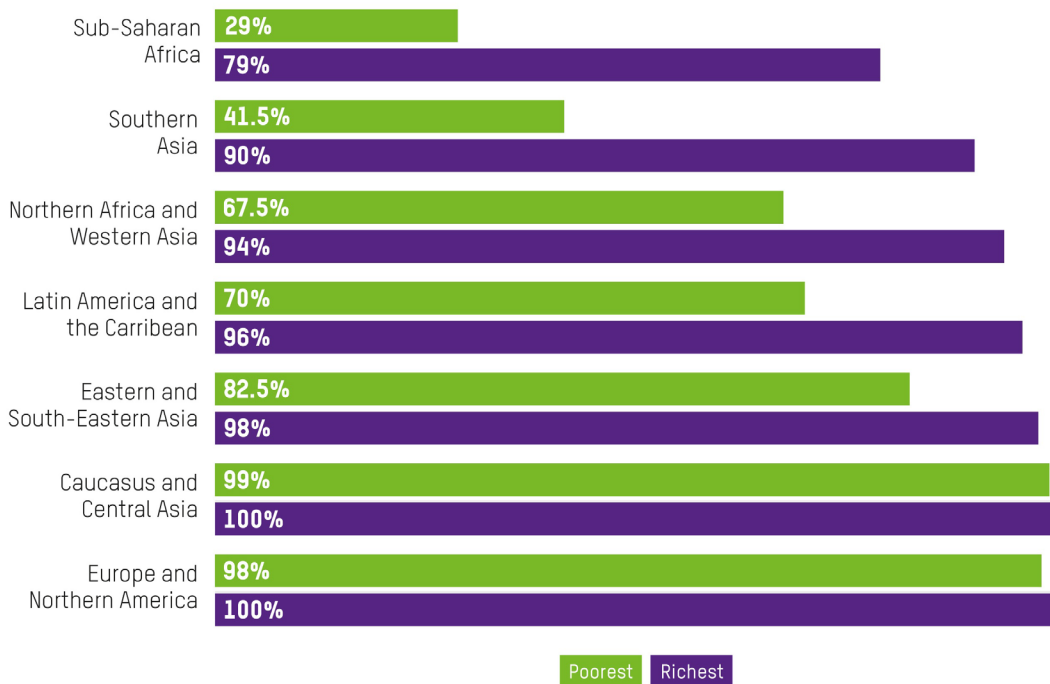
There has been huge progress since the 1990s in getting more children into primary school. However, there are still gaps in progression across primary school, and many of the most marginalized and poorest children, often girls, remain out of school. An average level of primary school completion of 74% across low- and lower-middle income countries⁹⁹ masks large and often persistent inequality gaps. These gaps are largely between children from the poorest and wealthiest backgrounds. In Pakistan, for instance, more than 75% of the richest children complete primary school, but fewer than 30% of the very poorest do.¹⁰⁰ In Denmark, 9th grade students from the upper middle class score 30% better in exams than children from poorer households.¹⁰¹

These gaps widen further after primary school. In a large majority of developing countries, the poorest children have less than 10% of the chances of rich children to attend higher education. For example, in Malawi, a poor child has about 30% of a wealthier child's chance of enrolling in secondary school, and less than 1% of a wealthier child's chance of enrolling in higher education.¹⁰²

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Location is another common source of inequality. In most developing countries, rural children are at a distinct disadvantage. In Senegal, urban children are twice as likely to be in school as rural children.¹⁰³ In most low- and middle-income countries, children with disabilities are more likely to be out of school than any other group of children.¹⁰⁴

Figure 2: Primary completion rates for different regions, between the poorest and richest quintiles

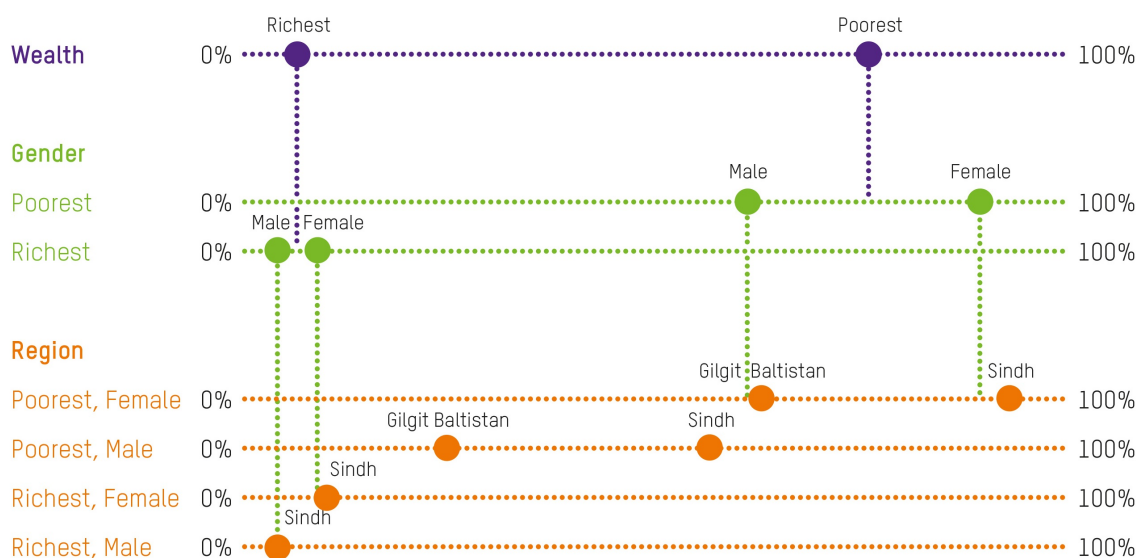


Source: Data taken from the World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE). See <https://www.inequalities.org/>.

These patterns are broadly reflected in learning inequalities: the poorest children consistently perform at lower levels than their wealthier peers. In Madagascar, by the end of primary school, 97% of the richest learn the basics in reading, but only 15% of their poorest counterparts meet the same level.¹⁰⁵

Much has happened to get more girls into school over the last half decade, with the average number of years in school for girls doubling globally from three to seven. However, in some countries, there is still an incredibly low level of access even to primary school for girls: in Central African Republic and Chad, more than a third of girls of primary school age are out of school; this is even higher in Liberia (64%).¹⁰⁶ In India, the median number of years of education girls from the richest 20% receive is 9.1, whereas the median number for children from the poorest 20% is zero years.¹⁰⁷ But it is the poorest rural girls – those facing intersectional discrimination – who deal with the greatest challenges in getting to school, especially in highly patriarchal societies. For instance, deeply rooted gender inequalities in Pakistan are reflected across all groups, but for poor children, especially in rural or disadvantaged areas, they act as a powerful exclusionary force from education (see **Figure 3**). As a result, poor girls are three times as likely as poor boys to have never attended school.¹⁰⁸

Figure 3: What are your chances of having less than four years' schooling in Pakistan? Intersecting inequalities by wealth, gender and location.



Source: Data taken from the World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE). See <https://www.education-inequalities.org/>.

UNEQUAL EDUCATION DIVIDES US

Currently education is doing too little to ensure that children can learn together – or from each other. In many poor countries, a child born to a rich family will go to the best school, with the best teaching, and will be given more opportunities to grow their inherited privilege. They will be able to use their wealth to see that their children do the same.

If they make it into education, the world's poorest girls and boys – due to poverty, ill health and chronic malnutrition – will arrive at the school gates already severely

disadvantaged. They will then struggle in overcrowded facilities that lack teachers, textbooks and toilets. They will pass on their poverty to their children.

Pulled out of schools before their brothers, millions more of the poorest girls – whose education is often deemed a ‘waste’ after a certain age by powerful gender norms – will continue to have their life chances stymied by an education that is all too brief.

As long as the schooling offered in villages, towns and cities across the developing world is segregated by class, wealth, ethnicity, gender or other signifiers of privilege and exclusion, it will cement inequality. Segregated patterns of schooling build segregated communities by driving a wedge between the haves and the have-nots right at the start of life. When schools become a haven for equity in the community, they can challenge the rules that perpetuate economic inequality in broader society. They can give young people the tools to go into the world and build more equitable societies.

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Unequal education is eroding democracy

Unequal education has serious implications for our societies, as well as individuals. A stratified and segregated system in which a low-quality education is available to the majority, while the more privileged can pay for a better education, does little to facilitate social cohesion or build a public sense of a collective.

Growing inequality is contributing to widespread mistrust of democratic institutions in many countries.¹⁰⁹ When governments fail to deliver basic functions expected by citizens, such as quality public services, they feel let down. When governments fail to ensure taxes are paid to enable them to provide public services, and when people see no dividends from democracy, that mistrust erodes democratic institutions. According to the International Trade Union Confederation’s 2017 Global Poll, 85% of the world’s people want the rules of the global economy rewritten, and people unanimously believe that the world would be a better place if governments were more committed to delivering public goods, such as education.¹¹⁰

Inequality in education is also contributing to a sense of social mobility being jammed, and the game being stacked in favour of the privileged. ‘Mobility has stalled in recent years’,¹¹¹ is the conclusion of a recent World Bank report using a new Global Database for Intergenerational Mobility¹¹² that covers 96% of the world’s population. The report looks at both economic and educational mobility. Both are much lower on average in developing economies than high-income economies – 46 of the bottom 50 are developing countries.¹¹³ Africa and South Asia, the regions with most of the world’s poorest people, have the lowest average mobility. In some low-income and/or fragile African countries, only 12% of today’s young adults have more education than their parents.¹¹⁴ This shows that the prospects of too many people across the world are still too closely tied to their parents’ social status rather than their own potential – and that education is doing very little to unleash the opportunity and talent of the many. Educational and economic mobility are most stagnant where substantial learning gaps exist between students at differing ends of the socio-economic scale, i.e. where education systems are highly unequal.¹¹⁵

In some low-income and/or fragile African countries, only 12% of today’s young adults have more education than their parents.

Rich countries are not immune to slowing social mobility, which adds to a sense of stalled chances for the average worker and their children. The US, for example, has particularly poor social mobility (see **Box 4**). In the report *A Broken Social Elevator?* the OECD documents a pattern of accelerated income inequality and stagnant social

mobility across the world's 24 richest countries since the 1990s. It contrasts the prospects of younger generations with those of people born between 1955 and 1975, when social mobility was a 'reality' and children from the poorest families often exceeded their parents in wealth and education.¹¹⁶

Analyses of recent social mobility trends by both the OECD and the World Bank have come to very similar conclusions: to help lower income inequality and enhance social mobility, countries must invest in good-quality and equitable education. This is especially important in contexts in which a good education is only available to those who can pay for it, as this leads to opportunity being hoarded by the wealthy. Researchers describe this phenomenon as the 'commodification of opportunity', whereby instead of accessing the opportunities that come with a decent education by right as a citizen, through a free public system, individuals must buy their way into opportunity by purchasing services privately.¹¹⁷ This creates situations in which the chance to enter more elite professions or earn higher incomes is passed on within families, and inequality deepens with each generation.¹¹⁸

The 'commodification of opportunity' is when individuals must buy their way into opportunity by purchasing services privately, instead of accessing the opportunities that come with a decent education by right as a citizen, through a free public system.

Box 4: Is the 'American Dream' over?

'Life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement... regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.'

This is the definition of the 'American Dream' by James Truslow Adams in his book *The Epic of America*, published in 1931.¹¹⁹

However, as the OECD has recently noted, in the United States: 'this concept of equal opportunities for all, however, has become a mere dream for some, while a privileged few enjoy abundant opportunities to succeed in life.'¹²⁰

Recent research shows that there can be an enormous gap between the public discourse about equal opportunity and the reality of unequal access to education in the United States. For instance, out of 100 children whose parents are among the bottom 10% of income earners, only 20 to 30 go to college. However, that figure reaches 90 when parents are within the top 10% of earners.¹²¹

This appears to be linked to increasing gaps in education: over the past three decades, growing wage gaps between secondary school graduates and secondary school dropouts has been a major source of rising inequality.¹²²

Historical intergenerational social mobility in the United States has been shown to be very strongly correlated to education. In one study of social mobility in the US, the strongest predictors of social mobility later in life were learning and educational quality, both individually and within the community in which a child lives (adjusted for the income of that community). Secondary predictors of social mobility were based on inputs, spending and class sizes.¹²³

In other words, education was a major part of the American dream. It is now part of its unravelling.

INEQUALITY IN SPENDING

Spending on equalizing education can have a long-term impact on inequality by helping to provide all citizens with the same opportunities. In order to do this, it must foster social mobility. World Bank data shows that, while greater social mobility is associated with higher public spending, the focus must be on building equitable and quality education systems.¹²⁴ However, currently, too little financial resources are

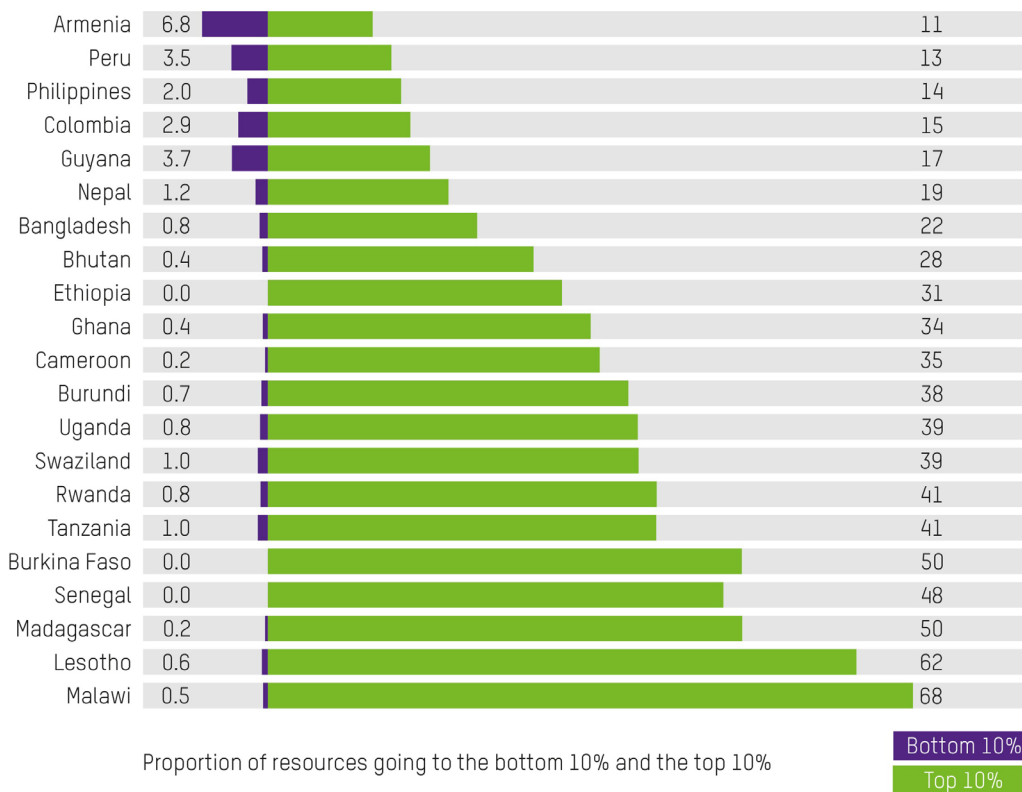
targeted at reaching the poorest and most marginalized students in many low-income countries.

Education budgets are often configured in a way which favours the wealthiest and most advantaged areas, or which fails to remedy disadvantage. On average, in low-income countries, 46% of public education resources are allocated to educating the most-educated 10% of students.¹²⁵ This is partly the result of perverse spending patterns in education: the very poorest children often end up having the least spent on them because they frequently drop out of school after only a few short years, or possibly don't go to school at all. But it is also a result of significant shares of education budgets being allocated to levels of education that are disproportionately accessed by higher-income groups, i.e. tertiary level. This is most dramatic in some of the world's poorest countries with the greatest educational inequality: in Malawi, Burkina Faso, Madagascar, Lesotho and Senegal, the richest 10% all get more than 50% of government-allocated education resources. In Malawi, the top 10% use 68% of all public resources in education;¹²⁶ close to a third of the country's education budget goes to tertiary education, yet figures show this is almost exclusively accessed by wealthier families.¹²⁷ A child from a family on the bottom three rungs of income – middle, poor, and poorest – has a less than 1% chance of completing tertiary education, while the richest children have a 20% chance.¹²⁸

In low-income countries, 46% of public education resources are allocated to educating the most-educated 10% of students.

This is explained by the fact that it inherently costs more per pupil to fund tertiary education than primary school. But it often also reflects a level of spending per pupil in government primary or secondary schools that is far too low to provide quality for the majority, combined with generous spending per student at tertiary level. In Malawi, government spending on a tertiary student is over 225 times the amount spent on an average primary school student.¹²⁹ In Liberia, it is 1,000 times.¹³⁰ Compare this to OECD countries where this figure tends to be, on average, only about five times larger, in contexts in which a far greater proportion of the less wealthy go on to higher education.¹³¹ This is leading to perverse spending patterns, whereby a tertiary education available to the elite is subsidized by the state, while poor children struggle in underfunded classrooms too starved of resources to deliver quality, with poor parents contributing to keep these underfunded schools afloat. This is manifestly unfair. It is also self-evident that this is unlikely to unleash the equalizing potential of education or boost social mobility.

Figure 4: Percentage of public education resources going to the 10% most-educated and 10% least-educated students



Source: Steer, L., and Smith, K. (2015). *Financing Education: Opportunities for Global Action*. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/FinancingForEducation2015.pdf>

THE PRESSURE ON PUBLIC EDUCATION

As public schooling has expanded in developing countries, education systems have struggled to keep up with the magnitude of demand. Millions more children now go to school, but too many governments have failed to make the investments required to ensure quality education for all children. While many countries are making serious efforts to prioritize education spending,¹³² on average lower-income countries are still spending only half of what is needed per student to deliver a decent quality education.¹³³ Donors are failing to deliver the increased aid to help meet this financing gap. As a result, many countries face a learning crisis: UNESCO estimates that 330 million children are in school but still not even learning basic skills.¹³⁴ Education should be equipping children with these and all the additional skills they need to lead healthy, productive and meaningful lives. These are the skills that will help us to beat inequality.

On average, lower-income countries are still spending only half of what is needed per student to deliver a decent quality education.

In addition to the continuing crisis of educational access, this 'learning crisis' is one of the most pressing educational challenges facing the world. According to one study, in Uganda, when third grade students were asked to read a sentence such as 'The name of the dog is Puppy', three-quarters did not understand what it said. The evidence clearly shows the degree of underachievement in many public education systems. This is unacceptable and requires urgent action.

The learning crisis has led some to question whether public education alone can deliver the solution, with a number of highly influential actors advocating scaling up

private provision of education – often using public funds – to tackle the crisis.¹³⁵

However, evidence suggests that such an approach is diverting attention from action on equalizing education and undermining the task of increasing quality for all, while doing little to address the learning crisis at scale.

Box 5: Chile's disastrous experiment with vouchers

Probably the largest-scale example of a voucher system (a government subsidy which allows parents to use public funds for private schooling) comes from Chile, where it was first introduced in 1980 under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. This was part of a reform that led to a massive redirection of government resources from public to private education. Wealthier families were far more likely to make use of vouchers to subsidize private education, and there was a rapid stratification of the system, with poorer students congregating in the (now under-resourced) public sector. Nevertheless, these private schools added 'little or no academic value' and, once students' backgrounds were accounted for, produced no better results than public schools.¹³⁶

After the election of a more equity-focused government in the 1990s, further reforms led to greater investment in education, some restrictions on the operation of voucher-funded private schools, and other school reforms. However, the voucher system as a whole remained in place.

The Inter-American Development Bank reports that public education has improved in Chile in recent decades due to unrelated government reforms, including those related to the school day, improved nutrition and pedagogical support.¹³⁷

At the same time, there has been a huge downside in terms of 'pronounced socioeconomic stratification'¹³⁸ and segregation of the school system.¹³⁹ Middle class and wealthy students increasingly 'sorted' themselves into private voucher schools, while poorer students were left in public schools.¹⁴⁰ This is decidedly not a neutral outcome; quite apart from the obvious damage to social cohesion, it creates educational disadvantage for poorer students. Those public schools in areas where the voucher programme had the largest effect suffered the worst drops in performance, while even within private voucher schools, the correlation between student backgrounds and test scores is extremely strong.¹⁴¹ Chile's experiment has thus resulted in massive inequality without producing quality for the majority, and has been proven to have damaged social cohesion.¹⁴²

Can the private sector address the learning crisis?

A number of prominent donors, including the World Bank, are promoting and funding private sector approaches for education delivery in developing countries, and some governments are pursuing them as a means of solving pressing challenges in public education systems, including slow progress in improving learning. This has led to increased private sector involvement in education, through the growth of independent private schools, including commercial and for-profit chains, as well as the expansion of public-private partnerships (PPPs).

The term 'PPPs in education' refers to the public funding of private schools for the delivery of education. This can be through direct assistance to private schools – such as per-student subsidies, block grants, or funding to private organizations to manage public schools (sometimes called 'supply-side' PPPs) – or through 'demand-side' funding, such as vouchers, scholarships or cash transfers for students to use in accessing private schools. In recent years, there has been a growing phenomenon of 'low-fee private schools' – private schools aimed at lower-income families in poor

countries, often with a profit orientation – and PPPs that partner with such schools to deliver education.

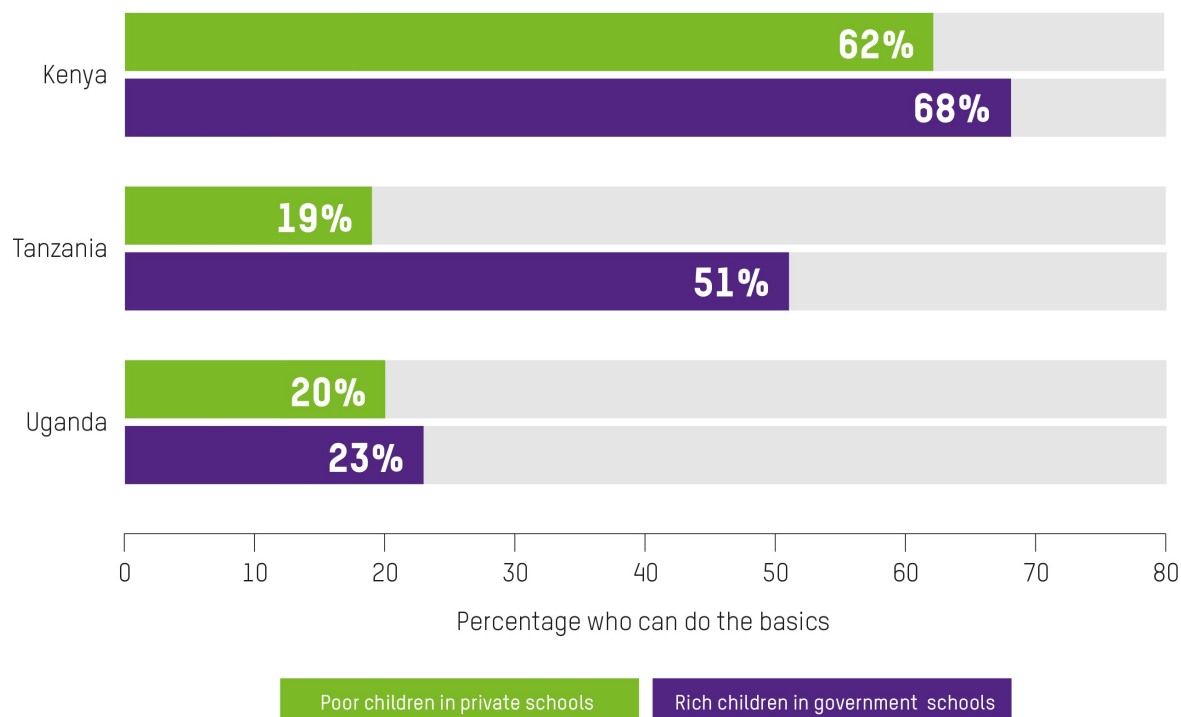
These strategies are often presented as part of a 'school choice' agenda to give students the choice of opting out of local public options so they can access (it is assumed) a better education in private schools. These better-performing schools, it is envisaged, will bring competition into education systems, with the idea being that the cumulative effect of such choices on the education system will drive up quality across the sector, while improving efficiency and accountability.

Evidence is often cited of the better-quality education provided by private schools in developing countries to underpin these arguments. However, recent evidence casts doubt on the claim that privately-run schools offer inherently better-quality education. Much of the evidence cited to support the claims that private schools offer inherently better-quality schooling tend to conflate the effects of private schools themselves with the effects of the type of students who enrol in private schools. This is because private schools may skim off the relatively higher-income students who are easier and most profitable to teach, which often leads to better testing results in private schools.

Much of the evidence cited to support the claims that private schools offer inherently better-quality schooling tend to conflate the effects of private schools themselves with the effects of the type of students who enrol in private schools.

One study in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda exemplifies the role of social advantage for wealthier children. Even comparing richer students in government schools with poorer children in private schools, the study shows richer children do better than poorer students in all environments (see **Figure 5**).¹⁴³ This highlights the importance of understanding the conditions under which children, whether rich or poor, can learn in government schools and acting to redress what is holding poor children back.

Figure 5: Learning outcomes for richer and poorer children in government schools in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda



Source: Taken from Rose, P. Sabates, R. Alcott, B and Ilie, S. (2017). *Overcoming Inequalities Within Countries to Achieve Global Convergence in Learning*. University of Cambridge. <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.7673>

Ultimately, as the World Bank's *World Development Report 2018* points out, there is no consistent evidence that private schools deliver better learning outcomes. Citing comparisons across 40 countries that seek to adjust for differences in student characteristics, it concludes that there is 'no private school advantage' in the vast majority of countries¹⁴⁵ once social advantages (family income, literate parents, better nutrition, etc.) are considered. Analysis from across OECD countries backs this up: if public schools draw from the same population as private schools, any differences vanish.¹⁴⁶

Moreover, the relatively lower-income children who do attend 'low-fee' schools are receiving an education explicitly designed to be cheap, and which is often of observably poor quality.¹⁴⁷ Low-fee schools keep costs down by using strategies that impact negatively on education quality, such as reliance on unqualified, poorly trained teachers who are paid extremely low wages, and insufficient investment in school facilities and other resources that promote learning. This raises serious questions about the quality of education on offer.¹⁴⁸ A 2017 preliminary evaluation of a PPP programme in Liberia, which handed over public schools to private operators including low-fee chains, found that one for-profit school operator, Bridge International Academies, achieved modest improvements in learning. But in order to do this, it expelled children to achieve reductions in class sizes, spent more than 13 times the per-pupil funding in public schools, and was allocated additional teachers as well as its first choice of better-trained teachers.¹⁴⁹ These findings call into question claims of better quality and cost-effectiveness in these PPP schools.

Privatization of education drives inequality

When schools charge fees to parents, no matter how small, they are likely to be unaffordable for the poorest families.¹⁵⁰ In Ghana for example, a major low-fee private school chain targeting poor people (Omega Schools) charges fees that are equivalent to 40% of the income of the poorest families per child.¹⁵¹ In Senegal, only 8% of private secondary school students come from households whose expenditure per capita is below the national median – suggesting that fees are unaffordable for poorer families.¹⁵² Such unaffordable fees mean that families have to make huge sacrifices with other basic necessities. In some cases, this can lead to splitting families, as parents choose to invest their meagre incomes in some children and not others – with girls and children with disabilities more likely to be left out.¹⁵³

'There is no consistent evidence that private schools deliver better learning outcomes than public schools, or the opposite.'

World Development Report 2018, the World Bank¹⁴⁴

In Ghana for example, a major low-fee private school chain targeting poor people (Omega Schools) charges fees that are equivalent to 40% of the income of the poorest families per child.

Box 6: PPPs in Pakistan

Pakistan has some of the largest educational gaps globally in terms of wealth and gender, especially for a country of its income level. With 24 million children out of school, and only 15% of poor rural girls completing primary school,¹⁵⁴ Pakistan has some of the lowest public spending levels in the world. Almost all wealthier parents send their children to private schools, while the poorest students struggle in crumbling public schools. With such pre-existing inequalities, and an underfunded and underachieving public system, any prospective educational reforms must be assessed for their likely impact on equity, with a focus on those most likely to be left out – girls and the poorest children – and building a system-wide approach to addressing their needs.

Oxfam recently commissioned research on a World Bank-funded education PPP programme in Punjab province administered by the Punjab Education Foundation, which provides public funding to low-fee private schools to deliver education. The study's findings raise serious concerns about equity and access for marginalized populations in the PPP schools, as well as educational quality and accountability challenges. School principals/owners in the sampled schools reported that:

- Very few children in their schools were previously out-of-school (only 1.3 percent);
- Gender parity was not being achieved in most of the schools sampled; among co-ed schools in the sample, 75 percent had more boys than girls;
- Very few children with disabilities were accessing the schools in the sample. Most schools were not wheelchair-accessible and none had a special needs teacher;
- Non-fee expenditures (such as uniforms, meals, books, transportation) were a significant financial barrier to access for the poorest children. The costs for one child could represent half the income of a parent living at the poverty line; and
- Schools were actively selecting and screening out children based on their academic ability, including through admissions screening tests.

The findings shed light on the unintended consequences of a high-stakes 'reward and sanction' incentive model, in which payment to schools is determined by their performance on a standardized test. The findings suggest that this approach is leading schools to employ student screening, selection and exclusion techniques in order to boost test scores, and creates disincentives for schools to cater to the poorest and most marginalized children and children with disabilities, who may be less likely to perform well on standardized tests. In addition, the findings raise questions about the quality of education and teaching being provided in the low-resource private schools in the programme. The schools in the sample employed an underqualified teacher workforce, with very limited access to training; teachers were predominantly female, with average reported salaries less than half the minimum wage, suggesting that the system relies on gender inequalities in the labour market.¹⁵⁵

Oxfam is currently conducting research into Sindh Education Foundation, a similar PPP in the Sindh province.

A striking body of evidence is accumulating on the negative impact of educational policies focused on large-scale private sector involvement on equity, gender equality and poverty, including from Chile (see **Box 5**), Peru,¹⁵⁶ El Salvador¹⁵⁷ and Colombia.¹⁵⁸ Recent research comparing approaches in Finland, Sweden, the USA, Canada, Chile and Cuba¹⁵⁹ found that 'privatizing education [including outsourcing] has accompanied lower and/or more disparate student performance'.

Academic research has also echoed concerns about the equity impacts of PPPs in education service delivery. For example, a recent literature review has found that:

'PPPs seem to be especially problematic in terms of education inequalities, inclusion, and school segregation. This is due to the fact that the competitive environment that many PPP contracts generate incentivizes schools to try to select the best students, as well as to discriminate against those students less academically skilled or with special needs or behavioural issues'.¹⁶⁰

Oxfam's own research has raised serious equity and quality concerns about a PPP programme in Punjab, Pakistan, which has often been promoted as a success story by the World Bank and other donors (see **Box 6**).

There are particular concerns about negative impacts on girls' education. A review of literature on private schools in less-developed countries found that private schooling is

not equally accessed by boys and girls.¹⁶¹ Several country-level studies have also shown that girls are disadvantaged when families decide whether or not to send a child to private school. Boys are more likely to be seen as a 'safe investment' in patriarchal societies in which girls are not expected to secure decent work, or are likely to be married off to another family.¹⁶²

Little rigorous research has assessed the cumulative effects of private schooling on the long-term health of the public-school system. Even if the expansion of private schooling were to bring short-term benefits, it can undermine the political constituency for effective public schooling in the longer term. For example, low-fee private schools keep costs low in large part by hiring underqualified teachers on short-term contracts paying poverty wages, sometimes below the minimum wage, which could lead to the creation of an untrained teacher workforce.¹⁶³ Moreover, where such schools are widely promoted, they displace efforts and funding to expand public education, leaving limited alternatives for those children who are left behind.¹⁶⁴

The lessons from around the world could not be clearer: pushing private or market-based alternatives to a public education system creates educational segregation and exacerbates educational inequalities, and thus wider social inequalities. It supports more advantaged students at the expense of those who most need support. This is a dangerous diversion from the real task of building greater equality into education systems.

Girls are disadvantaged when families decide whether or not to send a child to private school. Boys are more likely to be seen as a 'safe investment' in patriarchal societies in which girls are not expected to secure decent work, or are likely to be married off to another family.

Pushing private or market-based alternatives to a public education system creates educational segregation and exacerbates educational inequalities, and thus wider social inequalities.



Kolind Central School in Kolind, Denmark. Photo credit: Kissen Møller Hansen.

4 DELIVERING QUALITY AND EQUALITY

The fact that the majority of education systems in developing countries are highly unequal, and that most public schools tend to struggle with issues of quality, is not an accident. It is the result of policy failures. Currently, many education systems do not have the right level of investment, and insufficient attention is given to supporting poorer children to learn.

In 2014, Oxfam brought together significant evidence to show that bad policy choices in public education, and the privatization of services, are increasing inequality. Conversely, public services work hardest to fight inequality when governments take appropriate policy solutions, i.e. providing free high-quality public services for all.¹⁶⁵ If paid for by fair taxation, this is one of the most powerful things a government can do to reduce the gap between rich and ordinary people.

In education, the appropriate policy solutions include using public funds to provide high-quality public education that is free, universally available, accountable to communities, inclusive and subject to public oversight. It must pay attention to helping empower women and tackle gender inequalities. It should be funded through fair taxes invested at levels sufficient to ensure quality for all, as a down payment on the future of a nation.

The remainder of this report demonstrates, using evidence from across the world, how different types of policy solutions lead to very different outcomes.

We have a chance to correct the lottery of birth through education. Addressing the combined challenge of expanding educational access together with raising learning for all children and young people, regardless of their background, must remain a top priority for governments.

UNIVERSALIZING AND EQUALIZING BASIC EDUCATION

In recent decades, public education in developing countries has delivered remarkable results in a very short space of time. Primary school enrolment is now almost universal, with as many girls enrolling as boys – a huge challenge only a generation or so ago.¹⁶⁶

However, there is still much to do. Millions have been left behind both inside and outside the classroom, with progress stubbornly stuck for those children born on the bottom rungs of society.¹⁶⁷

The ambition articulated in SDG 4 is that, within the next generation, all girls and boys should complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education. Even with eyes firmly on this goal, progress is currently painfully slow. At present rates, it could be another 100 years before all girls in sub-Saharan Africa have the opportunity to complete a full 12 years of education as promised.¹⁶⁸

At present rates, it could be another 100 years before all girls in sub-Saharan Africa have the opportunity to complete a full 12 years of education as promised.

It is crucial for governments to invest in expanding education upwards to secondary level, especially for girls, who tend to drop out at higher rates than boys at secondary level. However, focus must also be kept on ensuring that those who fail to complete primary school are not left behind, as well as supporting the learning of the poorest students.

Universalizing access, with a focus on equalizing education, also requires attention downwards – to the very early years of schooling. This is important because before they even set foot in school, very young children in poor families display significantly differing cognitive and non-cognitive abilities to their wealthier peers (see **Box 7**).¹⁶⁹ In a range of rich and developing countries, children from poor households lag behind their more affluent peers by age three, with gaps widening as they grow.¹⁷⁰ Investment in early childhood education, especially pre-primary, can help overcome these gaps.

Box 7: The poorest start school with a disadvantage

Recent scientific evidence shows striking inequalities in cognitive ability from a very young age between children from poor families and their wealthier peers.¹⁷¹ Before they even arrive at school, children from poorer families are at a remarkable disadvantage, which is hard to overcome. These pre-existing cognitive gaps, and the resulting reduced levels of learning in the early years, remain the most important influence on later achievement in education, even when children's background characteristics are taken into account, including their poverty status, gender and their parents' education. In fact, this is second only to poverty status in explaining progress in education and levels of learning.¹⁷²

Evidence also suggests that those who cannot read in the early grades fall behind and rarely catch up.¹⁷³ Young people from poor households who are not learning at eight years old are very unlikely to access higher education.¹⁷⁴ Therefore, investing in the poorest children when they are very young is important for more equal educational outcomes.

In developing countries, the problem is compounded by high levels of illness and malnutrition, which are strongly associated with cognitive gaps in children. Given that around a third of children under five are chronically malnourished in low- and middle-income countries,¹⁷⁵ these children arrive at school already severely disadvantaged.¹⁷⁶

There is substantial evidence from developed countries,¹⁷⁷ and a growing body of research from low- and lower-middle-income countries,¹⁷⁸ demonstrating that early childhood education aimed at poor children, especially girls, is key to building greater equality into education. In Brazil, for instance, girls from low-income households who attended preschool are twice as likely to reach fifth grade and three times more likely to reach eighth grade than their peers who did not attend preschool.¹⁷⁹

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PUBLIC FIRST

As discussed in the previous section, approaches that expand the role of private and commercial schools in education systems have been shown to deepen inequalities in education, widening the gaps between those with privilege and those who are excluded. Instead, governments must devote themselves to the essential task of developing high-quality public education for all children and youth.

Under international human rights law,¹⁸⁰ governments are responsible for guaranteeing the right to education, regardless of provider; however, states are also regarded as having principal responsibility for the direct provision of education in most circumstances. Thus, states have an obligation to both develop quality public

education provision, and regulate and monitor private education institutions.¹⁸¹ This requires states to ensure that private providers meet minimum standards, and that educational freedoms do not lead to extreme disparities of educational opportunity for some groups in society.¹⁸² Managing the necessary regulatory framework to achieve this is difficult. This led the World Bank to conclude that ‘governments may deem it more straightforward to provide quality education than to regulate a disparate collection of providers that may not have the same objectives’.¹⁸³ In most cases, it is likely to be easier to focus on increasing quality in public provision, not least as managing private sector providers properly often raises the same technical and political barriers that education systems face more generally. The UN Special Rapporteur on the right to education has stated that the rapid growth of private and commercial actors in education ‘threaten[s] the implementation of the right to education for all and Sustainable Development Goal 4’.¹⁸⁴

The role of international aid should be to target pro-poor and poverty reducing initiatives. Thus, the enthusiasm shown by some major donors for private education should be questioned. Oxfam research has found that the World Bank has been increasingly promoting education PPPs through its lending and policy advice to governments,¹⁸⁵ and another recent study found it has scaled up its direct investments in for-profit, fee-charging, private primary and secondary schools through the International Finance Corporation.¹⁸⁶ Instead, states should be supported to raise the quality of public education as a top priority.

The enthusiasm for private sector approaches in education also suggests a dangerous collective amnesia about the lessons of the past on what has been achieved through the provision of fee-free and public education.¹⁸⁷ In many countries there is a need to challenge the pessimism, and the devastating poverty of ambition, about the ability of the public sector to achieve quality public education for all. Decades of government investment in public education lies at the heart of the high standards and universal provision in rich countries. Just a century ago, no country provided universal basic education for all its citizens; now, education is taken for granted as a core responsibility of the state, and the parameters of universal provision have progressively expanded. In developing countries, enrolment has risen dramatically, and today there are 50 million more children in school than in 2000.¹⁸⁸ Even in the midst of a widely-acknowledged learning crisis, data from 31 countries shows an additional 15 million children are now learning at least basic skills in mathematics.¹⁸⁹

These successes have been the result of government commitments and public provision.

Box 8: Weak states leave an educational void in emergency situations

A quarter of the world’s children live in countries affected by conflict or disaster, with 50 million forcibly displaced from their homes as a result.¹⁹⁰ More than one-third of out-of-school children and adolescents are living in contexts affected by an emergency or conflict. Children in these countries are 30% less likely to complete primary school, and 50% less likely to complete lower secondary school.¹⁹¹ Conflict-affected countries show particularly worrying trends: they have higher dropout rates, lower completion rates, higher gender disparities and lower literacy levels.¹⁹²

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Often by definition in these situations, state capacity and bureaucratic functions can be disrupted, making tasks such as the delivery of public education a particular challenge. There is still a need for more evidence on the role and impact of private actors in delivering education in such contexts, but the evidence available does suggest a few themes.

While some private provision may be a necessary stop-gap, this must be part of a coherent plan to (re)build government capacity to provide public education and regulate the education system as a whole. Examples such as the Syrian refugee situation show the danger of proliferating private providers stepping in. Problems have been shown to include inefficiency arising from poor co-ordination, significant inequity, very poor quality, undemocratic decision making and exploitative profiteering.¹⁹³ Both donors and private actors should be actively thinking about long-term sustainability and how to support greater state capacity.

Emergencies, conflicts and political instability create threats to children's ability to go to school. Displacement due to conflict or disasters often places children in harm's way, and they may witness the destruction of their homes, schools and their families' livelihoods. Girls are often the worst impacted: displaced girls are two-and-a-half times more likely than displaced boys to be out of school.¹⁹⁴

Emergencies, including sudden-onset emergencies, are often used as an opportunity for massive expansion of private provision, in the form of 'disaster capitalism', in which opportunistic businesses seize openings created by disasters.

The same kind of opportunism can arguably also be seen even in countries with strong states: for example, in the US, the conversion of the whole New Orleans school district to privately run charter schools after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 caused thousands of experienced teachers and other school personnel to be dismissed from their jobs.¹⁹⁵

Research from Tulane University in 2017 reported that the charter system remains highly segregated by race and economic status.¹⁹⁶



Children on their way to school in Jalawla, Kurdistan Region of Iraq, after the town was retaken from ISIS. Photo credit: Abbie Trayler-Smith.

Fee-free basic education

In 2015, 180 governments agreed the Education 2030 Framework for Action, committing them to provide 12 years of free and compulsory education by 2030. However, fewer than half of countries report currently offering 12 years of free education, and only just over half report at least 10 years. More than one-quarter of countries do not report providing any free secondary education at all; only four in 10 African countries do so.¹⁹⁷

However, in order to be universal and equal, education must be free. Experiments over the last 50 years have repeatedly demonstrated that fees act as a brake on education for the poorest students. From the 1960s, free education spread around the world – particularly in newly-independent African countries – and led to massive expansion in school enrolment. In Kenya, for example, when early grade fees were abolished in 1974, enrolment in first grade nearly tripled.¹⁹⁸ But, in the 1980s, as donors and creditors put pressure on social spending – including requirements for cuts – many aid-dependent countries re-introduced school fees, and saw the gains in enrolment reversed.^{199, 200} From 1990 to 1999, the number of out-of-school children in low-income countries grew, with notable increases in sub-Saharan Africa and Eastern and South-East Asia.²⁰¹

Experiments over the last 50 years have repeatedly demonstrated that fees act as a brake on education for the poorest students.

The fact that ‘user fees in education were working to stifle demand, particularly for the poorest and most vulnerable children’ was described by the World Bank and UNICEF in 2009 as a ‘hard lesson’ that was crucial to ‘the success or failure of current efforts to achieve education for all’.²⁰² They established the School Fee Abolition Initiative precisely to ensure that this lesson was implemented. From the late 1990s into the 2000s, low-income countries again worked to abolish school fees, and again saw enrolment rise rapidly: the number of out-of-school children of primary school age in low-income countries fell by nearly 40% between 1999 and 2009, even as populations grew.²⁰³

The message is clear: government investment in free universal public education is crucial for building equality because it gives every child a fair chance, not just those who can afford to pay.

The same lessons apply to secondary education. The persistence of fees at secondary level is one of the greatest educational challenges facing many developing countries. There is almost certainly a huge untapped reservoir of demand in many countries. In Ghana, after fees for senior high school (upper secondary) were dropped in September 2017, 90,000 more students flooded through the school doors at the start of the new academic year.²⁰⁴ In Ethiopia, one study estimated that if secondary schooling was completely fee-free, attendance rates would increase by 85% for the poorest students, and 47% for the second-poorest quintiles.²⁰⁵

In Ghana, after fees for senior high school (upper secondary) were dropped in September 2017, 90,000 more students flooded through the school doors at the start of the new academic year.

Remedying the educational disadvantage for girls, particularly those from poor families, requires education that is freely and easily accessible to all. It is likely that a reduction in school fees at secondary level would have a particular equality-enhancing impact on gender and economic inequality. For example, Namibia has consistently reduced inequality in the last two decades, with free secondary education playing a significant role in this, especially for women and girls.²⁰⁶

Finally, even when school tuition is ostensibly ‘free’, formal and informal fees and charges can impose a severe financial barrier for the poorest pupils. Collectively, these

fees and additional charges in private and public schools contribute to a situation in which, according to a recent UNESCO survey of 50 countries, households bear 34% of total education expenditure in middle-income countries and 49% in low-income countries.²⁰⁷ To overcome inequality, education must be genuinely free.

Box 9: Using fees to make up for low government spending in Uganda

In Uganda, there is a law mandating that primary schooling be free and compulsory. However, data on household expenditures from UNESCO shows that families' contributions towards schooling are unsustainably high, with more than half of total spending on primary education and around three-quarters of the funds at secondary level paid by families out of their own pockets.²⁰⁸

The poorest families struggle the most, as they must spend disproportionately more on tuition fees relative to their incomes. The poorest quintile has only 1.5% of the wealth of the top quintile, but its spending on education is about 4.5% of what the wealthiest quintile spends. It has been estimated that lowering out-of-pocket household expenditures on education could approximately double current secondary school attendance.²⁰⁹

This situation must be seen in the context of very low government spending: Uganda has one of the lowest government spending levels on education of any sub-Saharan African government. In other words, families are making up for insufficient government funding.²¹⁰

In this context, poor-quality, 'low-fee' private schools have flourished in Uganda – often costing little more than government schools when indirect fees are taken into account. The Ugandan government needs to increase public spending and stop allowing this bargain basement education to fill in the cracks left by insufficient public funds.²¹¹

In addition, some schools have received criticism in Uganda for not reaching minimum standards. In 2016, Bridge International Academies – one of the biggest chains of for-profit schools in the world – was ordered to close 63 schools in Uganda because of low standards in education and sanitation.²¹² Poor infrastructure and unsanitary conditions, under-prepared teachers reading lessons from a script, and an absence of learning and other materials promised by Bridge have all come under fierce criticism from civil society.²¹³ In spite of being ordered to close by the Ministry of Education, Bridge continued to operate a number of unregistered schools, leading to a High Court intervention upholding the decision of the Ministry to close them.²¹⁴

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Equalizing education

There is solid evidence that focusing on making education more equal as an explicit goal of education policy can lead to improving educational outcomes across the board.²¹⁵ In Korea and Japan, all students make it over the lowest threshold of learning.²¹⁶ In addition, these governments made rapid progress on delivering both quality and equity in a short space of time, at similar levels of income to many other developing countries today.²¹⁷ Vietnam has showed similar and promising results (see **Box 18**).

Finland – long the 'poster child' for equity in education – set out on substantial education reforms in the 1970s that are credited with its good performance now. The system was designed around giving every child the same opportunity to learn as an instrument to even out social inequality.²¹⁸ More recently, Estonia has been demonstrating similar results (see **Box 10**).

What marks these countries out is that they have implemented programmes specifically designed to promote equitable learning, including investing in skilled

teachers, early on in their efforts to universalize education for all. These countries, and other evidence, show that promoting equity in education and supporting disadvantaged students help to increase quality and learning across the board.²¹⁹ Vietnam has shown impressive progress through, among other efforts, investment in early childhood development as well as teacher recruitment and training. As a result, Vietnamese 15-year-olds recently performed at the same level on international tests as those in Germany (**box 18**).²²⁰

All strategies aiming to support marginalized children to go to school must also focus on the factors that keep girls out of school. This requires greater gender sensitivity in learning materials and teaching methods, and making sure that all schools have toilets for girls. Where necessary, it may require stipends to keep girls in school, especially at secondary level, where the gender disadvantage is often most acute.

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Box 10: Focusing on equality as well as quality in Estonia

Educators have long flocked to Finland to discover its magic formula. It is now well-established that Finland's simultaneous policy focus on equity and quality has been the key to its success. By focusing on the poorest people and those least likely to succeed, Finland's government has built an equitable educational system. This has led to high performance for all Finnish children, and very low levels of educational inequality.²²¹

However, neighbouring Estonia has not aroused the same degree of interest. It should – for very similar reasons. Estonia has improved the quality of its education system by similarly focusing on equity.

In 2015, Estonia's 15-year-old boys came top in Europe and third in the world for performance in science. The number of top achievers who can solve extremely complicated tasks is high – standing at 13.5%, while the OECD average is 8%.²²² Students also score highly for problem-solving and teamwork, and are sixth in the world for reading ability.²²³ Crucially, Estonia also had the smallest number of weak performers in Europe, and overall has less than half as many low performers compared with the global average.²²⁴ Students in the lowest income quartile in Estonia scored about as well as American students in the second-highest income quartile.²²⁵

This has been managed against a backdrop of students coming from diverse backgrounds. A fifth of Estonia's students come from families that still speak Russian at home – a group that has historically lagged behind their native-speaking counterparts. This is important, as many have rejected the applicability of the Finnish school system to other contexts, given the relatively homogenous population in Finland.

Of course, test results alone are an inadequate measure of quality, but they do highlight interesting lessons about the 'success' of both Finland and Estonia in improving their system for the lowest performers, while simultaneously raising standards for all. Of course, there are many other factors that may contribute to Estonia's success beyond its focus on equity: education continues to be highly valued; teachers have relatively significant autonomy and are highly trained; early childhood education is free from 18 months (when paid maternity or paternity leave ends); and everyone gets free lunch.

DELIVERING QUALITY FOR ALL

The learning crisis exists, at least in part, because there has been a failure to scale up financing and capacity to keep pace with the growing demand. Education must be adequately funded and properly planned to avoid the risk of getting millions more

children into schools without the facilities, materials and, crucially, teachers that they need.

Currently, there is chronic underfunding of public education in most developing countries. For example, there is a well-established ratio of trained teachers to students that is required to ensure learning in the classroom. If financing for basic education is insufficient to meet these basic requirements, quality (and learning) will always suffer. It is estimated that the minimum cost to deliver basic quality primary education in low-income countries is \$200 per student; however, on average, current spending is only \$70 per pupil.²²⁶

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But achieving quality also requires a policy focus on what is taught, how it is taught, by whom it is taught, and what are valued as outcomes. Evidence from countries that have made progress in delivering quality education in a short space of time shows that they have a number of commonalities:²²⁷

- Their education systems are adequately resourced, with investment into a professional teaching force that can teach diverse learners.
- They build high-quality curricula; in many countries, these must focus on supporting children to learn in their own languages.
- They build systems with strong oversight and public accountability.

We outline the evidence in each of these areas below.

High-quality teachers

In many respects, the learning crisis is a teaching crisis. An empowered and professionally trained teacher is the biggest contributor to ensuring quality in education.²²⁹ For instance, a meta-analysis of randomized experiments in developing countries estimates that teacher training and class sizes have the greatest impact on learning.²³⁰ However, there is an acute shortage of professionally trained teachers in most developing countries. A lack of investment in training and retaining a high-quality teaching force has had a devastating impact on educational quality in many countries.

'No one has yet realized the wealth of sympathy, the kindness and generosity hidden in the soul of a child. The effort of every true education should be to unlock that treasure.'

Emma Goldman,
political activist and
author²²⁸

During the vast expansion in access in most developing countries, teacher education was neglected.²³¹ As a result, fewer than three-quarters of teachers are trained to any accepted national standard.²³² Thus, in some contexts, teachers are unable to perform the type of numeracy and literacy tasks for which they are meant to be preparing their students. For example, in Kenya, sixth grade teachers scored only 61% on tests of sixth grade mathematics material.²³³ In far too many contexts, teachers are not able to adapt to the challenges they face, such as the large numbers of first-generation learners entering the classroom from a wide diversity of backgrounds.

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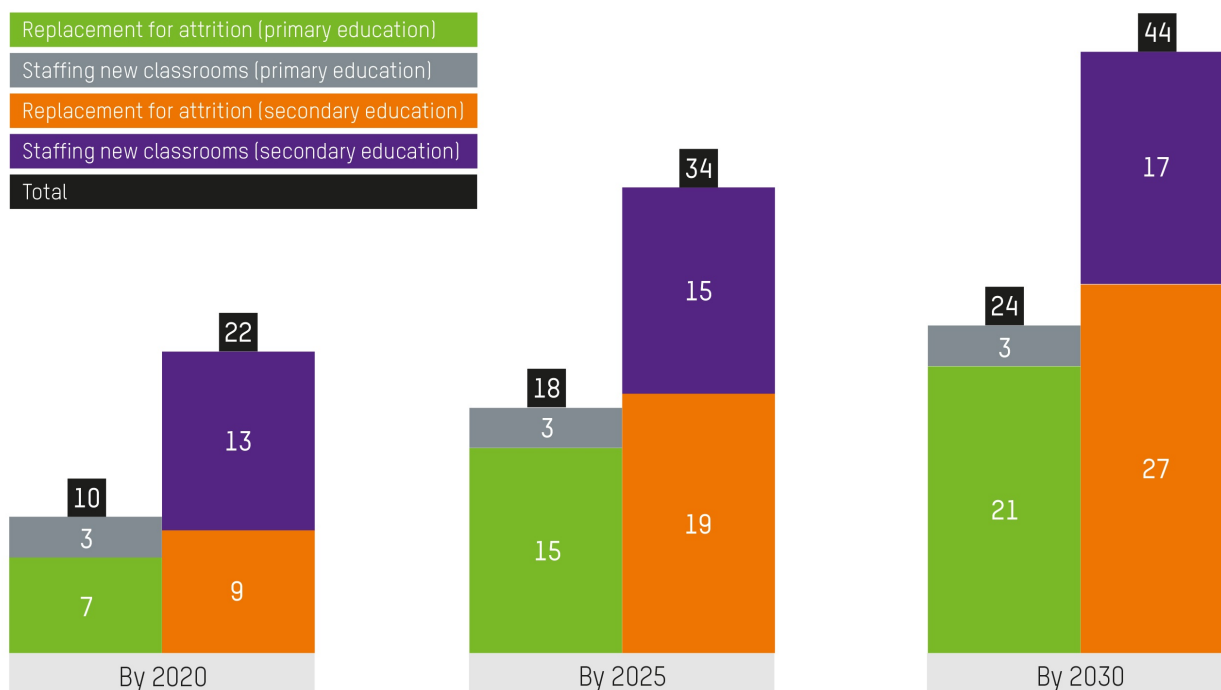
The next wave of expansion at the secondary level in many countries could be even more challenging, as it requires trained teachers with degree-level subject knowledge. The pace of growth in recruitment required for the highest-need countries is considerable. For instance, both Rwanda and Uganda would need to double current recruitment rates: this challenge is made all the greater by the low proportion of adults with a secondary school education.²³⁴ Globally, to ensure universal school enrolment by 2030, it is estimated that an additional 24.4 million primary school teachers and 44.4 million secondary school teachers are needed.²³⁵

All teachers – new recruits as well as those already in classrooms – need to be well-trained, have access to ongoing training, and be treated as professionals, with decent pay and conditions. Better training could turn around learning in many countries. For example, in Liberia, an intervention that included providing in-service training to teachers to support weak learners resulted in a 130% increase in children’s reading comprehension scores, with higher impacts on girls.²³⁶

In Liberia, an intervention that included providing in-service training to teachers to support weak learners resulted in a 130% increase in children’s reading comprehension scores, with higher impacts on girls.

Raising quality and achievement in public schools depends on professionalizing teachers. Once qualified, the most experienced teachers need to be deployed to the most disadvantaged areas. In too many countries, the opposite is currently true: wealthier children are more likely to be taught by better prepared teachers. In Kenya, 46% of wealthier children have a teacher with some form of qualification, compared to 29% of poorer children. In Tanzania, 70% of wealthier children have a teacher with at least three years of experience, in comparison with 55% of the poorest.²³⁷

Figure 6: Global number of teachers (in millions) required to meet SDG 4 by 2030 in five-year intervals



Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics. (2014). *The World Needs Almost 69 Million New Teachers to Reach The 2030 Education Goals*. Factsheet No. 39. UNESCO. Available at: <http://uis.unesco.org/en/document/world-needs-almost-69-million-new-teachers-reach-2030-education-goals>

Box 11: Strategies for improving teachers' time in classrooms

Teacher absenteeism receives a lot of attention in many countries, but the solutions appear to be largely required at a system-wide level, rather than on the level of individual recrimination of teachers. Teachers may stop going to work because they have not received their pay for months, for example, or because they must travel and wait to receive salaries, or because they do not have sufficient training or professional development support.²³⁸

Recent research from UNESCO shows that in many developing countries teachers are often not in school or teaching because they are expected to perform non-teaching tasks (such as fundraising or administration); need to travel to receive pay or attend training courses (which could have been delivered locally); or are subject to poor or non-existent management and supervision.²³⁹ In very poor communities that lack literate professionals, secondary school teachers are often expected to perform a variety of other civic and political tasks, such as monitoring local elections, or invigilating and marking primary school exams. As UNESCO stated in 2017, 'a closer look shows that this is often a problem of weak systems or teacher management'.²⁴⁰

For instance, in Senegal in 2014, schools were closed for 50 out of 188 official school days, for a variety of reasons. However, systemic issues outside of teachers' control cause most teacher absenteeism in Senegal. Only 12 of the 80 missed school days were due to individual teacher absence.²⁴¹

Most lost days reflected systemic factors, such as school closure for weather damage, renovations or wider planning issues.

Of course, as in all professions, there are teachers who are demotivated or uncommitted, or are simply not good at their job; the right course of action is to manage them more effectively. The number of hours of instructional time has been shown to be effective in improving teaching quality and learning.²⁴²

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High-quality curricula

In addition to improving the quality of the teaching workforce, research suggests an appropriate curriculum, taught at the right pace and in an appropriate language of instruction, is also critical.²⁴³ In many contexts, the pace of classroom instruction is determined by the need to cover an overly ambitious curriculum, rather than by the pace of student learning.²⁴⁴ Often curricula represent a dominant culture or language – or at the very least have little relevance to the lives of children – and in too many countries have been designed by, and for, elites (see **Box 12**).²⁴⁵

As the World Bank World Development report states, education systems around the world expect students to acquire foundational skills such as reading by grades 1 or 2; by third grade, children are expected to 'read to learn' in most public education systems. This means that those who are not yet able to read get left further behind.²⁴⁶ As such, the system caters mainly to the students in the top 10% of achievers, who are the only ones able to keep pace with the curriculum, while the bottom 10% could be spending several years in school with little benefit in terms of their learning.²⁴⁷

Learning in Indian schools appears to stagnate over the school grades, while in Vietnam, children's learning has generally improved (though with some exceptions). Comparing the two countries by drawing on data from Oxford University's Young Lives study, it was found that mathematics learning in Vietnam 'keeps pace' with a curriculum, which was appropriate for different learning needs, and teachers were well trained enough to adapt lessons to the pace of individual classrooms.²⁴⁸

Most countries need to also significantly improve the gender-sensitivity of education. Materials and teaching tend to rely on outdated gender roles: textbooks in many developing countries show women to be greatly underrepresented; men and women are associated with certain personal traits, and in stereotyped roles.²⁴⁹ Yet ensuring gender equality is reflected in teaching and learning materials across the education system ‘may represent the strongest source of counter messages to traditional norms learned in the family, community, and national media’.²⁵⁰

Materials and teaching tend to rely on outdated gender roles: textbooks in many developing countries show women to be greatly underrepresented; men and women are associated with certain personal traits, and in stereotyped roles.

More generally, curricula must change to reflect 21st-century demands on education systems and the priorities of the SDGs. Ultimately, a new emphasis on curriculum development and higher-order skills is needed, along with a focus on socio-emotional skills such as team work and perseverance. Such skills have also been shown to be the catalyst of development,²⁵¹ and are increasingly important as the world moves towards the ‘fourth industrial revolution’.²⁵²

Box 12: Are education standards captured by powerful elites in developing countries?

In many developing countries, elite groups develop education systems, instructional materials and the language of instruction targeted at their own children.²⁵³ This elite focus further exacerbates inequalities as children progress, making classes increasingly irrelevant to a growing number of students who have yet to master the basics, and so do not have the foundations for further learning.²⁵⁴ In India, for instance, the curriculum is and always has been linked to an elite understanding of schooling; this has been shown to be inappropriate for the majority of learner needs.²⁵⁵

When discussing the incoherence in many education systems, the World Bank has stated: ‘...misalignments aren’t random. Because of these competing interests, the choice of a particular policy is rarely determined by whether it improves learning’. When discussing the lack of learning in many public education systems, it has stated: ‘given these [powerful] interests, it should come as no surprise that little learning often results’.²⁵⁶

Lower-income parents are not usually organized to participate in debates at the system level, and may lack knowledge of the potential gains from different policies. Of course, there is also often a power asymmetry between poor (frequently illiterate) parents and those who set educational standards. By contrast, richer and wealthier families tend to be better organized to act collectively and support education reforms in their favour. This is often most starkly visible in countries in their choice of public spending on education: in most developing countries, public education expenditure tends to favour wealthier, more powerful groups, as discussed previously in this report.²⁵⁷

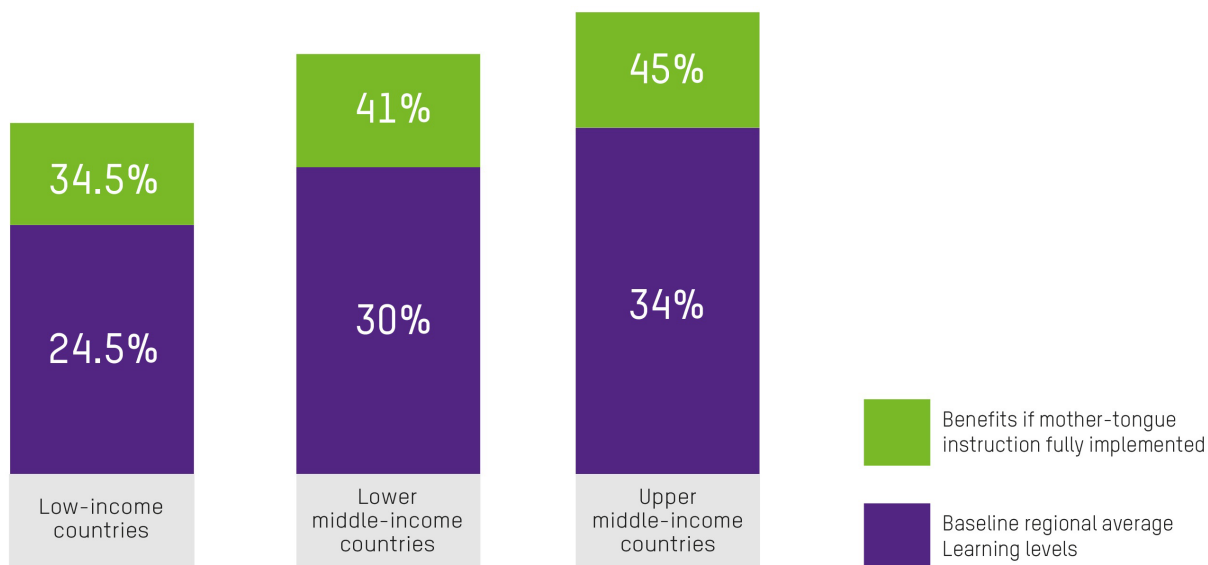
Far too many children are entering classrooms unable to understand their teachers’ words or the materials they are given because the language used in their schools is different from the language used in their homes. It is estimated that as many as 40% of the world’s school-going people may be being taught in a language other than their mother tongue.²⁵⁸ In most sub-Saharan African countries, this is substantially higher – according to some estimates as high as 90%.²⁵⁹ This has been strongly linked to a lack of learning.²⁶⁰ In multi-ethnic societies, imposing a dominant language through a school system is often part of a legacy of wider social and cultural inequality and marginalization of non-dominant groups.

It is estimated that as many as 40% of the world’s school-going people may be being taught in a language other than their mother tongue.

A number of studies have shown how damaging this is in education.²⁶¹ Often, it can take until the third or fourth grade for children to start to understand the language of tuition, after which learning takes place.²⁶²

It is now well-established that children who receive schooling in their mother tongue in early grades have better learning outcomes overall and, in particular, significantly better literacy levels.²⁶³ This process should be backed by a culturally contextualized curriculum with appropriate and adequate materials. The lack of such materials has a hugely negative effect on children’s learning. At the same time, teachers need to be equipped to teach multilingual curricula. Since many parents often prefer instruction in colonial languages, the benefits need to be communicated to them to gain their support.²⁶⁴

Figure 7: Mother-tongue learning can help children to learn the basics



Source: Taken from the 2018 World Development Report, using data from the Education Commission. World Bank. (2018). World Development Report 2018. *Learning to Realize Education’s Promise*. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2018>

Box 13: Over-reliance on high-stakes testing does little to improve real quality

There is currently a strong global bias towards testing of students and teachers to improve accountability for education outcomes, combining external evaluation with often ambitious targets. Yet these ‘high-stakes’ examinations tend to provide very little insight to improve learning and teaching, and have been shown to encourage ‘teaching to the test’ in the US, while restricting the curriculum and lowering education quality by focusing too much on narrowly-defined learning outcomes.²⁶⁵

Some forms of assessment can be useful as a catalyst for the development of educational systems, for example, if a formative assessment goes hand-in-hand with a high-quality curriculum and teaching, and has a positive feedback loop into the curriculum and local teaching practice. However, such approaches are largely absent in developing countries.²⁶⁶ If tests are disconnected from improving curricula and pedagogy, and instead serve to evaluate an individual, teacher or school on one narrow aspect of learning or quality – to determine which schools to close or teachers to fire – they will fail to support system-wide and substantive quality reforms.²⁶⁷

Moreover, the increasing focus on standardized testing in developing countries runs the risks of failing to recognize the huge challenges and dangers of standardizing comparison across different languages, scripts, cultures and contexts.²⁶⁸ Such test-based accountability is strongly rooted in the argument that, by providing the information by which consumers can make choices, quality will be improved.

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However, it feeds into a dangerously reductive concept of quality, narrowly focused on reading and math outcomes, and (even more narrowly) using test scores as the key tool for improvement and accountability. This can serve to distort both the outcomes it seeks to achieve and the broader purpose of education. As an open letter in 2014 signed by more than 70 leading academics in the field of education globally stated, if we emphasize only a limited range of measurable aspects of education, we

*'...take attention away from the less measurable or immeasurable educational objectives like physical, moral, civic and artistic development, thereby dangerously narrowing our collective imagination regarding what education is and ought to be about.'*²⁶⁹

Oversight and accountability

Currently, far too many public services are not accountable to those they are supposed to serve, with minimal public oversight mechanisms.²⁷⁰ Improving educational quality requires public education to become more accountable to children, their families and citizens overall.

Action is needed at all levels – from individual schools through to national governments – from schools, teachers, elected officials, taxpayers and parents. In many public education systems, this accountability loop is very poor (if not broken).²⁷¹ Yet if schools are to play their role in social cohesion, civic participation and nation-building, fixing this is necessary.

Some commentators argue that introducing more parental choice alone will introduce greater accountability, driving up quality across the system in the process.²⁷² This is based on the assumption that providing parents with a choice means that they will take their children out of failing schools, resulting in pressure to increase standards, and, ultimately, the market will drive up quality.²⁷³ This concept underpins a number of educational reforms across the world. However, this relies on parents having the right information, and being able to identify indicators of good quality. This appears to be a flawed assumption when tested.²⁷⁴ Moreover, given the capacity for the poorest and most marginalized people to absorb information (especially if parents are functionally illiterate) and act on that information (given a lack of political power), this seems blind to the power asymmetries in communities. These asymmetries are likely to be compounded in many low-income countries with limited information. This is why the 'school choice' agenda has been shown by the OECD to be associated with larger differences in the social composition of schools.²⁷⁵

Instead, improving accountability across the whole system requires focusing on the chain of accountability. At the school level, this requires involving parents more in governance and decision making – whether in statutory bodies such as school management committees or more informal structures, such as parent-teacher associations. However, too often these structures are dominated by a local elite, rather than being representative of all parents. Such interventions need to be fully cognizant of local power and politics, as well as gender inequalities. For instance, research on an intervention in Mali found that increasing local governance empowered some groups, but further isolated nomadic groups.²⁷⁶ Local or district education authorities also have a crucial role to play to ensure professional accountability, but this requires renewed investment in district education, particularly in rural areas, to give effective support to schools.²⁷⁷

Funding for schools also needs much tighter control and better governance oversight. Too often allocated funds are not reaching schools.²⁷⁸ Ensuring effective scrutiny of budgets by communities is crucial. There is a need to increase the monitoring and accountability at every level to ensure that budget allocation is properly targeted, arrives in full and on time, and is effectively spent. Action to ensure budgets are transparent and funds are tracked independently can help to ensure that resources are converted into real delivery on the ground.²⁷⁹

Box 14: The risks of results-based financing approaches

Results-based financing (RBF) is defined by UNESCO as '*any programme that rewards delivery of verified outputs, outcomes or impact with a financial or other incentive. The reward recipients may be governments (results-based aid), service providers (results-based financing) or beneficiaries (e.g. conditional cash transfers)*'.²⁸⁰

Despite a relatively weak evidence base on the effectiveness of RBF approaches,²⁸¹ the World Bank in 2015 committed to channel \$5bn over five years through such programmes in education.²⁸² When RBF approaches are used to incentivize or reward performance in student learning outcomes, equity becomes a serious concern. Furthermore, the impact of external factors, such as socioeconomic class, raises questions about attribution of outcomes. RBF can risk deepening existing inequality and exclusion by rewarding those schools that are performing well, and leaving those most in need with less support and funding. It can lead schools to engage in behaviours that improve performance on standardized tests, such as only admitting the best students, cheating and the unnecessary expulsion of low-performing students. RBF approaches that seek to directly address equity, for example by rewarding schools for enrolling poor students, may be limited by low institutional and data capacity of local governments to verify income status; these resources could perhaps be better used in providing capacity for stronger school support, management and oversight.

There is a growing evidence base on the pitfalls of RBF linked to test results. Research in the United States by the National Academy of Sciences looked at 15 incentive programmes designed to link rewards or sanctions for schools, students and teachers to students' test results. It found that test-based incentives do not produce meaningful improvements in student achievement.²⁸³ This form of financing also raises the challenge of sustainability and unpredictability, which makes it difficult for schools and districts to commit to hiring quality teachers and other personnel, who are critical to the task of improving learning.

USING EDUCATION TO FIGHT FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Action on equalizing education must also pay attention to the role it can play in supporting women's economic empowerment. Across the world, women consistently earn less than men and are concentrated in the lowest-paid and least secure work, which is often part-time.²⁸⁴ They are often paid less than men for the same job, in rich and poor countries alike, even in societies considered to have achieved high levels of gender equality.²⁸⁵ Globally, women's participation in the formal labour force is 26% lower than men's, and the average gender pay gap is 23%.²⁸⁶

Reduced economic opportunities for women in the workforce often start in the classroom. While simply ensuring education for all girls will not in itself wipe out disparities in wages, poverty, reproductive autonomy and political power, data suggests it can play a powerful role.²⁸⁷ For example, in Pakistan, women with only a primary education earn around 50% of men's wages, while women with a secondary education earn around 70% – still an unacceptable gap, but a far narrower one. It is for this reason that investment in increasing education levels has a stronger impact on future earnings for girls than boys, and thus can have a powerful impact on reducing income inequalities between men and women.

In Pakistan, women with only a primary education earn around 50% of men's wages, while women with a secondary education earn around 70% – still an unacceptable gap, but a far narrower one.

Women are more often among the poorest people, particularly during their reproductive years, because of the level of unpaid care work they are expected to perform.²⁸⁸ Data from 66 countries shows that women on average spend more than three times as much time on unpaid care as men do – in some countries up to 11 times as much – and when unpaid and paid work are combined, women do significantly more work than men, particularly in developing countries.²⁸⁹ This work can fall on mothers, constraining their ability to work, and sisters, affecting their ability to continue their education. It is widely recognized that addressing girls' unpaid care responsibilities is central to increasing girls' participation and attainment in secondary education.²⁹⁰

Investing in early childhood care and education can have a particularly large impact on young girls and women – with a double impact on inequality because it can also free up women from unpaid childcare duties, contributing to greater economic empowerment for women. For instance, when Kenya expanded its preschool education to include four-to-five-year-old children, it was shown to have a significant and positive impact on increasing female labour participation.²⁹¹

Yet in low-income countries, preschool remains inaccessible to the vast majority of children. Only one in five young children are enrolled in pre-primary education, and, for the most part, these establishments are privately run, fee-charging centres in urban areas that cater to urban elites.²⁹³ This leaves the world's poorest children falling behind right from the start, and it leaves the world's poorest mothers struggling to support their children's early chances in life.

Only one in five young children are enrolled in pre-primary education, and, for the most part, these establishments are privately run, fee-charging centres in urban areas that cater to urban elites.²⁹² This leaves the world's poorest children falling behind right from the start, and it leaves the world's poorest mothers struggling to support their children's early chances in life.

To benefit women, policies need not only to take account of the needs of children, but also the needs of women, for example by fitting around their typical working hours, which many policies do not.²⁹⁴ Only a handful of low- or middle-income countries, primarily in Africa, have acknowledged women's care needs in their early childhood care programmes.²⁹⁵ In Ghana, for example, policy explicitly recognizes women's need for childcare support in addition to children's need for education. In Namibia, early childhood education and care policy specifically notes the importance of such support for allowing older siblings to attend school.²⁹⁶

Box 15: Valuing the work of female teachers

While most of this report focuses on the benefits of public education for those being educated and their societies, the impact for those working within the system is also notable from an equality perspective. Recent figures show that more than 72 million people are working as teachers at pre-primary, primary and secondary level globally;²⁹⁷ this does not count teachers at other levels, nor the large numbers of non-teaching staff working in education. International Labour Organization figures show that one in 23 people in employment globally work in education.²⁹⁸

In the USA, elementary and middle school teaching is the single most common occupation for working women. By contrast, teaching and school jobs do not feature in the top 10 occupations for men.

Moreover, education is a particularly significant employer for women, being a female-dominated profession in all regions outside sub-Saharan Africa.²⁹⁹ In the UK, for example, one in 12 working women is employed in a school.³⁰⁰ In the USA, elementary and middle school teaching is the single most common occupation for working women. By contrast, teaching and school jobs do not feature in the top 10 occupations for men.³⁰¹

Thus, the pay and conditions for teachers and education workers is very important for ensuring decent work, which is a bulwark against inequality, especially between men and women. While there are significant variations between schools – and between types of private schools – evidence indicates that around the world there is a strong tendency towards lower pay and benefits in private schools compared to public schools. This is often in a context in which teachers are already underpaid in comparison to their similarly educated peers. Recent research shows that, for example, teachers employed by major chains of private school operators in the Philippines (APEC)³⁰² and Uganda (Bridge International Academies)³⁰³ have salaries around 50% lower than those of public school teachers, while the Omega private school chain in Ghana pays teachers salaries equivalent to just 15% to 20% of the salaries their public-school counterparts receive.³⁰⁴

In Pakistan, low-fee private schools tend to have a largely female teaching workforce; working environments and the treatment of teachers tend to reflect the gendered division of labour in wider Pakistani society. Working under mostly male principals, female teachers have hardly any part in decision making, either in classes or at school level. By virtue of their gender, female teachers are paid lower salaries than their male counterparts, and are mostly restricted to teaching primary school children.³⁰⁵

This is not to say, of course, that conditions for teachers in public schools are always acceptable. On the contrary, in far too many countries, teachers have poor conditions at work.³⁰⁶ In the public system, however, there tend to be stronger unions, which can help to push back against poor conditions.

Given the scale of employment in the education sector, for women in particular, an emphasis on high-quality teaching jobs in public education that also provide training needs to be an important element of a strategy to combat inequality among working people and tackle gender pay differentials.



A teacher at Salam Girls' Primary School in Aweil, South Sudan. Photo: William Vest-Lillesoe.

5 INVESTING IN THE FUTURE

Delivering quality with equity requires both more and better spending. To ensure that education can play a role in tackling broader inequalities in society, it also requires large new injections of public funding, paid for by those who can most afford it. Governments must tax wealth fairly as an investment in nations' futures, so that every child gets a chance to achieve their potential and contribute towards a better society – as a down payment on creating more equal and happier societies.

INCREASED INVESTMENT IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

Extra funding is required to scale up educational expansion to reach those still not in school, and to spend more on each pupil. Achieving universal pre-primary, primary and secondary education of good quality requires at least a tripling of current spending levels in low- and middle-income countries.³⁰⁷ This necessitates an immediate radical shift in financing; at current levels, it is estimated that it could take until at least 2080 to ensure all children receive primary and secondary education.³⁰⁸

In many low-income countries, the need for increased investment is made even more challenging by the predicted 'youth bulge'. In Africa, the number of children is projected to increase by 170 million between now and 2030, taking the number of the continent's under-18s to 750 million.³¹⁰ The number of teachers in low-income countries will need to nearly double to meet this demand.³¹¹ This has led some experts to note that this will require investment – at least in the shorter term – above the international benchmark for education spending of 6% of GDP or more, and more than 20% of public budgets.³¹²

Without this investment, we will be letting down generations of the world's poorest children, stifling their talent and potential to contribute towards bettering their societies. It will mean squandering the promise of education to fight poverty and inequality.

TAXING WEALTH AS A DOWN PAYMENT ON A BETTER FUTURE

There is no getting away from the fact that spending more money on education requires boosting the money available to governments. Of the \$3 trillion per year required by 2030 across low- and middle-income countries, 97% must come from the public purse.³¹³

Tax revenues can unlock considerable new resources, when countries combine this with a focus on spending them on education. For example, Ecuador tripled its education spending between 2003 and 2010 through effective tax mobilization policies and prioritizing education in its budget.³¹⁴

This means governments must find ways to raise more taxes to realise the right to education for all. Fairer taxation of the wealthiest can help pay for this, thus ensuring

At current levels, it is estimated that it could take until at least 2080 to ensure all children receive primary and secondary education.

'How we [Africa] can organize ourselves to make sure that the wealth, the huge wealth of this great continent, at least, in the first time in modern history, is used on behalf of the peoples of the continent, and not those outside... We are going to have to make sure that every young child, boy and girl, has access to education. Not only that they have access to education, but they have access to an education that will allow them to be able to address the challenges of the 21st century.'

Speech by President Akufo-Addo of Ghana at the Global Partnership for Education's financing conference³⁰⁹

that the wealth of those who have the most helps to build nations' prosperity. We could and should use wealth to build better and more equal economies and societies.

Taxes must fall on those most able to pay – wealthy individuals and companies. This includes:

- taxing wealth and capital at fairer levels;
- stopping the race to the bottom on personal income and corporate taxes in poor countries; and
- eliminating tax avoidance and evasion by corporates and the super-rich.

Currently, the tax dodging practices of multinationals are leading to a haemorrhaging of resources from developing countries.³¹⁵ This deprives their citizens of wealth that could be invested in education. The impact of companies avoiding tax³¹⁶ alone costs developing countries at least \$100bn every year – this is half the estimated annual total cost of meeting the target of universal primary and lower-secondary education in low-income countries.³¹⁷ Companies making money in a country must give back through a fair contribution in taxation that can be invested in building that country's long-term wealth through education for all.

If domestic resources increased to the ambitious target of 6% of GDP – which is what the Education 2030 Framework for Action suggests³¹⁸ – across low-income countries, there would still be a funding shortfall of \$39bn. In this context, aid remains central to ensuring that the wealthiest nations help support the poorest children in the world in the short term. However, aid falls far short; according to some estimates, it needs to be multiplied six times to ensure equity and quality for all children by 2030.³¹⁹

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Box 16: Donors must commit to supporting education in developing countries

Lower-income countries need support to make the crucial investments required for education. Yet donor aid to education has been falling for a number of years, is currently stagnant, and is being diverted away from those countries that need it most.³²⁰

An estimated \$340bn per year will be necessary to achieve universal pre-primary, primary and secondary education of good quality in low- and lower middle-income countries.³²¹ However, aid is increasingly not allocated according to need. Donor money for basic education in sub-Saharan Africa, home to over half of the world's out-of-school children, has been halved since 2002. Sub-Saharan Africa now only gets 26% of total ODA to basic education, barely more than the 22% allocated to Western Asia, where only 9% of children are out of school. Bilateral donors need to increase their aid while giving greater support to multilateral efforts, ensuring that they are supporting the countries and populations most in need.³²²

PUBLIC SPENDING AS AN ENGINE FOR FIGHTING INEQUALITY

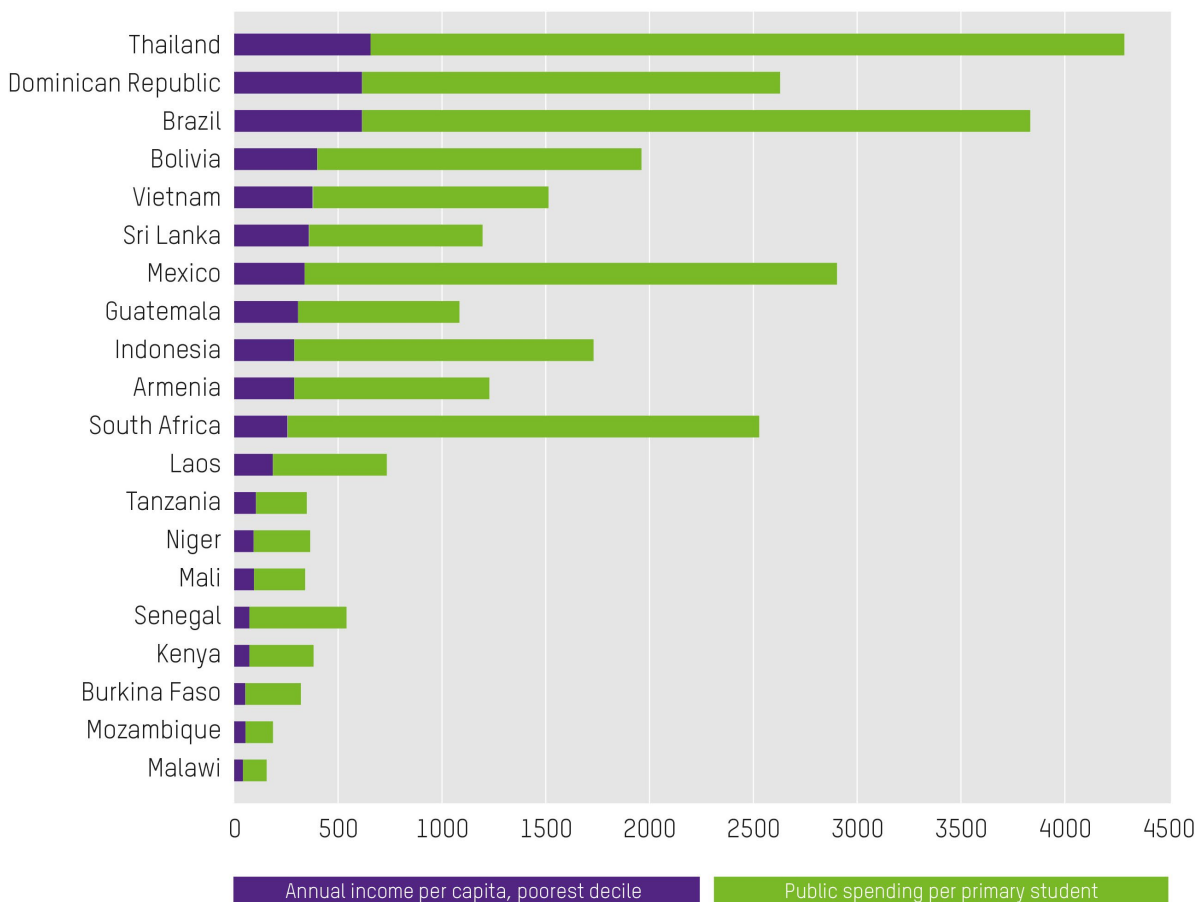
How governments spend on education – where it is spent, on what kind of education, and who benefits from it – matters greatly to the degree of impact it can have on income inequality. Government financing of universal free education – paid for by taxing the wealthiest and the most able to pay – has a large impact on promoting equality and fighting poverty, to the benefit of the nation as a whole.

The IMF has identified spending on public services and social protection as among the most important tools available to governments to reduce inequality and poverty. Evidence from more than 150 countries, rich and poor alike, spanning over 30 years,³²³ shows that investment in education and other public services reduces inequality.³²⁴ The same effect is demonstrated in a study of 29 low- and middle-income countries, which found that public spending has had an equalizing effect across all of them. Within those countries, education helped fight poverty and make societies more equal.³²⁵

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This is because if a government provides education that is either completely free or heavily subsidized at the point of delivery, the poorest people do not have to use as much of their very low earnings to pay for it. This has been shown to boost to gross incomes for lower-income households by as much as (if not more than) their regular earnings: Oxfam compared public education spending and income data for 88 countries,³²⁶ and found that the amount of public education spending per pupil at primary level³²⁷ is more than per capita income for the poorest 10% of households (see **Figure 8**).³²⁸ In almost three-quarters of these countries, spending by the government for each primary school child is more than twice the income per capita for the poorest families; in more than a quarter of the countries surveyed, it is more than quadruple.

Figure 8: Income of the poorest compared to public spending per primary student



Source: Comparison by Oxfam. This was calculated using household income data from the Global Consumption and Income Project and education spending data from the UNESCO Institute of Statistics. See endnote 14 for more information.

In South Africa, government education spending for three children in primary school is more than five times the household income for a poor family of five. For a single mother with two children who are both in primary school, public spending on schooling exceeds household income by five times in Colombia, nearly four times in Poland and Cote D'Ivoire, and almost three-and-a-half times in Indonesia. Governments are thus producing a powerful redistributive effect with their public education spending.³²⁹

This effect can vary greatly, thus showing the varied impact that the choice of government policies plays. It is vital that education spending enables the poorest children to access free quality education, because spending on free public services benefits everyone, but provides relatively greater benefits to the poorest people.³³⁰ The more unequal a country is and the greater its public spending, the more significant the benefit for the poorest families is likely to be. This is best demonstrated in looking at the difference between Latin America and advanced economies: Latin America has the highest average income inequality in the world and advanced economies have the lowest; more than three-quarters of the difference can be explained by the greater extent of redistribution in advanced economies through taxing wealthier people and redistributing the funds through spending on public services.³³¹

For a single mother with two children who are both in primary school, public spending on schooling exceeds household income by five times in Colombia, nearly four times in Poland and Cote D'Ivoire, and almost three-and-a-half times in Indonesia.

Box 17: India's education system is underfunded and unequal

India's education system is unequal. The median number of years of education girls belonging to rich families receive is nine, while the equivalent median number for girls from poor families is zero.³³² Girls are 20% less likely than boys to study in technical streams, science or commerce compared with arts or humanities, blocking their access to better paying jobs in life. Having studied in a technical stream rather than arts reduces the gender gap in earnings by 28.2%.³³³ India's marginalized social groups also tend to have lower learning outcomes.³³⁴

While improved public education provision reduces inequality a lack of schools and health centres has been found to be responsible for an approximately 30% increase in inequality in ethnically fragmented districts in India.³³⁵ However, much of the education system in India is under-resourced. Barely 12.7% of India's schools comply with the minimum norms under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE). There are huge differences between states: while almost all teachers in schools in Delhi, Gujarat and Puducherry have the requisite academic qualifications, 70% of teachers in Meghalaya continue to lack them. The overall poor quality of education is accompanied by active discrimination in classrooms.³³⁶ Lower caste children also experience longer travel time to school since they are more likely to reside at the outskirts of their villages,³³⁷ and schools with tribal populations often lack instruction in their mother tongue.

When private schools provide spaces for rich and poor students to mix, as has been envisaged under the RTE Act in India, this makes rich students more pro-social, generous and egalitarian, less likely to discriminate against poor students, and more willing to socialize with them.³³⁸ However, the growth of private schooling has instead led to social segregation as, unfortunately, private schools frequently create hurdles to avoid enrolling children with disabilities and from marginalized communities.³³⁹ Girls are at a particular disadvantage in the expanding private education market. The gender gap in private school enrolment in India is rising, even as it is closing in government schools.³⁴⁰

In India, girls belonging to rich families receive an average of nine years of education, while on average girls from poor families get none at all.

SPENDING FOR EQUALITY

In the context of resource scarcity, equitable use of public funds in the education sector is of paramount importance. It is possible to achieve more for the majority with similar overall budget levels. For example, in Burundi the number of out-of-school primary children dropped from 723,000 in 1999 to just 10,000 in 2009. Over the same period, Burundi increased its investment in education from 3.2% of GDP to 8.3%. The most important factor was dedicating a much larger chunk of the budget to primary education.³⁴¹

Undoubtedly, one of the biggest educational funding challenges facing most developing countries will be to not leave behind the very poorest as education expands. A delicate balance has to be found – especially if education is to play a role in tackling inequality.

This may require using budgets for affirmative action to benefit the poorest and other excluded groups, or to address gender inequality. Budgets are often formulated in ways that fail to factor in the higher investment needed to reach those children who are disadvantaged due to poverty, disability or other factors. Governments need to have a far sharper focus on investing in equality in education, using complementary measures to positively redress disadvantage. This will include going beyond spending on education with complementary interventions: for instance, targeted financing to the most vulnerable groups, which has been shown to support the poorest children to go to school.³⁴²

This can include spending on areas that increase students' capacity to learn. For example, school-provided meals can have positive effects on learning in places where children have limited access to food at home.³⁴³ Subsidies for uniforms, transport or learning materials can help. Financial or in-kind incentives (such as housing) for teachers to keep them in rural areas have been effective in Cambodia, Gambia and Malawi.³⁴⁴

Such strategies are most beneficial when they are also part of wider efforts to target education reforms. For instance, for more than ten years, Brazil was particularly successful in both increasing its investment in education from 10% to 18% of its budget and implementing transfers of federal funding to poorer states specifically to help them focus on equity in education.³⁴⁵ This was coupled with a conditional cash transfer programme called *Bolsa Família* to support poor families. This helped tackle inequality in the education system and led to one of the fastest increases in learning achievements on record.³⁴⁶ Unfortunately, current restrictions on spending risk endangering previous successes.

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Brazil was particularly successful in both increasing its investment in education from 10% to 18% of its budget and implementing transfers of federal funding to poorer states specifically to help them focus on equity in education.

Box 18: How Vietnam is spending on education to improve equality and quality

Vietnam is a particularly instructive example of how much can be achieved when a lower-income country prioritizes equality and quality in educational spending. Previous decisions to prioritize equitable investments in its public education system have helped children access education and have led to the achievement of strong learning outcomes.

Vietnamese 15-year-olds perform at the same level as those in Germany.³⁴⁷ At the same time, the basic learning attainment rates of children from the poorest households have increased considerably, with the most substantial gains among children from the poorest households.³⁴⁸ The previous gender gap has largely disappeared,³⁴⁹ though unfortunately differences between urban and rural areas and challenges for ethnic minorities persist.³⁵⁰ Education plays a facilitating role in terms of social mobility (income, jobs, skills, mobility). National statistics show that households headed by people with higher educational attainment are more likely to move from the low-income quintile to higher-income groups. 23% of households headed by post-high school education graduates moved up from the 40% of lowest-income households to higher income groups in 2010–2014. Meanwhile, this rate was only 8% among households headed by primary school graduates.³⁵¹

Recently, the progress of previous years has been frustrated by continued enrolment gaps among socioeconomic groups³⁵² and by government policies to focus more investment in tertiary education. This has stifled the otherwise impressive progress in Vietnam and has led to the risk of expansion of private education in urban areas.

However, there are many lessons to be learned from the situation and experience of Vietnam. Unlike many other lower-income countries, Vietnam largely managed to maintain educational quality during rapid expansion. It did this by ensuring that disadvantaged students received relatively equitable access to quality schooling, and funding was logically and coherently assigned towards addressing equity and quality simultaneously. Programmes emphasized a minimum standard of quality for schooling, focusing on disadvantaged communities and providing extra government resources to poorer districts.³⁵³

The relative success of Vietnam can also be attributed to far-reaching reforms in teacher recruitment, training drives and in spending in a way that ensured good-quality teachers in the regions with the most disadvantaged pupils. Teachers of more disadvantaged children were absent less often, and provided feedback more regularly to their students, enabling greater learning to take place.³⁵⁴ Teachers were also able to assess students' levels more accurately than in many other countries with a similar income, and were seen to be more aware of and responsive to their students' learning levels, providing evidence for the importance of appropriately paced curricula combined with support to teachers to use it effectively.³⁵⁵ As a result, the share of children in the most disadvantaged district in Vietnam who answered questions in fourth-grade correctly rose from 18% at the beginning of the school year to 47% at the end.³⁵⁶

Vietnam also invested heavily in early-learning programmes for the very worst off, including children from minority language groups. This has been coupled with complementary spending to address malnutrition. Vietnam has shown prolonged commitment to inclusive education by gradually developing adequately resourced large-scale programmes, including strategies for curriculum reform and teacher training that targets inclusion.

Finally, Vietnam focused on expanding universal, fee-free government provision of education, leading to an increase in the enrolment ratio, while private enrolment dropped. Education is still not entirely without some hidden costs in Vietnam, but they are by-and-large much lower than in other countries: for instance, in Nepal, it was estimated in 2016 that households paid almost 40% of the cost of primary education; by contrast, in Vietnam, households paid 13% of the total cost of primary education, which is much closer to levels observed in high-income countries.³⁵⁷

6 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Economic inequality is growing. The kind of education system a country has will have a major impact on its capacity to respond. Access to good-quality education for individual children offers a pathway to liberation from poverty and illness, towards the fulfilment of basic rights. It can transform lives and bring children out of the shadows of poverty and marginalization. For societies, it acts as a leveller and an agent for greater equality.

Yet, as this report shows, the only road to this is through reform of public education systems focused on quality and equality. This must be achieved through the necessary policy approaches identified in this report. Approaches that focus on privatization, competition and a false sense of 'choice' will lead to greater inequality in and through education. This is a dangerous path, not least as today's young people face a radically and rapidly changing world. What's more, it will do little to deliver on the SDG promise of ensuring an equitable and good-quality education for all by 2030, which requires a radical shift in current policies and spending in the vast majority of poor countries. For instance, India, currently home to nearly 40 million out-of-school children at secondary level, is only forecast to meet the target for universal access to secondary school in 2085.³⁵⁸ In Mozambique, it will take a predicted 500 years.³⁵⁹ Some countries will only deliver for their wealthier citizens: in Nicaragua, Armenia, Cameroon, Guatemala, Zambia and Chad, learning for the poorest children (whether they are in school or not) is actually decreasing, while for the wealthiest it is improving. This is leading to predicted inequality-widening patterns by 2030.³⁶⁰ It is a negative and potentially dangerous vision.

But against this backdrop, some countries show what is possible, including countries that perform far better than income levels would predict, such as Vietnam, thanks to delivering a public education system with a sustained focus on quality with equality. While there are still areas to improve upon, they shine a light on the actions required to deliver on the promise of the SDGs by 2030.

We can ensure that every young person gets to experience the incredible liberation of learning, and unlock the levelling impact of good-quality education. Governments must act with urgency because, in education, a dream deferred all too often becomes a dream denied.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To build equitable and good-quality public education that can help fight economic and gender inequality, policy makers must focus on the following actions:

1. Deliver universal, fee-free education from pre-primary to secondary

- Set out plans to ensure free, equitable and high-quality primary and secondary education for 12 full years, as agreed in SDG 4 on education.
- Eliminate fees at all levels, including informal fees, progressively achieving fee-free secondary education. This must be carefully planned so as not to jeopardize

quality. Progressively expand access to at least one year of fee-free, quality pre-primary education.

- Support the poorest, minorities and children with disabilities with extra help to redress disadvantage, so that they stay in school and learning.
- Support poor and vulnerable girls to go to school and stay in school.

2. Focus on policies that can help to deliver quality for all

- Develop a fully costed and funded strategy to deliver a trained, qualified and well-supported professional workforce, with enough teachers and other personnel to deliver education for all up to secondary school.
- Invest in relevant and non-discriminatory teaching materials, taking into account mother tongues; the changing needs of the majority; and the need for schools to be places where sexist and patriarchal rules are challenged, not learned.
- Develop local accountability mechanisms between schools and their communities, parents and children; build better safeguarding and accountability mechanisms from national to local levels, including ensuring budgets and other information is available publicly and transparently for citizen scrutiny.
- Use appropriate assessments that encourage a feedback loop for curriculum development and classroom adaptations at the local level; do not simply equate higher test scores with improved quality.

3. Deliver more equal education systems

- Develop national education plans that focus coherently and comprehensively on identifying pre-existing inequalities in education, producing data on gaps and needs, and developing appropriate strategies.
- Ensure equitable teacher deployment, coupled with equitable spending on school infrastructure and learning inputs, to help redress disadvantage. This may require affirmative action in poorer or more marginalized districts or regions.
- Ensure additional spending targeted at redressing disadvantage for marginalized or poor children in ways with proven impact.
- Ensure schools and teachers are supported to address the unique learning needs of all students, including children with disabilities. This will require training teachers on differentiated instruction as well as proper data collection and diagnosis.

4. Focus on building public systems first; stop supporting privatization

- Devote the maximum available resources to public education provision, to ensure adequately and equitably financed public schools; do not direct public funds to commercial or for-profit private schools, or market-oriented PPPs. Avoid diverting scarce public resources and attention away from the essential task of building good-quality, inclusive public schools that are free and accessible for all students.
- Ensure adequate regulation of private education providers, especially commercial schools, to ensure educational quality and standards are being upheld.
- Safeguard the labour rights of teachers, especially female teachers, in the public sector and the private sector as well.

- Donors and multilateral institutions such as the World Bank should support the improvement and expansion of public education delivery, and should not direct public aid funds to commercial or for-profit private schools, or market-oriented PPPs.

5. Ensure education works to strengthen equality for girls and women

- Address the particular barriers that keep girls out of school or learning, such as providing separate bathrooms for boys and girls, addressing the non-fee related costs of schooling, and ensuring curricula and teacher training promote positive gender roles and avoid stereotypes.
- Invest in early childhood care and education programmes that take account of the needs of women (i.e. fit around typical working hours), and young girls who are expected to care for children: this can free up women's time by easing the millions of unpaid hours they spend every day caring for their families and homes.

6. Fully fund public education systems to deliver quality and equality for all

- Governments must scale up spending to deliver quality and equity in education; in low- and middle-income countries this will require at least 20% of government budgets, or 6% of GDP allocated to education. Those with the furthest to go, and large youth populations, may need to invest more than this in the short term.
- Government spending must proactively redress disadvantage, including by adopting equity-of-funding approaches to address the historical disadvantage faced by the poorest groups.
- Invest in building robust structures, from school to local to national levels, for the effective oversight and accountability of education budgets.
- Tax wealth and capital at fairer levels. Stop the race to the bottom on personal income and corporate taxes. Eliminate tax avoidance and evasion by corporations and the super-rich. Agree a new set of global rules and institutions to fundamentally redesign the tax system to make it fair, with developing countries having an equal seat at the table.

Donors should substantially increase their official development assistance (ODA) commitments to education, especially to basic education and in countries with the greatest needs, in order to ensure developing countries are able to devote adequate resources to build quality public education provision.

NOTES

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- 12 K.M. Bous and J. Farr (2019) *False Promises: How delivering education through public-private partnerships risks fueling inequality instead of achieving quality education for all*. Oxfam International Briefing Paper <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/false-promises-how-delivering-education-through-public-private-partnerships-ris-620720>
- 13 Taken from the foreword by Nellie Kumambala in: Lawson, M et al. (2019). *Public good or private wealth?* Op. cit.
- 14 These figures were calculated by Oxfam by comparing education spending per pupil data and per capita income. The education data was from the UNESCO Institute of Statistics using the following indicator: 'Initial government funding per primary student, constant \$PPP'. See: <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>. We used the most recent data available (2013 or later in all cases). Per capita income was taken from the Global Consumption and Income Project. See: <http://gcip.info/>. The mean per capita income in 2014 for poorest decile of the population was used (US\$ in 2005 PPP terms).
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