

# Inequality undermining education opportunities for millions of children

Paris, 25 November – The failure of governments across the world to tackle deep and persistent inequalities in education is consigning millions of children to lives of poverty and diminished opportunity, according to a report published by UNESCO today.

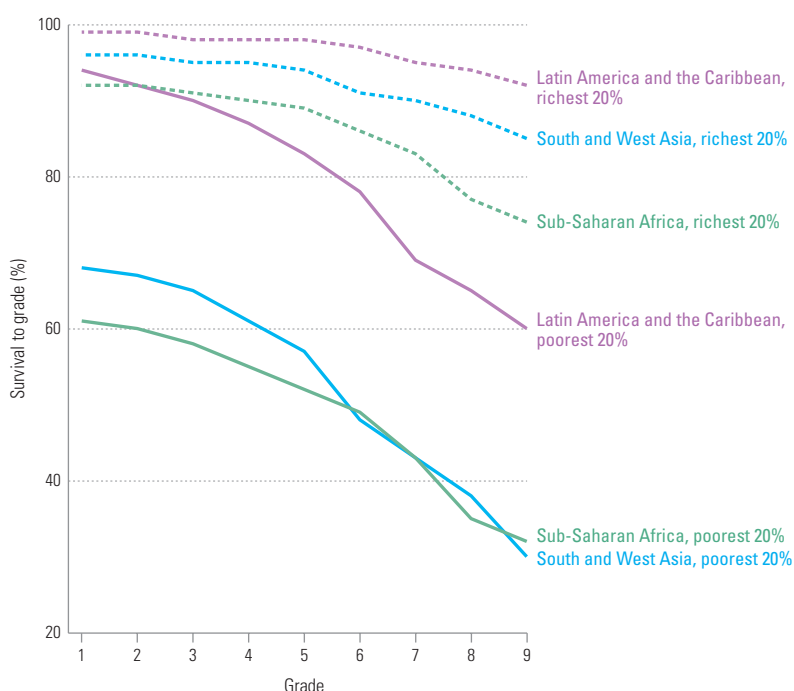
Blaming a combination of political indifference, weak domestic policies, and the failure of aid donors to act on commitments, the 2009 Education for All Global Monitoring Report – *Overcoming inequality: why governance matters* – warns that ‘unacceptable’ national and global education disparities are undermining efforts to achieve international development goals.

“When financial systems fail, the consequences are highly visible and governments act,” commented UNESCO’s Director-General Koïchiro Matsuura, adding: “When education systems fail the consequences are less visible, but no less real. Unequal opportunities for education fuel poverty, hunger, and child mortality, and reduce prospects for economic growth. That is why governments must act with a greater sense of urgency.”

The UNESCO report documents what it describes as a ‘vast gulf’ in educational opportunity separating rich and poor countries. It notes that:

- One in three children in developing countries (193 million in total) reaches primary school age having had their brain development and education prospects impaired by malnutrition – a figure that rises to over 40% in parts of South Asia. High economic growth in some countries has done little to reduce child malnutrition, calling into question current public policies.

**Figure 1: Grade attainment among 10- to 19- year-olds in Latin America and the Caribbean, South and West Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, 2000-2006<sup>1</sup>**



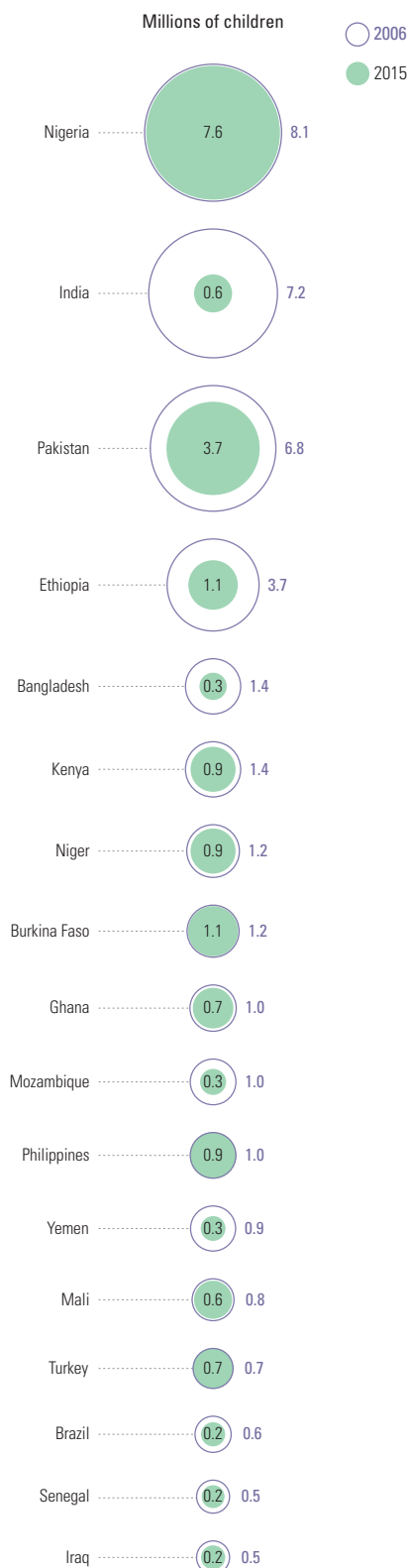
1. Data are for the most recent year available during the period specified.  
Source: See Figure 1.2 in the *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2009*.

- 75 million children of primary school age are not in school, including just under one-third of the relevant age group in sub-Saharan Africa.
- Whereas over a third of children in rich countries complete university, in much of sub-Saharan Africa, a smaller share completes primary education – and just 5% attend university level.

National disparities mirror global inequalities. Children in the poorest 20% in countries such as Ethiopia, Mali and Niger, are three times less likely to be in primary school as children from the wealthiest 20%. In Peru and the Philippines, children in the poorest 20% receive 5 years less education than children from the wealthiest families.

Wealth is not the only marker for disadvantage. Girls are still neglected in education. Gender enrolment gaps remain

**Figure 4: Estimated number of out-of-school children, 2006, and projections for 2015, by selected country<sup>1</sup>**



1. Countries are included if available information indicates they had more than 500,000 out-of-school children in 2006. Source: See Table 2.5 in the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2009.

large across much of South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Disadvantages based on language, race, ethnicity and rural-urban differences also remain deeply entrenched. In Senegal, children in urban areas are twice as likely as those in rural areas to be in school.

The report’s authors comment that: “The circumstances into which children are born, their gender, the wealth of their parents, their language and the colour of their skin should not define their educational opportunities.”

## Missing the targets

The annual UNESCO report provides a detailed assessment of progress towards key education goals, including early childhood development, universal primary education, gender equality, literacy and good quality education. While noting encouraging gains in some of the world’s poorest countries, it warns that without drastic action many targets will be missed – in some cases by spectacular margins.

Take universal primary education. The report documents some impressive national and regional performances. Sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia have made marked increases in their net enrolment rate since 1999. Tanzania and Ethiopia have both reduced the number of children out of school by over 3 million. Despite a protracted civil conflict, Nepal has registered strong gains. And in a region marked by deep gender inequalities, Bangladesh has as many girls as boys reaching secondary school.

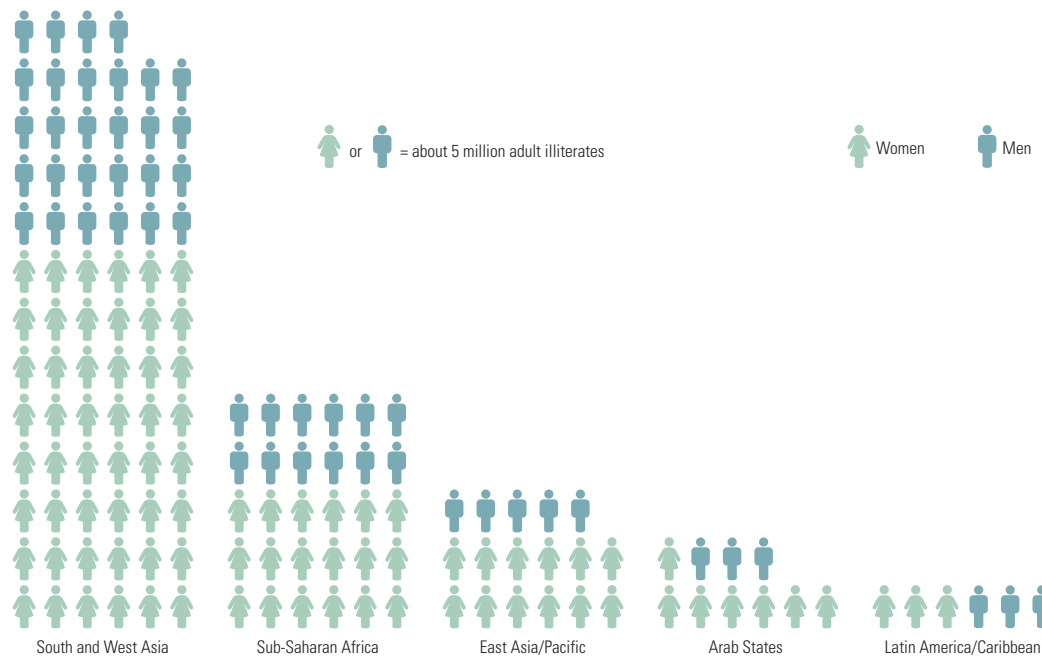
The bad news is that the world is not on course for achieving the international development target of universal primary education by 2015.

According to partial projections, at least 29 million children will still be out of school in 2015. This headline figure is an under-estimate as it does not include conflict affected countries such as the Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Also:

- Nigeria is projected to have 7.6 million and Pakistan 3.7 million children out of school in 2015. “Both suffer from weak governance and high levels of inequity in finance and provision,” the report notes. Pakistan still enrolls only 80 girls for every 100 boys
- Ethiopia and Burkina Faso will have more than 1 million children out of school in 2015.
- In all, 12 countries will have over half a million out-of-school children in 2015.

The UNESCO report cautions that out-of-school figures are a partial barometer of the scale of the challenge. Millions of children start school but drop out before completing primary school. Moreover, learning assessments powerfully document the failure of school systems to deliver good quality education – many children are leaving school without having gained the most basic literacy and numeracy skills.

**Figure 6: Projected number of adult illiterates (age 15+), by gender and region, 2015**



Source: See Table 2.11 in the *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2009*.

- 60% or more of secondary school students in Brazil, Indonesia and Tunisia score on the lowest possible ranking in international assessments for science achievement
- One assessment in India found that just under half of grade 3 pupils could read a text for grade 1 pupils.

Addressing these deficits will require wide-ranging reforms and increased investments. School systems in many countries are chronically under-financed and under-resourced. In sub-Saharan Africa alone, 3.8 million teachers will have to be recruited by 2015 if the universal primary education is to be achieved.

Beyond the current deficits in schools the UNESCO report documents a large backlog. There are still an estimated 776 million adults lacking basic literacy worldwide – 16% of the world’s population. Two-thirds are women. On current trends, there will still be over 700 million illiterate adults in 2015.

## Policies for strengthening equity

*Overcoming inequality: why governance matters* sets out a wide-ranging agenda for reform. The central message is that governments need to attach a greater priority to fairness and social justice. “If the world’s governments are serious about Education for All, they must get more serious about tackling inequality,” states Mr Matsuura.

Drawing on international experience, the report identifies a range of policies to remedy extreme inequality. These include the removal of school fees for basic education, increased public investment, incentives for girls and marginalised groups, and a strengthened commitment to education quality. Conversely, decentralisation has often widened inequalities by reinforcing financing gaps between rich and poor regions.

The report cites an encouraging example from Latin America. Several countries in the region have introduced cash transfer programmes for poor households, with payments made conditional on school attendance and health visits. Mexico's *Oportunidades* programme, one of the largest, is now being applied on a pilot basis in New York.

The report's authors are critical of current approaches to reform in education governance. They caution against the export to developing countries of what they describe as 'governance blueprints' drawn from rich countries. The report also questions policies aimed at expanding the role of the private sector to compensate for state failure. "While private provision may have a role to play in some areas, effective and affordable public provision of basic education is the real foundation for education for all," commented Kevin Watkins, Director, EFA Global Monitoring Report. "If the public system is broken, governments need to fix it."

## Aid – donors are back-tracking on commitments

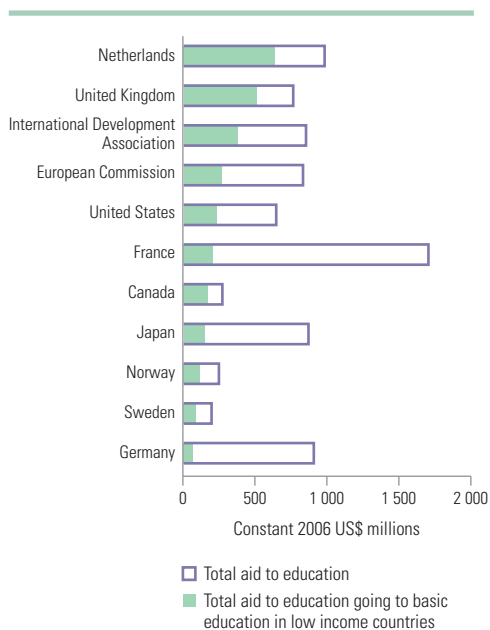
The UNESCO report accuses the donor community of a 'collective failure' to deliver on aid commitments.

On a conservative estimate, the report calculates that the aid financing gap for achieving basic education by 2015 is around US\$7 billion annually. "These large aid deficits are holding back progress," says the report.

While donors attending the High-Level Event on the Millennium Development Goals in 2008 made encouraging declarations, current aid trends point in a worrying direction:

- In 2005 donors pledged to increase aid by US\$50 billion by 2010. Current aid commitments point to an impending shortfall of US\$30 billion against this pledge, almost half of it in sub-Saharan Africa.
- Aid commitments for basic education have stagnated since 2004, calling into question medium-term financing commitments

**Figure 11: Priority to low-income countries and to basic education, main donors, commitments, 2005-2006 annual average**



Source: Derived from Figure 4.13 in the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2009.

- The Fast Track Initiative, a multilateral aid framework for supporting education for all, is not meeting expectations, the report argues. Inadequate donor support means that countries with approved plans will face an FTI shortfall of US\$2.2 billion by 2010

"If donors are serious about their pledges to education, they cannot afford more years of under-performance," comments the report.

The authors are also highly critical of the practice of some donors in skewing aid budgets to higher education. While countries such as the Netherlands and the United Kingdom allocate over 60% of their aid to basic education in low-income countries, others adopt different priorities. France allocates 12% of its total development assistance for education to basic education in low-income countries, and Germany just 7%.

"Both countries put greater priority on subsidising attendance at their universities...than on supporting basic education in low-income countries," the report notes.

The report also urges the United States and Japan to invest a greater share of national income in aid.