

Sustainable Development Goal 4 and interlinkages with other SDGs

*An Expert Group Meeting in preparation for HLPF 2022:
Building back better from the coronavirus disease
(COVID-19) while advancing the full implementation of
the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*

Paris, 17 May 2022

Concept Note

1. Introduction

The theme of the 2022 HLPF is “Building back better from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”. The 2022 HLPF will have an in-depth review of Sustainable Development Goals 4 on quality education, 5 on gender equality, 14 on life below water, 15 on life on land, and 17 on partnerships for the Goals. The forum will consider the different and particular impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic across all Sustainable Development Goals and the integrated, indivisible, and interlinked nature of the Goals.

In preparation for the review of SDG 4 – and its role in advancing sustainable development across the 2030 Agenda, the Division for Sustainable Development Goals of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-DESA/DSDG), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), together with other partners, are organizing an Expert Group Meeting (EGM).

The objective of the meeting will be to take stock of where we are in terms of progress towards SDG 4; to consider what has changed since the SDG was last reviewed in 2019 including in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic; to consider interlinkages with other SDGs and opportunities to leverage synergies and minimize trade-offs; to share knowledge about success stories, good practices and challenges; to identify particular areas of concern; and to suggest ways forward in terms of policies, partnerships and coordinated actions at all levels.

This event will help inform the HLPF, inform the planning of its sessions, and contribute to the evidence base for collaborations and programmes of work on quality education and lifelong learning going forward from 2022.

2. Progress and gaps in implementation of SDG 4 and its interlinkages with other SDGs

The vision of SDG 4 (Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all) as embodied in the Education 2030 Framework for Action is to transform lives through education, recognizing the important role of education as a main driver of development and in achieving the other SDGs¹. SDG 4 and its corresponding targets (Annex) are inspired by a

¹ [Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4](#)

humanistic vision of education and development based on human rights and dignity; social justice; inclusion; protection; cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity; and shared responsibility and accountability. Inclusion, equity and gender equality in and through education is the cornerstone of SDG 4's transformative education agenda.

In line with SDG4, education for human rights, gender equality, global citizenship, peace and non-violence and cultural diversity are integral components of quality education and are a means to engage youth to be responsible agents of change and a driving force for social progress. Educational efforts fostering respect, equality, inclusion, solidarity and participation empower young persons to uphold their rights and those of others; equip individuals belonging to groups which historically faced discrimination and exclusion with the necessary knowledge and skills to become leaders for positive change in their communities; and prevent violence by proposing solutions to chronic and emerging problems, including poverty, violent conflict and discrimination, consistent with human rights principles. Accordingly, human rights and global citizenship education represent a critical investment for living together and building a more peaceful and equitable future for all.

The SDG4-Education 2030 commitment promotes inclusive, quality **lifelong learning** opportunities for all, in all settings and at all levels of education from early childhood to adulthood and including quality early childhood care and education, technical and vocational education and training and higher education and research. Recognizing that a large number of children and adolescents remain out of school despite recent progress, efforts are focused on the most disadvantaged to ensure that no one is left behind, for instance in the context of conflicts, natural disasters-induced displacement, or international migration². Just before the pandemic struck, 53% of young people were completing secondary school globally, but only 29% in sub-Saharan Africa.³ This has also further exacerbated gender inequality, as in the midst of the pandemic schooling became impossible for half of the Asia and the Pacific regions, where families already lacked access to the Internet, and the loss of household income made education unaffordable for many families, especially affecting girls' education.⁴

The commitment to inclusive **quality education** and **improved learning outcomes** also implies the urgent need to focus on **teachers** – their empowerment, professional development and support. In 2019, 81% of primary school teachers were trained but the proportion was lower in sub-Saharan Africa (65%) and Southern Asia (74%). With the unprecedented lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to total or partial school closures in most countries, the teaching workforce was severely affected.⁵

Strengthening **science, technology and innovation**, as well as harnessing information and communication technologies (ICTs) is also imperative for strengthening education systems and their resilience to the impact of disasters, knowledge dissemination, information access, and quality and

² Studies have shown that displaced children and young adults have comparatively low schooling levels and school enrolment rates: refugee children are five times more likely to be out of school than non-refugee children, see: <https://gmdac.iom.int/data-and-resources>

³ United Nations. 2021. Secretary-General's SDG Progress Report. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/27610SG_SDG_Progress_report_2021.pdf

⁴ Forthcoming UN Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction 2022 - Our World at Risk: Transforming Governance for a Resilient Future

⁵ Ibid.

effective learning. But across the Least Developed Countries, more than two thirds of primary schools do not have access to electricity. Availability of internet and computers for pedagogical purposes in schools is even lower. Half of the total number of learners that were kept out of the classroom by the COVID-19 pandemic – some 826 million students – do not have access to a household computer and 43% (706 million) have no internet at home. The situation is worse in developing countries. For example, 89% of learners in sub-Saharan Africa do not have access to household computers and 82% lack internet access⁶. This reality creates not only a digital divide but is pushing further behind millions of children in rural communities.

SDG 4 has links across the 2030 Agenda as an enabler of achieving other goals and harnessing human ingenuity to address challenges like climate change (SDG 13) and the potential labour market disruptions of digitalization (SDG 8) and to reduce inequalities (SDG 10). SDG 4 encompasses the acquisition of foundational skills in literacy and numeracy; analytical, problem-solving and other high-level cognitive, interpersonal and social skills; and skills, values and attitudes that enable citizens to lead healthy and fulfilled lives, make informed decisions, and respond to local and global challenges like biodiversity loss (SDG 15) and ocean protection (SDG 14) through education for sustainable development (ESD). Integrating disaster prevention and preparedness into the implementation of SDG 4 is essential to ensure that citizens can embrace a culture of risk reduction, and create more prepared households and safer communities, as well as minimize disruption to education as a basic service.⁷ Human rights education (HRE) and global citizenship education (GCED) can also help to build solidarity around the 2030 Agenda and advance partnerships (SDG 17).

Education is an integral means to empowering women and girls and advancing gender equality (SDG 5). Yet gender disparities persist in education. For example, in 2019 there were only 92 literate women aged 15 years or older for every 100 literate men of the same age. Almost half of countries with recent data did not meet gender parity in primary completion, and only a handful of countries demonstrate parity in tertiary enrolment ratios.⁸ The COVID-19 pandemic threatens to unravel past progress toward gender parity. Education is also a means to break down gender stereotypes and discriminatory social norms; curricula in all levels need to be designed to address the underrepresentation of women in a variety of sectors, by equipping especially girls and young women with the skills of the future (notably in STEM and digitalization-related fields)⁹ and raising awareness amongst students on gender equality and intersectionality at a young age.

Likewise, progress across the 2030 Agenda is imperative for ensuring the achievement of SDG 4 – eliminating poverty, ensuring good nutrition for children, expanding access to electricity and the internet, investing in safe and resilient infrastructure for education, and reducing inequalities are all enablers of access to a quality education for everyone.

3. Framing the issues for the 2022 HLPF

⁶ UNESCO 2020. *Startling digital divides in distance learning emerge*.

⁷ <https://www.undrr.org/publication/words-action-guidelines-engaging-children-and-youth-disaster-risk-reduction-and>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ UNIDO, UNODC, Permanent Missions of Finland, Norway and Sweden in Vienna. 2022. [*Summary of recommendations – Vienna Discussion Forum, 4 November 2021*](#)

SDG 4 was first reviewed at the 2019 HLPF under the theme “Empowering People and Ensuring Inclusiveness and Equity” around the urgency and the need to transform education systems to accelerate progress, reaffirming that investment in education can catalyze achievements in all the global goals. At that time, projections showed that while there had been some progress, the world was off track to meet its education commitments by 2030.¹⁰ In 2018, 262 million (18%) children, adolescents and youth were out of school and 6 out of 10 children and adolescents worldwide were not achieving minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics.

The HLPF review of SDG 4 in 2019 recognized that education is essential to tackle critical challenges like climate change, to help instill people with new skills and opportunities for employment and support economic growth, and to uphold peaceful and inclusive societies and effective institutions. Given this, there were calls for actions to leverage these interlinkages. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the immense systemic impact of disasters on education, beyond climate change. To safeguard and foster education and innovation to reduce current and mitigate future risk, we must build resilience by reducing the vulnerability, exposure and inequality that drive disasters.

Stakeholders urged that the world is facing a learning crisis where children are not learning the most basic skills they need. Shortcomings in quality and inclusiveness were identified as among the biggest barriers to SDG 4 particularly for girls and in conflict areas. Identifying the specific barriers to education and learning across contexts and breaking them down was seen as instrumental for achieving the 2030 Agenda.

There were also calls reimagining education around what is in the modern world with new platforms for cooperation, new partnerships and shared values around the importance of education, more support for teachers and increased investment in universal quality education and lifelong learning.

In response, the SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee put forward a set of concrete policy recommendations, calling for transformation, innovation, political responsibility and commitment, as well as a true paradigm shift to move:

- Beyond averages: to leave no one behind
- Beyond access: to ensure relevant learning outcomes
- Beyond basics: to diversify and broaden the contents of education
- Beyond schooling: to lifelong and lifewide (across multiple learning spaces) learning
- Beyond education: to expand multi-sectoral planning
- Beyond countries: to foster peer learning mechanisms

The context has changed significantly over the past three years since 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic spread across the globe followed by the temporary closure of schools which impacted more than 91 per cent of students globally (1.6 billion), including nearly 369 million children who rely on school meals for daily nutrition. The disproportionate impact of the pandemic on lower income countries and marginalized populations was also evident in education as the abilities to offer remote learning and reopen schools to minimize learning disruptions largely depended on financial and infrastructural conditions, highlighting the importance of retrofitting existing and building new schools and other education facilities to become disaster resilient, including to the impacts of climate

¹⁰ UNESCO Institute for Statistics and Global Education Monitoring Report. 2019. *Meeting commitments: are countries on track to achieve SDG 4?* Paris: UNESCO.

change. High-income countries were able to safely reopen schools sooner with the average duration of full school closure of 53 days whereas full school closure lasted on average 115 days in lower-middle-income countries and 88 days in low-income countries.¹¹

The lost learning due to school closures risks this generation of students losing \$17 trillion in lifetime earnings in present value, or the equivalent of 14 percent of today’s global GDP. In low- and middle-income countries, the share of children living in “learning poverty” is projected to rise sharply, potentially up to 70 per cent. Compounded to these challenges are the threats to hard-earned progress in gender equality and women’s empowerment (SDG 5) due to unequal access to remote learning as well as increased exposure to violence and exploitation during prolonged school closures and lockdowns, resulting in women learners’ dropouts and school absence. In addition to lost learning, school closures adversely impacted the nutrition levels of school going children who received lunch and mid-day meals at the school. The negative impact has extended to global immunization programs, as schools were a venue for this important task. Furthermore, school closures in rural areas and the connected digital divide and impossibility to attend a virtual learning modality, may have exposed children in rural communities to higher risks of child labour.

Education is an investment that requires sustainable funding, and domestic resources – particularly through tax revenues – remain the primary source of funding for education. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted both government and household spending, which together accounts for more than 99% of global education spending. UNESCO estimated that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic could increase the pre-COVID annual funding gap of US\$148 billion in low and lower-middle income countries to as much as US\$200 billion.¹² In these countries, education budgets declined in 65% of low- and lower-middle-income countries since the onset of the pandemic. The need for increased education financing—both domestic resources and international aid—thus is even more urgent for the world’s recovery from the pandemic and acceleration of the progress towards SDG 4.

This educational crisis, on the other hand, mobilized unprecedented levels of international solidarity and multi-stakeholder cooperation. UNESCO convened two Global Education Meetings to galvanize political and financial commitments to education, established the Global Coalition for Education to bring together over 200 members from the UN family, civil society, academia and the private sector to ensure that #LearningNeverStops, and led the rethinking of the global education cooperation mechanism through the strengthened SDG4-Education 2030 High-Level Steering Committee. Regional initiative such as the Caribbean Safe School Initiative Pre-Ministerial Forum were also organized, providing forums to advance school safety and build resilience in the education sector. Moreover, the historical educational disruptions invited the education community to rethink and reimagine the purpose, content and delivery of education, with a view to transforming education toward peaceful, inclusive and sustainable futures of humanity and the planet. In this context, the UN Secretary-General proposed the Transforming Education Summit in his report, *Our Common Agenda*, drawing on the *Report of the International Commission for the Futures of Education, Reimagining our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education*, convened by UNESCO.

¹¹ UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank and OECD. 2021. *What’s Next? Lessons on Education Recovery: Findings from a Survey of Ministries of Education Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic*.

¹² UNESCO. 2020. “Act now: reduce the impact of COVID-19 on the cost of achieving SDG 4” GEM Report Policy Paper 42.

This EGM will provide the opportunity to discuss strategies for accelerating the implementation of SDG 4 including reflection on what has changed since SDG 4 was reviewed at the HLPF in 2019, while also leveraging synergies with other Goals and addressing barriers to the full realization of SDG 4 and the 2030 Agenda.

4. Key questions

Stock taking:

- What are the major impacts of COVID-19 on education and lifelong learning that risk pushing back progress towards SDG 4? Are girls and boys affected differently?
- How can current and future disaster risk for education be reduced, so that the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic will not repeat?
- How will those education impacts affect the three pillars of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental) from the experts' perspectives?
- What has been the recent progress in education to support empowerment and positive engagement of individuals in society to build resilience?
- What does the overall evidence base on the above look like, and what are any urgent data gaps?

Challenges:

- From the vantage point of your expertise, what are the bottlenecks to recovery in education and life-long learning from COVID-19 and acceleration towards SDG 4? How do these vary across groups including in rural/urban environments, for girls and boys, and in conflict areas?
- At the 2019 HLPF, shortcomings in quality and inclusiveness were identified as among the biggest barriers to SDG 4. Has there been progress in these areas and how has the pandemic changed the nature of the challenge?
- How could non-education sectors and actors be engaged more seriously in advancing the education and life-long learning agenda in the remaining years of the 2030 Agenda?
- How should the education and training sector and its actors be transformed, especially to foster inclusive development of the skills of the future, to contribute to the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development?

Opportunities:

- What opportunities and initiatives are there across diverse areas of sustainable development, peace and human rights that can help accelerate progress towards SDG 4 by 2030?
- What good practices can be highlighted to accelerate the resilient and sustainable recovery from COVID-19 and advance progress on SDG 4? What needs to happen to scale up promising initiatives, technologies and partnerships? In the immediate term, next 5 years and next 10 years? Who are the key actors to focus on?
- What are successful examples of gender-responsive approaches to advance progress on SDG4 in the COVID recovery that benefit both girls and boys?
- How have lessons learned from COVID-19 been incorporated to prevent the creation of new and reduce existing disaster risk, and build resilience in the educational sector so that disasters do not undermine development gains?
- What opportunities and innovations exist to galvanize political commitment to and financial investment in education and lifelong learning at the country level?

- How can interlinkages between SDG 4 and other SDGs be harnessed to contribute to the three pillars of sustainable development and to individual well-being and fulfilment, leaving no one behind?

5. *Contribution to HLPF 2022*

The knowledge and insights of experts—both practitioners and academics—from across the world will be crucial to addressing these questions. The EGM will serve to bring together a cross-section of such expertise from a diversity of countries and regions to:

- Provide substantive inputs into the thematic reviews at the 2022 HLPF and help inform its outcomes;
- Identify cases from regions and specific countries (including those that are conducting or have conducted Voluntary National Reviews) that illustrate challenges or highlight innovative practices;
- Suggest effective presenters for the specific sessions at the HLPF, as well as contributors to blog posts, e-discussions and other activities leading up to the HLPF; and
- Influence collaborations and programmes of work going forward from 2022.

6. *Participation and organization*

The EGM is part of a broader review of SDG 4, including specialized reports from various agencies and think tanks. Some of these inputs will also feed into the EGM.

Participation at the EGM will be by invitation. A limited number of experts from think tanks, academia, NGOs, the private sector and Governments will be invited. Experts from the UN system and other international organizations will also be invited to participate.

UN-DESA/DSDG and UNESCO will prepare the event in consultation with the SDG4-Education 2030 High-Level Steering Committee. DESA/DSDG will also coordinate across other DESA divisions in this connection.

Individual sessions at the EGM will address specific themes. The meeting is planned to be held in a hybrid mode (in person in Paris and online). This is a working-level meeting, with all participants encouraged to speak openly and informally.

The EGM will be conducted in English and French. All presentations/papers/remarks will be made available online (in the original languages).

ANNEX 1: SDG 4 Targets



4.1 Universal primary and secondary education

By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes



4.2 Early childhood development and universal pre-primary education

By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education



4.3 Equal access to technical/vocational and higher education

By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university



4.4 Relevant skills for decent work

By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship



4.5 Gender equality and inclusion

By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations



4.6 Universal youth literacy

By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy



4.7 Education for sustainable development and global citizenship

By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development

Means of implementation



4.a Effective learning environments

Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all



4.b Scholarships

By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries, for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programs, in developed countries and other developing countries



4.c Teachers and educators

By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing States